



September 4, 2025

Legislative Update: HHS Secretary Kennedy Testifies Before the Senate Finance Committee on the President's 2026 Health Care Agenda

Witness:

- Secretary Robert F. Kennedy, Jr., Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) ([Testimony](#))

Committee Leadership:

- Chairman Mike Crapo (R-ID) ([Opening Statement](#))
- Ranking Member Ron Wyden (D-OR) ([Opening Statement](#))

Background:

On August 28, Chairman Crapo [announced](#) that Secretary Kennedy would testify before the Senate Finance Committee to preview the Trump administration's 2026 health care agenda, including the Make America Healthy Again (MAHA) initiative.

This was Secretary Kennedy's first Congressional hearing since the passage of H.R. 1 on July 4. The bill introduced sweeping changes to Medicaid and the individual marketplace, most notably Medicaid community engagement requirements and restrictions on state financing mechanisms like provider taxes. You can read more about H.R. 1 on AMCP's [resource page](#).

Secretary Kennedy's leadership of HHS has come under intense scrutiny related to vaccine access. On June 9, Kennedy removed all members of the Advisory Committee on Immunization Practices (ACIP), the panel that advises the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) on vaccines and votes on updates to the federal government's vaccine schedules. Secretary Kennedy announced, without consulting ACIP, that he had removed the CDC's recommendations that all healthy children and adults routinely receive COVID-19 vaccines. On August 27, the Food and Drug Administration (FDA) approved three COVID-19 vaccines for the 2025-2026 respiratory season with narrower eligibility for children and adults, while removing the emergency use authorizations that enabled broader access to vaccines for children under 12. The hearing announcement came the morning after HHS announced that Dr. Susan Monarez, the CDC Director, was removed from her role less than four weeks after being confirmed by the Senate. The ACIP is scheduled to meet on September 18 and 19 to review the government's recommendations for COVID-19 vaccines; hepatitis B vaccine; measles, mumps, rubella, and varicella (MMRV) vaccine; and respiratory syncytial virus (RSV).

Finally, this fall will see an expanded focus on the MAHA movement. The MAHA Commission, established earlier this year by President Trump's executive order on lowering drug prices, is expected to release a strategy report later this month detailing how the government should respond to the childhood chronic disease crisis. This strategy document follows a [report](#) released by the MAHA Commission on May 22 that assessed key drivers of childhood chronic disease, including poor diet, chemical exposure, lack of physical activity and chronic stress, and overmedicalization.

Overview:

The hearing's most prominent subject was the CDC's vaccine recommendations for COVID-19 and immunizations for children. In his opening statement, Secretary Kennedy testified that the firings at the CDC were necessary to restore trust in the government's public health infrastructure. He said that the CDC failed its responsibility during COVID by closing schools and businesses and instituting vaccine mandates that violated medical freedom without knowing the long-term health effects of COVID-19 vaccines.

Three Republicans on the committee—Sens. Cassidy, Barrasso, and Tillis—joined Democrats in expressing concern for Secretary Kennedy's position on vaccines. In his opening statement, Ranking Member Wyden said that firing CDC Director Monarez and other senior CDC leaders sows mistrust in the government's public health information and threatens the health of the American people. Sen. Cassidy praised President Trump's leadership in developing COVID-19 vaccines in record time under Operation Warp Speed and observed that Kennedy's belief that more people died from the COVID vaccine than from COVID was at odds with the president's accomplishment. Both Sen. Cassidy and Sen. Warren fear that the updated vaccine policy will reduce vaccine access because many states tie pharmacists' authority to order and administer vaccines without a prescription to ACIP's recommendations. Kennedy hinted at restricting access to other vaccines on the childhood vaccine schedule and did not directly respond to questioning by Sen. Lujan about David Geier's "research" into the root causes of autism, which many in the MAHA movement attribute to vaccines.

The other subject that received the most attention during the hearing was the president's domestic policy bill, H.R. 1. Secretary Kennedy, Chairman Crapo, and other Republicans on the committee touted the Medicaid and marketplace reforms, which will reduce waste, fraud, and abuse in government health programs. Secretary Kennedy focused on the Rural Health Transformation Program, which gives Kennedy broad discretion to distribute \$50 billion in grants over 5 years to states to ensure that rural providers can continue to provide vital health services to their communities and modernize the rural health delivery system. Sen. Tillis joined Democrats in expressing concern about the impact of Medicaid cuts on health coverage and provider revenue. Sen. Sanders and Sen. Tillis pointed to evidence that rural communities will lose billions more in federal assistance than the grant money Kennedy will distribute.

Senators raised several other issues during questioning, including the MAHA Commission's strategy to address the root causes of chronic diseases, bipartisan benefit manager (PBM) reform legislation, direct-to-consumer drug advertising, medication abortion, and payment reform.

Opening statements:

Chairman Crapo expressed his support for Secretary Kennedy's efforts to improve our understanding of childhood chronic diseases. He also touted the health care reforms in H.R. 1, which will reduce the amount of waste, fraud, and abuse in government health insurance programs. He cited a report from the Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services (CMS) that 2.8 million people were improperly enrolled in marketplace plans with enhanced advance premium tax credits. H.R. 1 will ensure that medical assistance goes to the people who truly need it, while incentivizing adults without dependents to work and receive coverage through their employers. Chairman Crapo also touted the Rural Health Transformation Program, which will invest \$50 billion over 5 years to ensure that rural providers can continue to provide vital health services to their communities and modernize the rural health delivery system.

Sen. Crapo described his priorities for the rest of this Congress, including realigning incentives in the prescription drug supply chain, which likely refers to the bipartisan pharmacy benefit manager reform legislation that was nearly enacted last year; expanding access to telehealth services; and reforming the physician payment system.

Ranking Member Wyden called H.R. 1 a health-care calamity, with roughly \$1 trillion in cuts to Medicaid and marketplace plans and an estimated 15 million people losing coverage. Sen. Wyden called H.R. 1 the largest health care cut in history, which will result in hospitals closing and premiums rising for all Americans. Sen. Wyden expressed concern that CDC Director Monarez and other senior leaders resigned or were fired last week. Sec. Kennedy's actions sow mistrust in the federal government's public health information and threaten the health care of the American people. He is concerned that the new vaccine guidance will threaten access to COVID vaccines, putting all Americans at risk of infectious diseases. Sen. Wyden called for Sec. Kennedy to resign and said that Kennedy lied to the Finance Committee during his confirmation hearing when he said that he would not restrict access to vaccines.

Secretary Kennedy stated that his priority is to shift the health care system to address the root causes of chronic disease that were identified in the MAHA report. Since Sec. Kennedy took office, HHS has scrutinized food dyes, infant formula contamination, the generally recognized as safe (GRAS) loophole for food additives, fluoride in drinking water, "gas station heroin", prior authorization, information blocking, and health information interoperability. He also mentioned HHS policies promoting nutrition education in medical schools, addressing youth cell phone use and screentime, and removing diversity, equity, and inclusion policies. Secretary Kennedy touted the Rural Health Transformation Fund as the largest investment in rural health in history.

Secretary Kennedy testified that the shakeup at the CDC was necessary to restore trust in the government's public health infrastructure. He said that the CDC failed its responsibility during COVID by closing schools and businesses and instituting vaccine mandates that violated medical freedom without knowing the long-term health effects of COVID-19 vaccines. The people removed from the CDC were responsible for the COVID response and/or were subject to conflicts of interest that raised doubts about their recommendations. He said that the new members of ACIP and other new faces at CDC were dedicated to promoting transparent, unbiased, evidence-based science.

Questions:

Public Health/Vaccine Policy:

- Ranking Member Wyden (D-OR) asked whether Secretary Kennedy directed the former CDC Director to accept ACIP's recommendations even if she did not agree with them.
 - Sec. Kennedy said he did not say that to her.
- Ranking Member Wyden asked about the new members of the ACIP, including vaccine skeptics, and the upcoming ACIP meeting. He mentioned that the American Academy of Pediatrics released its own vaccine guidance that differs from the CDC.
 - Sec. Kennedy said that the American Academy of Pediatrics is conflicted because they are funded by drug companies that make vaccines. Kennedy said that he depoliticized ACIP, rather than politicizing it.
 - In a follow-up, Secretary Kennedy said that ACIP has conflicts of interest, and he is confident in the panel's ability to evaluate vaccines for RSV and other conditions.
- Sen. Cornyn (R-TX) asked whether the COVID-19 response was politicized.
 - Sec. Kennedy said that the government failed to protect us and did not follow the science when developing social distancing guidelines, vaccine mandates, and other public health responses.
- Sen. Bennet (D-CO) singled out Dr. Robert Malone, one of Sec. Kennedy's appointees to ACIP, for saying that mRNA vaccines can cause a form of acquired immunodeficiency syndrome (AIDS). He also quoted another ACIP member who said that mRNA vaccines can cause death and other serious health conditions, which Sec. Kennedy said he agreed with.
 - Sen. Tillis (R-NC) asked for confirmation that Sec. Kennedy agreed with the statement that mRNA vaccines can cause serious adverse events. Sec. Kennedy agreed.
- Sen. Cassidy (R-LA) said that President Trump deserves a Nobel prize for Operation Warp Speed. He asked how Kennedy can praise Trump for Operation Warp Speed while also saying that the COVID vaccine killed more people than COVID and attempting to restrain access by suing HHS. Sen. Cassidy also expressed concern about HHS cancelling \$500 million in contracts to develop new mRNA vaccines.
 - Sec. Kennedy said that the government should have de-emphasized vaccines and focused on providing access to COVID treatments like hydroxychloroquine and ivermectin.

- Sen. Cassidy pushed back on Sec. Kennedy's assertion that former ACIP members had conflicts of interest. Instead, the new ACIP members are conflicted because they were paid witnesses for parties that sue vaccine makers.
- Sen. Cassidy also raised concerns that pharmacists are confused about who can receive the COVID vaccine without a prescription, which reduces access for patients.
- Sen. Cantwell (D-WA) called Sec. Kennedy a charlatan for lying about the harms associated with mRNA vaccines. She praised California, Washington, and Oregon for issuing vaccine guidelines separate from the CDC.
- Sen. Warner (D-VA) asked whether Sec. Kennedy agreed that over 1 million Americans died from COVID.
 - Sec. Kennedy said that he does not trust the CDC's data.
- Sen. Barrasso (R-WY) praised Operation Warp Speed and George Washington's efforts to inoculate the Continental Army against smallpox. Sen. Barrasso expressed deep concerns about Sec. Kennedy's vaccine positions and asked how he will ensure that vaccine guidance is clear and trustworthy.
 - Sec. Kennedy said that American children are subject to too many vaccines and that only one vaccine on the childhood immunization schedule has ever been tested in a placebo-controlled trial. Any new vaccine must demonstrate safety and efficacy against a placebo before it is approved.
- Sen. Warren (D-MA) asked whether all adults and children over 6 months are eligible to get the COVID booster at their pharmacy today.
 - Sec. Kennedy said that the vaccine is not recommended for healthy people under 65. Sen. Warren followed up by saying that means that pharmacies can't administer the vaccine to those people, and insurance companies don't have to cover the claim at no cost to insured individuals. Sec. Kennedy said that most people will be able to get the vaccine at their pharmacy for free, but it depends on their states' policy.
- Sen. Warren also asked about vaccines for hepatitis B and other diseases on the schedule for ACIP's September meeting.
 - Sec. Kennedy said that he does not want to recommend products that have no clinical trial data supporting their use.
- Sen. Tillis said that he wants a definitive statement from Sec. Kennedy on Operation Warp Speed and mRNA vaccines. He echoed concern about the firing of CDC Director Monarez.
- Sen. Marshall (R-KS) said that children are supposed to receive 76 immunizations by the time they're 18. He said it makes no sense why children are supposed to receive a hep B vaccine immediately after birth.
 - Sec. Kennedy said that he's not anti-vaccine, but he does want to make sure that the CDC's recommendations communicate the risk profile of each vaccine so that parents can be empowered to make decisions about their children's health.
- Sen. Lujan (D-NM) asked about Sec. Kennedy's advisors that are studying the root causes of autism, including David Geier.

- Sec. Kennedy said that Mr. Geier is not leading the study into autism's causes, but he is studying vaccine safety information.
- Sen. Warnock (D-GA) said that Sec. Kennedy's agenda is a threat to public health.
- Sen. Young (R-IN) asked about what HHS is doing to address long COVID, which an estimated 20 million Americans suffer from to this day.
 - Sec. Kennedy said that HHS is supporting studies to identify what treatment protocols are working for patients suffering from long COVID.
- Sen. Young mentioned that it takes about 18 years to bring therapeutics to market, so we need to accelerate the development of therapeutics for long COVID.
 - Sec. Kennedy said that HHS should repurpose drugs that are already on the market, and he committed to cracking down on parties that are blocking clinical trials using these products. He also committed to using ARPA-H to support studies.

MAHA:

- Chairman Crapo (R-ID) asked how MAHA will shift our health system to address the root causes of diseases.
 - Secretary Kennedy cited a CDC report that over three-quarters of Americans have at least one chronic disease. He said that it was a national security issue because younger adults cannot qualify for military service.
- Sen. Cornyn asked what HHS is doing to reduce health expenditures and ensure that we are getting value for our money.
 - Sec. Kennedy said that chronic disease is bankrupting us, so the MAHA strategy report will detail how the government will address the drivers of chronic diseases.
- Sen. Blackburn (R-TN) asked how CMS plans to align its ["Make Health Tech Great Again" policy](#) with existing interoperability standards.
 - Sec. Kennedy said that he would follow up with more information.
- Sen. Blackburn (R-TN) discussed the overprescribing of stimulants to treat behavioral conditions in children. She asked how HHS can provide parents with more information about the harmful effects of overprescribing.
 - Sec. Kennedy said that we know very little about the long-term impacts of prescribing stimulants, SSRIs, and other medications to children. He said that too many children are prescribed these medications.

H.R. 1/Rural Health:

- Chairman Crapo asked how the Rural Health Transformation Program will improve the rural health delivery system.
 - Secretary Kennedy said that rural hospitals are a vital part of communities that have been in crisis for some time—120 rural hospitals have closed over the past 10 years. Secretary Kennedy claimed that under H.R. 1, rural hospitals will receive a larger share of Medicaid payments than they do currently. The \$50 billion transformation

program will lead to a 50% increase in the amount of money going to rural communities through Medicaid.

- Sen. Cantwell asked about the advance premium tax credits expiring at the end of this year and the impact on health coverage.
 - Sec. Kennedy said that Democrats had a chance to make the enhanced tax credits permanent.
- Sen. Cortez Masto (D-NV) called H.R. 1 a give-away to big pharma because it shields some of the biggest-selling cancer drugs from Medicare negotiation.
 - Sec. Kennedy said that Medicare drug negotiation is poorly structured and raises costs for Medicare. He was not aware of H.R. 1 expanding the orphan drug exclusion to include products with multiple orphan indications.
- Sen. Sanders (D-VT) asked whether H.R. 1 would make America healthy again. He said that while the Rural Health Transformation Program would give up to \$50 billion to some rural providers, H.R. 1 would remove \$150 billion in federal funding for rural communities.
- Sen. Tillis expressed concern about H.R. 1's impact on the state of North Carolina and asked for HHS to respond to estimates that North Carolina will lose \$25 billion in federal assistance over 10 years.
- Sen. Welch (D-VT) said that 45,000 Vermonters will lose health coverage due to H.R.1, and hospitals in his state will face reduced revenue because of lower health coverage rates.

Direct-to-Consumer Advertising:

- Sen. Grassley (R-IA) highlighted his bill with Sen. Durbin (S. 229/H.R. 3789) would require drug makers to disclose the wholesale acquisition price for a 30-day supply of a drug or biologic in television advertisements if the WAC exceeds \$35. He asked whether the administration needs additional authority to require price disclosure in tv advertisements.
 - Sec. Kennedy said he would discuss that issue in private with Sen. Grassley.

PBM Reform:

- Sen. Lankford (R-OK) asked about what HHS is doing to rein in PBMs.
 - Sec. Kennedy said this is a priority for President Trump. PBMs have committed to transparency protocols and, as part of the Most-Favored-Nation (MFN) protocols, have agreed to participate in direct-to-consumer sales of MFN drugs.
- Sen. Blackburn mentioned her PBM reform bill that was approved by the Finance Committee last Congress. She asked whether Sec. Kennedy will work with her to pass the bill this year.
 - Sec. Kennedy agreed.

Medication Abortion:

- Sen. Lankford asked about the FDA's review of mifepristone.
 - Sec. Kennedy said that the FDA is currently reviewing the patient safety data for mifepristone but did not offer a timeline for a decision.

- Sen. Daines (R-MT) expressed concerns about the deregulation of mifepristone. He cited a study that 11% of women experienced adverse events after taking mifepristone. Sen. Daines asked whether HHS would remove the telemedicine allowance for mifepristone.
 - Sec. Kennedy said he would get back to him on that question.

Payment Reform:

- Sen. Whitehouse (D-RI) raised concerns that Rhode Island providers are paid significantly less than similar practitioners in Massachusetts and Connecticut. He asked for assurances that CMS will end the discrimination against Rhode Islanders.
- Sen. Whitehouse asked whether the CMS Innovation Center (CMMI) would approve Rhode Island's participation in an end-of-life care model.