

# Robert F. Kennedy Jr. Undergoes Confirmation Hearing for HHS Secretary Before the Senate Finance Committee

---

On January 29<sup>th</sup>, 2025, Robert F. Kennedy Jr. appeared before the Senate Finance Committee for his confirmation hearing as President Donald Trump's nominee for Secretary of the Department of Health & Human Services (HHS). The session included many hot-button topics such as:

- Vaccine safety,
- The role of the Food & Drug Administration (FDA) and National Institute of Health (NIH),
- Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) Benefits,
- Government oversight and regulation of Pharmacy Benefit Managers (PBMs),
- Legislation and reform on Medicare, Medicaid, Medicare Advantage, and the Affordable Care Act (ACA),
- Abortion,
- HHS workforce changes,
- The Inflation Reduction Act's (IRA) Drug Price Negotiation Program, and
- Lawsuits against pharmaceutical companies.

## VACCINE SAFETY

Throughout his career, Mr. Kennedy's position on vaccines has changed. During the confirmation hearing, several senators referenced his previous remarks on the subject. In his opening statement, Mr. Kennedy clarified that his position is "pro-safety," explaining that his focus on vaccines is rooted in a commitment to researching their safety.

Ranking Member Ron Wyden stressed the importance of taking vaccines seriously, warning that misinformation could endanger children and seniors in the U.S. He cited Mr. Kennedy's 2021 petition, which sought to restrict Americans' access to COVID-19 vaccines. In response, Mr. Kennedy argued that the claim lacked context, explaining that the petition was filed after the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) authorized vaccines for children without what he viewed as sufficient scientific backing.



Senator Bernie Sanders (D-VT) directly asked whether Mr. Kennedy believed the COVID-19 vaccine saved lives, to which he responded, “I don’t know.” Other senators pointed to his leadership of the Children’s Health Defense group, which has questioned the safety of childhood vaccinations. Mr. Kennedy maintained that he is not anti-vaccine, asserting that his statements have been taken out of context.

## FDA & NIH

Mr. Kennedy supports utilizing the NIH and FDA to research potential correlations between food additives and various health conditions. During the hearing, he advocated for aligning U.S. food standards with European regulations and suggested revisiting the FDA’s *Generally Recognized as Safe* (GRAS) standard to establish a higher burden of proof for new ingredients.

Mr. Kennedy highlighted his proposal to enhance diversity in clinical trials. Senator Ben Luján (D-NM) asked whether he would commit to finalizing regulations to improve the participation of diverse patient populations, to which Mr. Kennedy responded, “yes.” This discussion ties back to the 2023 omnibus spending bill, which mandates the FDA to establish formal diversity action plans for clinical trials.

## SNAP BENEFITS

Chairman Mike Crapo asked Mr. Kennedy about potential strategies for integrating nutrition-based interventions into Medicaid and Medicare. In response, Mr. Kennedy emphasized the need to reform SNAP to promote healthier food choices as a means of reducing chronic disease in the U.S. He stated, “*We shouldn’t be giving 60 percent of kids in school processed food... We shouldn’t be spending 10 percent of the SNAP program on sugary drinks.*”

## GOVERNMENT OVERSIGHT & PBMS

Senator Chuck Grassley (R-IA) emphasized the role of oversight in holding PBMs accountable for lowering prescription drug prices. He asked Mr. Kennedy whether he would commit to working with Congress on PBM accountability and supporting future legislation on the issue.

While Mr. Kennedy admitted he was not fully familiar with current PBM reform legislation, he expressed a willingness to collaborate on bipartisan efforts to address the issue. He also highlighted that a key part of President Trump’s agenda involves redirecting profits away from PBMs and toward primary and high-quality care.

Addressing speculation that he had met with PBM representatives to discuss reform, Mr. Kennedy clarified that his intent was simply to “hear from the other side,” rather than to align himself with PBMs.

## MEDICAID, MEDICARE, & THE ACA

Senator Bill Cassidy (R-LA) asked Mr. Kennedy how he would approach integrating Medicare and Medicaid, as well as his policy ideas for Medicaid reform. In response, Mr. Kennedy did not offer detail on specific reforms beyond advocating for increased transparency and accountability. He also criticized what he referred to as the “rapacious behavior” of insurance companies and expressed support for efforts to address overcharging and abusive practices.

Although he admitted to having limited knowledge of Medicare and Medicaid, he strongly endorsed Medicare Advantage, a position that aligns with Dr. Mehmet Oz, President Trump’s nominee to lead the Centers for Medicare & Medicaid Services (CMS).

When questioned about the ACA, Mr. Kennedy stated that many Americans are dissatisfied with both the ACA and Medicaid, suggesting that they would prefer Medicare or private insurance instead. He noted that some Medicaid enrollees are unhappy with their coverage and raised concerns about the cost of Medicaid premiums, although it is important to clarify that low-income enrollees do not pay premiums.

Regarding the potential dismantling of Medicaid, Mr. Kennedy clarified that he does not have a “broad proposal” for eliminating the program.

## ABORTION

During his confirmation hearing, Mr. Kennedy was questioned about his changing views on abortion. Several Democratic senators, including Bernie Sanders (D-VT) and Michael F. Bennet (D-CO), noted his shift in position, particularly after his nomination by President Trump. Senator Maggie Hassan (D-NH) asked him to clarify his stance, referencing his past statements in support of bodily autonomy and women's rights to make decisions about abortion. Mr. Kennedy responded by reiterating that he has always believed abortion is a tragedy.

## HHS WORKFORCE

Senator Mark R. Warner (D-VA) questioned Mr. Kennedy about the dismissal of 600 NIH employees and 2,000 HHS workers, as well as the use of buyouts. In response, Mr. Kennedy stated, “I will commit to not firing anybody who is doing their job.”

## IRA DRUG PRICE NEGOTIATION PROGRAM

Senator Catherine Cortez Masto (D-NV) questioned Mr. Kennedy on the high cost of prescription drugs. In response, Mr. Kennedy referenced a White House executive order supporting drug price negotiations under the IRA noting that President Trump had been highly enthusiastic about negotiating drug prices during his first term. However, while CMS recently issued a [press release](#) emphasizing that lowering prescription drug costs remains a priority for President Trump’s administration and described the selection of 15 drugs for negotiation as “statutorily required,” Trump has not actually signed an executive order on the matter.

During a separate exchange, Senator Sanders condemned the pharmaceutical industry's pricing practices and raised the issue of international reference pricing, emphasizing that Americans pay significantly more for the same drugs than those in other countries. When asked if he would commit to addressing this disparity, Mr. Kennedy agreed that it was important to close the gap.

## LAWSUITS AGAINST PHARMACEUTICAL COMPANIES

Senator Elizabeth Warren (D-MA) pressed Mr. Kennedy on whether he would commit to avoiding conflicts of interest as HHS Secretary by refusing financial ties to drug companies and forgoing any personal profit from litigation against them. She accused Mr. Kennedy of earning millions by encouraging individuals to join lawsuits against pharmaceutical companies and vaccine manufacturers.

Senator Warren specifically pointed to an arrangement in which Mr. Kennedy profited by referring clients to the law firm Wisner Baum, which was involved in lawsuits against Merck & Co. over its human papillomavirus (HPV) vaccine. In response, Mr. Kennedy pledged not to accept any compensation from pharmaceutical or medical device companies, hospital systems, or insurers for at least four years after leaving his position as HHS Secretary.

\*\*\*

*This Applied Policy® Summary was prepared by [Caitlyn Bernard](#) with support from the Applied Policy team of health policy experts. If you have any questions or need more information, please contact her at [CBernard@appliedpolicy.com](mailto:CBernard@appliedpolicy.com) or at (202) 558-5272.*