



Plain Language Edition

**HHS' Attack on Autistic
People and Public Health:
Year One**

Words To Know

Advisory Council on Immunization Practices (ACIP)

- A group of vaccine experts who help the government make choices about vaccines.

Administration on Community Living (ACL)

- Part of HHS that works to make sure people with disabilities and older people can live in the community.

Asset limit

- How much money someone can save while on Medicaid.

The Autism Collaboration, Accountability, Research, Education, and Support (CARES) Act

- The main law focused on funding autism research.

“Big Pharma”

- A nickname for the group of businesses that make medicines, like vaccines.

Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC)

- The part of HHS in charge of trying to stop diseases.

Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services (CMS)

- The part of HHS in charge of Medicare and Medicaid.

Circumcision

- A surgery to remove the skin covering the end of a penis. People who get circumcised usually get the surgery done when they are babies.

Commission

- A group of people in charge of something.

Conflict of interest

- Reasons someone can't be trusted to be part of a group or run a study. Conflicts of interest are usually something like being paid by an organization the group or study is about.

Department of Justice

- The part of the U.S. government in charge of making sure the law gets followed.

Epidemic

- A disease that more and more people get at one time.

Food and Drug Administration (FDA)

- The part of HHS in charge of making sure food and medications are safe.

Federal agencies

- The offices that run government services. The President chooses who is in charge at each federal agency.

Freedom of Information Act (FOIA)

- A law that gives everyone the right to ask for records from any federal agency

Grant

- Money the government gives out for a project to happen.

Health and Human Services (HHS)

- The part of the U.S. government in charge of health care.

Health, Education, Labor, and Pensions (HELP) Committee

- The part of the Senate in charge of health care laws.

Home and Community-Based Services (HCBS)

- Services people get to live in the community instead of institutions. Some kinds of HCBS are in-home helpers and help getting transportation around the community.

Impeaching

- When Congress decides someone should not be allowed to work for the government anymore because they did something bad.

Institutional bias

- A rule that says states have to save money to pay for disabled people on Medicaid to live in institutions. But states do not legally have to save money for HCBS for those same people.

Interagency Autism Coordinating Committee (IACC)

- A part of HHS. The IACC gives the government advice about autism research.

The Leadership Education and Neurodevelopmental and Related Disabilities (LEND)

- A program funded through the Autism CARES Act. LEND trains people on how to make policies that make sure people with intellectual and developmental disabilities get good support.

Long COVID

- Long COVID is when you are still sick over three months after you first got COVID-19. Long COVID happens because you got sick with COVID-19.

Make America Healthy Again/MAHA

- A slogan created by RFK Jr. It is similar to Trump's slogan "Make America Great Again." MAHA was made by people who want to get rid of disabilities like autism and ADHD. MAHA spreads false information about health. For example, MAHA does not want people to get vaccines.

Measles

- A type of disease. Measles can make you very sick. Some people die from measles. There is a vaccine for measles. People who get the measles vaccine do not get measles.

mRNA

- A new science to help make new vaccines faster. An example of an mRNA vaccine is the COVID vaccine.

NIH

- The part of HHS in charge of health research.

Optional

- Parts of the budget the state does not legally have to spend money on. For example, HCBS is an optional part of the Medicaid budget.

Pseudoscience

- When people try to make fake information seem like real scientific proof of something. For example, the Wakefield study about vaccines and autism is pseudoscience.

Public health

- The health of large groups of people, like cities or countries. Public health is also about how the government helps people stay healthy.

Public health Conspiracies

- Fake stories about health. These stories can make people do things that are actually unhealthy.

Recommendation

- When a person or group says what they think people should do. For example, experts on vaccines give recommendations for which vaccines people should get.

Registry

- A record of people's information.

Respiratory viruses

- Diseases that can spread through the air, like a cold, COVID, or the flu.

Richardson waiver

- A rule that says people must get the chance to share their feedback about changes to Medicare and Medicaid.

Skeptics

- Someone who dislikes or is unsure about a thing or idea.

Thimerosal

- A chemical that can keep vaccines safe. It does this by stopping germs from growing in vaccines. Germs in vaccines can make people sick or die when they get the vaccine.

Vaccines

- Shots that keep people from getting sick. Some kinds of vaccines are the flu vaccine and the COVID vaccine.

Vaccine Injury Compensation Program (VICP)

- A way people can get money after getting hurt by vaccines, without blaming vaccine-makers. People use the VICP instead of trying to sue a vaccine-maker.

Vaccine mandate

- When the government says people have to get certain vaccines.

Testifying

- Answering official questions about something you or someone you know did.

Work reporting requirements

- Rules that say people have to work to get Medicaid. They would have to let Medicaid know they are working on a regular basis.

About this report

This report is about Robert F. Kennedy, Jr. We call Robert F. Kennedy, Jr. “RFK Jr.” for short. RFK Jr. is the Secretary of the U.S. **Department of Health and Human Services (HHS)**. HHS is the part of the U.S. government in charge of health care. HHS works on things like:

- health care
- vaccines
- mental health
- programs for people with disabilities

HHS is a federal agency. **Federal agencies** run government services. The President chooses who is in charge at each federal agency. The Secretary of HHS is the person who leads HHS.

RFK Jr. became the Secretary of HHS in February 2025. It has been about a year since then. HHS has changed a lot since RFK Jr. became the Secretary. Some of those changes have made people worried or confused. Now, some Americans think they can’t trust the government to give them good health information.

This report explains what has happened at HHS since RFK Jr. became the Secretary. This report is for:

- Policy-makers (people who make laws and rules)
- people with disabilities and their families
- anyone who wants to understand what is happening at HHS, and how that affects U.S. health care

This report will answer questions like:

- Who is RFK Jr.? What was he doing before joining HHS?
- What has RFK Jr. done since joining HHS? How has HHS changed?

- How could the changes RFK Jr. made hurt people’s health?
- What should happen next at HHS?
- What can states and advocacy groups do to help?

This report was written together by two disability organizations. Both groups care a lot about how what the government does affects people with disabilities. They want to make sure that leaders and policy-makers listen to people with disabilities. These organizations are:

- The Autistic Self Advocacy Network (ASAN). ASAN is a group run by and for autistic people. They make sure autistic people have a say in the decisions and laws that affect their lives.
- The American Association of People with Disabilities (AAPD). AAPD fights for the civil rights of all people with disabilities. They help people with disabilities understand disability policy.

Background

The background section of this report will talk about Secretary Robert F. Kennedy, Jr. and his life. This will help explain how his past affects the choices he makes now as the leader of the HHS.

This section of the report will also talk about public health conspiracies. **Public health** means the health of large groups of people, like cities or countries. Public health is also about how the government helps people stay healthy.

Public health **conspiracies** are fake stories about health. These stories can make people do things that are actually unhealthy.

For example, a big public health conspiracy is about vaccines and autism. **Vaccines** are shots that keep people from getting sick. Some kinds of vaccines are the flu vaccine and the COVID vaccine.

People who believe and spread bad ideas about vaccines are called “vaccine skeptics” or “anti-vaccine”. For many years, these people have spread untrue

ideas about vaccines and autism. These ideas have made many people confused or afraid to get vaccines. Some people even stopped trusting doctors and public health experts because of these conspiracies.

Public health conspiracies helped make a movement called “Make America Healthy Again”. **“Make America Healthy Again”** is a slogan created by RFK Jr. It is called “MAHA” for short.

MAHA is similar to Trump’s slogan “Make America Great Again.” MAHA was made by people who want to get rid of disabilities like autism and ADHD. MAHA spreads false information about health. For example, MAHA does not want people to get vaccines.

We will talk about vaccines and autism a lot in this toolkit. That is because the way HHS treats vaccines and autism is an example of a bigger problem at HHS. Lots of research shows vaccines don’t cause autism. But HHS keeps bringing up the idea anyway. When HHS tries to bring up problems that aren’t real, they put people’s health in danger.

RFK Jr. had jobs in public health and politics before he became Secretary of HHS. In these jobs, he learned different public health conspiracies. He worked to spread these conspiracies.

Before HHS: Robert F. Kennedy Jr.’s Jobs

Before he became Secretary Kennedy, RFK Jr. had many jobs. Lots of people knew him from politics and advocacy. The disability community knew him because he said things that hurt people with disabilities.

RFK Jr. mostly worked as a lawyer on cases about the environment. He did this job from the 1980’s to the 2010’s. He worked to stop people and businesses from hurting the environment. People began to know RFK Jr.’s name because of the work he did.

At the same time, RFK Jr. made an organization called the Food Allergy Initiative (FAI). FAI focused on funding research to cure food allergies. But RFK Jr. also

believed that vaccines might cause allergies, even though research said this wasn't true. In the early 2000s, some parents of autistic kids talked to RFK Jr. They told RFK Jr. that they thought vaccines made their kids autistic.

RFK Jr. tried to use his fame to get lawmakers to change vaccine policies. After a while, RFK Jr. stopped doing jobs to try and help the environment. He focused more and more on vaccines and autism.

In 2018, RFK Jr. helped make the Children's Health Defense (CHD). When CHD first got made, they put out a statement about what they wanted to do. The statement said it was a problem that more people were getting diagnosed with autism and ADHD than before. They tried to make it seem like having these disabilities hurt children.

RFK Jr. left CHD in 2023 to run for President in the 2024 election. Later, RFK Jr. stopped trying to become President. He said people should vote for Donald Trump instead. After Trump got elected in November 2024, he said he would choose RFK Jr. as the Secretary of HHS.

Recently, RFK Jr. has shared lots of false ideas about health:

- He said school shootings were caused by mental health medication
- He said AIDS might not be caused by HIV
- He said chemicals in the water could "turn children transgender"
- He said COVID-19 was made on purpose by people, and didn't make Chinese people and Ashkenazi Jews sick.
- He said the polio vaccine made more people get cancer.
- He said that childhood vaccines were not tested to check if they are safe.
- He said that "there's no vaccine that is safe" and that vaccines cause autism.

Bad Public Health Information and the Make America Healthy Again (MAHA) Movement

“Make America Healthy Again” is a lot like “Make America Great Again”. RFK Jr. used a similar slogan to show that he and President Trump believe the same things. But the things that MAHA says are not new ideas.

Lots of people came together to make MAHA. Some kinds of people that work on MAHA are:

- Lawyers
- People who try to protect the environment
- Parents
- Healthcare workers (or people who used to be healthcare workers)

All these people have ideas about health that could hurt people. For example, some people in MAHA think food allergies are the main thing causing disability. Or, they think getting poisoned by the environment causes most disabilities. Studies show this is not true, but MAHA believes it anyway. The “poison” in the environment that they talk most about is in vaccines.

Vaccines, Mercury, and Autism

For almost 30 years, some people have thought there was a link between vaccines and autism. They think that a chemical in vaccines called thimerosal can cause autism. They are wrong.

Thimerosal is a chemical that can keep vaccines safe. It does this by stopping germs from growing in vaccines. Thimerosal is made from mercury, a chemical that can be dangerous. But studies show that thimerosal is safe to use in vaccines.

In 1998, a researcher named Andrew Wakefield did a study about vaccines and autism. He said a vaccine called the Measles, Mumps, and Rubella (MMR) vaccine

caused autism. But other researchers proved Wakefield wrong a few years later. Other researchers also found out that Wakefield made up the information he used in his study.

Wakefield also had a conflict of interest because he worked with people who sell other vaccines that are not MMR. **Conflicts of interest** are reasons someone can't be trusted to be part of a group or run a study. Conflicts of interest are usually something like being paid by an organization the group or study is about. For example, Wakefield's study tried to convince people to use different vaccines, like one by the company paying him.

Sixteen big studies have shown no link between the MMR vaccine and autism. Andrew Wakefield lost his job. In 2011, the science journal that first shared Wakefield's study let people know the study was proven wrong. But this did not stop RFK Jr. from believing vaccines cause autism.

In June 2005, RFK Jr. wrote an article for the magazines Salon and Rolling Stone. In the article, he said that mercury in vaccines caused autism. He said thimerosal was making more children become autistic.

RFK Jr.'s article said that vaccines had very high amounts of mercury. He said vaccines had 187 times the amount of mercury that is safe. RFK Jr. also said that kids were getting 24 vaccines with mercury in them. Both of these ideas are wrong. Salon and Rolling Stone took down RFK Jr.'s article because it was wrong.

RFK Jr. was not only wrong about how much mercury vaccines have. He also didn't talk about what type of mercury is in vaccines. Regular mercury can be dangerous. But thimerosal uses a special kind of mercury. This kind of mercury is much more safe. RFK Jr.'s lies made vaccines seem much less safe than they are.

RFK Jr.'s article also talked about Mark and David Geier. The Geiers are a father-son team of researchers. They said their research found a link between thimerosal and brain damage in children. But there have been nine studies about thimerosal and autism done since 2003. None of them found any link between thimerosal and autism. They also didn't find a link between the MMR vaccine and autism. Researchers know not to trust The Geiers about vaccines and autism.

In the 2010's, RFK Jr. spoke and wrote about vaccines and autism a lot. He kept telling people that vaccines can cause autism and other brain-based disabilities. He also said that vaccines were never tested to make sure they are safe.

But this is not true. The **Food and Drug Administration (FDA)** is the part of HHS in charge of making sure food and medications are safe. The FDA says all vaccines need a lot of testing before the government says they are okay. Vaccines like flu, COVID, and MMR were all tested a lot to show they are safe.

Children's Health Defense

In 2007, the World Mercury Project got started. This organization focuses on how dangerous they think thimerosal is. RFK Jr. joined the board of the World Mercury Project in 2015. Then, he became the leader of the board. and eventually become board chair.

In 2018, he renamed the World Mercury Project into the Children's Health Defense (CHD). RFK Jr. said CHD would get rid of poisons in the environment to stop kids from getting sick or disabled. CHD spread a lot of false information about vaccines. They tried to get the government to pass rules that would make it harder to get vaccines.

In 2019, CHD tried to sue New York state about their vaccine mandate. A **vaccine mandate** is when the government says people have to get certain vaccines. New York said that people had to get the measles vaccine because more people were getting sick with measles. CHD thought that making vaccine mandates should be against the law. They told people to not get vaccines to fight against vaccine mandates.

CHD got more popular when COVID-19 first happened. During this time, CHD made a lot more money. People were talking a lot about the COVID-19 vaccines. That gave people like RFK Jr. to share their bad ideas about vaccines. RFK Jr. said the COVID-19 vaccine kills more people that it saves. We know this is not true.

In May 2021, RFK Jr. talked to the FDA as the head of CHD. He asked the FDA to stop okaying new vaccines, and to stop giving out COVID-19 vaccines. He said

vaccines were more dangerous than people getting sick. He also said people should take medications that don't work to treat COVID instead of getting vaccines.

U.S. Public Health Groups and Programs

"Big Pharma"

RFK Jr. and other people with bad ideas about vaccines talk a lot about "Big Pharma". "**Big Pharma**" is a nickname for the group of businesses that make medicines, like vaccines. RFK Jr. thinks that "Big Pharma" has control over the government.

Making medicine does make businesses a lot of money. But saying "Big Pharma" controls the government is a conspiracy theory. Businesses that make vaccines are important to slowing and stopping diseases. RFK Jr.'s ideas make people trust the businesses that make medicine less.

Vaccine Injury Compensation Program

Sometimes, people do get hurt by vaccines. This is very rare, but it still happens. That is why the government made the **Vaccine Injury Compensation Program (VICP)**. The **VICP** is a way people can get money after getting hurt by vaccines, without blaming vaccine-makers. People use the VICP instead of trying to sue a vaccine-maker.

The VICP got made in 1986. Before that, many parents tried to sue vaccine-makers. These parents said their children were hurt by vaccines. Vaccine-makers dealt with over 250 lawsuits in the 1980s, and had to pay \$3 billion. Vaccine-makers were scared to keep making vaccines, because they would keep getting sued. These businesses could not afford to keep making vaccines if they had to pay more money in lawsuits. That led to most businesses that made vaccines shutting down.

When the VICP got made, there was only one vaccine-maker left that made whooping cough vaccines. But 9,000 children a year were dying from whooping cough. Congress decided it was better to pay people who got hurt by vaccines

themselves, instead of making vaccine-makers do it. That way, businesses could still make vaccines and not have to worry about being sued.

RFK Jr. said he thinks the VICP does not work. He said the VICP stops people from suing vaccine-makers because “Big Pharma” controls the government. But this is not true. The VICP is a very important government program. Without the VICP, we would not have vaccines.

The Advisory Committee on Immunization Practices (ACIP)

The **Advisory Committee on Immunization Practices (ACIP)** is a group of vaccine experts who help the government make choices about vaccines. ACIP is an important part of keeping vaccines safe.

ACIP makes recommendations to HHS about vaccines. **Recommendations** are when a person or group says what they think people should do. For example, experts on vaccines give recommendations for which vaccines people should get.

ACIP was first made in 1964. They gave recommendations on how to keep vaccines safe and make sure they work. Now, ACIP gives recommendations about more things. They give recommendations about:

- Which vaccines are okay for the public to get
- When people should get vaccines
- How to run studies about vaccines

ACIP’s recommendations affect how easy it is for people to get vaccines.

ACIP members are supposed to be experts on vaccines and public health. ACIP meets three times a year to look over research and vote on recommendations. ACIP’s recommendations have made vaccines better.

The members of ACIP must say what conflict of interest they have. Before RFK Jr. joined HHS, he said he thought all the members of ACIP have conflicts of interest. But there is no proof to back this idea up.

The Interagency Autism Coordinating Committee (IACC)

The **Interagency Autism Coordinating Committee (IACC)** is a part of HHS. The IACC gives the government advice about autism research. The IACC tells the government what kind of research the government should pay for. The IACC also keeps track of autism research and what it tells us about how to help autistic people.

The IACC first got made in 2000. Parents of autistic kids were worried that autism rates were going up. They wanted a space to have their voices heard about autism research.

The IACC has changed a lot since then. More people joined the IACC. Different federal agencies started joining in. Then, more everyday people got to join. The IACC made rules about who needed to be a part of it. Autistic self-advocates and autism researchers got added in.

The IACC's most important job is making the IACC strategic plan. This plan has recommendations on what autism research should happen. This helps the government decide where to award grants for autism research. A **grant** is money the government gives out for a project to happen.

The last meeting of the IACC was on January 14th, 2025. At this meeting, they said they would update the 2024 strategic plan. They said they would focus on how to help with other disabilities that autistic people get. The IACC also said they would share what research projects got grants, and how these projects fit the ideas in the strategic plan. But none of this has happened. As of February 2026, The IACC has not met since RFK Jr. became Secretary.

Conclusion

RFK Jr. has spent a lot of time spreading false information about vaccines. His ideas are even more dangerous now that he is HHS Secretary. Over the past year, RFK Jr. has used public health conspiracy theories to make people confused and scared. His ideas have had a big effect on HHS and public health in the U.S.

RFK Jr. and HHS Timeline

How did we find the information for this timeline?

RFK Jr. became the Secretary of HHS in February 2025. This report goes over news from right before RFK Jr. became HHS Secretary until January 2026. Some of the sources we used are:

- Statements from HHS, and other federal agencies under HHS, like the FDA
- White House press releases and fact sheets
- Social media pages of government offices
- Pages of disability organizations that talk about RFK Jr. or HHS
- News articles from major news sources, like NPR and Politico.

This timeline focuses mostly on autism. That means things that don't affect autistic people will not be on this timeline. Please keep in mind that things may be missing from the timeline.

What has RFK Jr. done at HHS since he became Secretary?

General Policy and Funding Changes

In January 2025, HHS went through a “communications freeze”. This means that HHS did not share information about what it was doing with the public. HHS said the communication freeze happened because they did not choose a new Secretary yet. RFK Jr. got chosen to be Secretary in February 2025. The communications freeze ended in April 2025.

In February 2025, The White House made the “Make America Healthy Again” commission. A **commission** is a group of people in charge of something. RFK Jr. got chosen as the leader of the commission.

In February 2025, HHS got rid of the Richardson Waiver. The **Richardson waiver** is a rule that says people must get the chance to share their feedback about changes to Medicare and Medicaid. Getting rid of this rule makes it harder for everyday people to talk to the government about Medicare and Medicaid.

In March 2025, HHS tried to cancel \$11.4 billion in federal grants to state and community health departments. HHS also cancelled a large grant from the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA). The grant was 1 billion dollars. Then, a judge said cancelling the grants would be against the law. So, the grants were not cancelled in the end.

In May 2025, HHS published the MAHA Commission Report. The MAHA Commission Report says it wants to end the “childhood chronic disease crisis.” This means they want to stop children from having disabilities or sicknesses.

Vaccines

RFK Jr. has made many changes to how the government handles vaccines. When RFK Jr. first joined HHS, he stopped the **Advisory Committee on Immunization Practices (ACIP)** from having a meeting. In normal times, the ACIP is a committee of scientists who know a lot about vaccines and public health. The committee makes recommendations about vaccines. The ACIP uses science to make these recommendations to the government. Vaccines are important and save lives. The government needs science-based recommendations to keep Americans healthy.

After this, RFK Jr. fired everyone on the ACIP. A few months later, RFK Jr. put eight new people on the ACIP. Most of those people spread lies about vaccines. After putting people who lie about vaccines on the ACIP, RFK Jr. allowed the ACIP to meet. At this meeting, the ACIP recommended getting rid of thimerosal from flu vaccines.

Thimerosal is a chemical that can keep vaccines safe. It does this by stopping germs from growing in vaccines. Germs in vaccines can make people sick or die when they get the vaccine. RFK Jr. signed the ACIP recommendation to get rid of thimerosal from flu vaccines.

Later, in September 2025, ACIP had another meeting. They made some new recommendations about vaccines. They said that:

- Children get separate vaccines for chicken pox and measles, and mumps and rubella.
- Adults over 65 should get the Covid vaccine, but adults under 65 might not need to.
- The Measles, Mumps, and Rubella vaccines should be 3 separate vaccines.

These recommendations go against the facts we already know about vaccines.

RFK Jr. has made it harder for some people to get certain vaccines. In May 2025, he said that pregnant women and healthy children don't need a COVID vaccine. After that, RFK Jr. decided to change what vaccines the government says kids should get. RFK Jr. did this even though the ACIP did not recommend it. Now, the government says kids only need 11 vaccines instead of 17.

In December 2025, ACIP voted to remove the recommendation for newborns to get the Hepatitis B shot. They said the Hepatitis B vaccine needs more research. HHS said they would pay for a research study on Hepatitis B in Africa. But other people in the government realized the study could hurt people, so it did not happen.

RFK Jr. also cut funding to important programs and organizations that help make or give out vaccines. One of those organizations is Gavi. Gavi gives vaccines to children around the world.

RFK Jr. also cancelled grants for mRNA vaccine research. **mRNA** is a new science to help make new vaccines faster. An example of an mRNA vaccine is the COVID vaccine.

In August 2025, HHS got rid of a policy that helped HHS keep track of if hospital workers got vaccines. The policy gave hospitals rewards for telling HHS how many of their hospital staff got vaccinated. HHS also announced that they are restarting the Task Force on Safer Childhood Vaccines. This Task Force had not met since 1998.

More people got sick during this time with diseases vaccines could have stopped. In March 2025, people in Texas got measles. In October 2025, people in the U.S. started to get whooping cough. When the measles outbreak happened in Texas, RFK Jr. said vaccines are a “personal choice”. Measles is a disease that can kill you. The measles vaccine saves lives. RFK Jr.’s ideas put people in danger.

Changing who is in charge: Closing offices and firing workers

In February 2025, the Department of Health and Human Services fired a lot of people in the department. Many people got fired from offices like:

- Food and Drug Administration (FDA)
- **Centers for Medicare and Medicaid (CMS)** - The part of HHS in charge of Medicare and Medicaid.
- **Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC)** - The part of HHS in charge of trying to stop diseases.

HHS said firing many workers was okay because the employees were “probationary.” That means they were newer to the job, so they had less rights at work.

A month later, HHS announced more changes at the department. HHS said they would:

- Fire over 20,000 people
- Get rid of the **Administration on Community Living (ACL)**. ACL works to make sure people with disabilities and older people can live in the community.
- Combine, make smaller, or close many other offices that help people stay healthier

In March 2025, HHS closed the office working on Long COVID research. Then in April 2025, HHS closed offices that take **Freedom of Information Act (FOIA)** requests. FOIA is a law that gives everyone the right to ask for records from any federal agency. Federal agencies usually have to give people those records. But closing these offices makes it harder for people to get those records.

In October 2025, HHS fired even more people from different parts of the department. HHS said this was okay because the government was shut down.

Some people left their jobs at HHS because they disagreed with RFK Jr. Some people who left HHS are:

- Fiona Havers, an expert on vaccines
- Peter Marks, another expert on vaccines

Then, RFK Jr. added new people to HHS. Many of these people spread lies about vaccines. Some of the new people at HHS are:

- Paula Stannard as the Director for the Office of Civil Rights (OCR).
- Jim O'Neill as the Deputy Secretary of HHS
- Dr. Ralph Abraham as CDC's Principal Deputy Director

David Geier, who was chosen to research vaccines and autism. [David Geier did illegal medical experiments on autistic children](#). He pretended to be a doctor. He did exams and gave people drugs even though he is not a doctor.

Some people got hired by RFK Jr., but then left HHS soon after. Dr. Richard Pazur got chosen to be in charge of making rules at the FDA. He retired a month after he started. RFK Jr. also chose Susan Monarez to run the CDC in July 2025. Then, she got fired in August 2025 for going against RFK Jr. 's ideas about vaccines.

Bad information about autism

RFK Jr. has made autism a big focus for HHS. In April 2025, RFK Jr. said in a cabinet meeting that HHS will know what causes autism by September. Then, HHS releases the Autism and Developmental Disabilities Monitoring (ADDM) report. The ADDM report says how many 8-year-olds have autism in the U.S. The report says that out of every 31 8-year-olds, 1 will be autistic.

Secretary Kennedy held a news conference on the report. At the news conference, he says hurtful things about autistic people. For example, he said autism is “destroying families”.

The next month, **NIH** made an announcement. NIH is the part of HHS in charge of health research. NIH announced they would give out more grants for autism research. They called this the “Autism Data Science Initiative”.

NIH announced which researchers got the grants in September. Many of these research projects focus on finding what causes autism. Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute also got a different grant to look for a link between autism and vaccines.

In April 2025, the idea of an Autism registry also came up. A **registry** is a record of people’s information. The head of NIH said they would make a registry for many diseases. But he said autism would be in the registry. The registry would take private medical records to give researchers more data.

A few days later, HHS said they are not making an autism registry. The project still happened, but the way HHS talks about it is different. The project is now called “Real World Data Platform.” Researchers could use this project to find the cause of autism. NIH says they are working with CMS to share Medicare and Medicaid about autism. They want to do this to research what causes autism.

In September 2025, RFK Jr. said that HHS will work on curing autism. They said that a medication called leucovorin could help children with autism. RFK Jr. also said that acetaminophen (tylenol) can make kids autistic if their mother takes it while pregnant. But research already proved that this is not true. In October, RFK Jr. took back what he said about acetaminophen causing autism. In January 2026, new

research came out that showed acetaminophen during pregnancy does not lead to Autism.

In September 2025, the CDC website got changed to say they want to find the cause of autism. The CDC website also got changed to say that there isn't proof that vaccines don't cause autism. The FDA website also got rid of a warning about dangerous autism "treatments".

Lastly, RFK Jr. has changed the IACC. In September 2025, HHS announced a new IACC would start the next year. In December, RFK Jr. announced 3 new members of the IACC. All of these new members have spread lies about vaccines. Members who were on the IACC before RFK Jr. started did not get to come back.

What do others think of what RFK Jr. is doing?

Members of Congress and everyday people spoke up about RFK Jr. In May 2025 and September 2025, RFK Jr. spoke to Congress. They asked him about things like staff firings, where money is going, and his thoughts on giving children vaccines. Louisiana Senator Bill Cassidy said that he disagrees with RFK Jr., and there is no link between Autism and Tylenol. In January, Congress asked RFK Jr. to come speak again about what HHS is doing with vaccine policies.

Disability rights groups have also worked to stop HHS from hurting more disabled people. Disability rights organizations had a roundtable to talk about Autism services, civil rights, science, and disability police. RFK Jr. was invited to participate, but did not come.

The roundtable was hosted by:

- Autism Society of America
- Autistic Self Advocacy Network
- Association of University Centers on Disabilities
- Autistic People of Color Fund

- Autistic Women & Nonbinary Network
- American Association of People with Disabilities
- The Arc
- National Association of Councils on Developmental Disabilities

Staff in offices run by HHS have also shared important information. Staff at the CDC wrote a letter to RFK Jr. in August 2025. The letter asked RFK Jr. to stop spreading false information about autism. The American Association of Pediatrics put out a statement that acetaminophen is safe for pregnant women. Twelve people who used to lead the FDA also put out a statement. They said that HHS was wrong to try and change who can get vaccines.

Explaining what the timeline shows

RFK Jr and HHS's choices caused a lot of problems. This section talks about the way those problems change public health and federal policy.

Some of the problems are:

- People trust the government less about public health and vaccines
- More people get sick from getting illnesses that vaccines could have stopped
- People can't get the health care they need
- States and community groups need to do the jobs the U.S. government used to do

We will talk more about these problems in this section of the toolkit.

RFK Jr. makes people trust the government less about health

Some people are afraid about the government making rules around public health. RFK Jr. and HHS make this problem worse. They do this by spreading public health conspiracies and pseudoscience.

Pseudoscience is when people try to make fake information seem like real scientific proof of something. For example, the Wakefield study about vaccines and autism is pseudoscience. That study did not follow rules scientific studies use so they can be fair. Later, other scientists said the Wakefield study was wrong. Lots of good studies proved there is no link between vaccines and autism. But people still try to say the Wakefield study proved vaccines cause autism.

Some Americans did a survey that showed they trust U.S. public health leaders less this year than last year. It is not clear what events last year led to these results. But the government spreading pseudoscience and causing trouble at HHS are probably one reason why.

Here are some examples from the timeline that could make people trust HHS less. These examples show RFK Jr. made HHS care more about his ideas than good science.

Last year HHS:

- Fired a lot of their staff. This made people worry about how well the offices in charge of public health could work.
- Told important officials to leave HHS when they spoke up about bad ideas RFK Jr. has about health
- Saw a lot of measles in Texas for the first time in many years
- Changed ACIP by getting rid of people who worked there for a long time.
- Added new members to ACIP that believe bad things about vaccines.

People also stop trusting the government about health when the government spreads bad information. RFK Jr. spread false ideas on social media about:

- mercury in vaccines
- A link between acetaminophen and autism
- a link between the MMR vaccine and autism
- a link between mRNA vaccines and autism
- a link between circumcision and autism. **Circumcision** is a surgery to remove the skin covering the end of a penis. People who get circumcised usually get the surgery done when they are babies.

RFK Jr. and HHS gave confusing messages about vaccine safety and how to help public health problems. These policy changes come from RFK Jr.'s personal beliefs. RFK Jr. used his personal social media to spread this false information. This usually doesn't happen in the government.

RFK Jr. uses social media to make it easier to spread bad health information to the public. The bad information RFK Jr. shares on his social media affects HHS. For example, he told the CDC to change its webpage on autism. Now, the page says there may be a link between vaccines and autism.

RFK Jr.'s views on the COVID vaccine have changed since he became head of HHS. At first, he seemed to think COVID vaccines were a good thing. He said that President Trump's Operation Warp Speed was the right thing to do. Operation Warp Speed was a way to make COVID vaccines faster.

But as Secretary of HHS, RFK Jr. made policies that make it harder to get COVID vaccines. He said that COVID and other diseases are less dangerous than the vaccine created to stop them. This message is wrong. Decades of public health research prove that the way we make and test vaccines are safe. His message makes people scared and confused about proven vaccine science. It makes less people get vaccines. This is part of RFK Jr.'s plan.

Surveys show Americans believe vaccines are important. More people believe vaccines work than not. A group called Kaiser Family Foundation News did a survey. The survey said that most of the public disliked how RFK Jr. did his job. It showed most of the public did not like how he handled vaccine policy.

The survey also said that half of the public trust the CDC 'a great deal' or 'fair amount' to give good information about vaccines. This is the lowest amount of trust in the CDC people had since the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic. This shows that Americans still believe in the science of vaccines. But Americans don't trust the U.S. government to give them good information about vaccines.

The lower trust in the U.S. government about health led to a split between the scientific community and the government. HHS is usually made up of top scientists, lawyers, and community health experts in the country. But RFK Jr. filled HHS with his friends and people who agree with his ideas. Scientists don't have power to make decisions at HHS anymore. So when RFK Jr. made changes at HHS, the scientific community told RFK Jr. about what they thought.

Here are some big health and science organizations that shared what they thought about RFK Jr. and HHS:

- American Public Health Association
- American College of Obstetricians and Gynecologists
- American Academy of Pediatrics

These groups have said they are worried about RFK Jr. spreading false health information. They pointed out how the changes at HHS will confuse the public. They said that people will trust the U.S. government less about health.

Many states have started making their own public health information. They worry that U.S. government information can't be trusted anymore. Some states have made groups to start giving science-based policies:

- California, Hawaii, Washington, and Oregon created the West Coast Health Alliance (WCHA)
- More than 10 states now make up the Northeast Public Health Collaborative (NPHC)
- Fifteen governors made a Governors Public Health Alliance.

Some of these groups put out recommendations for the 20205-2026 respiratory virus season. Respiratory viruses are diseases that can spread through the air, like a cold, COVID, or the flu. WCHA put out a guide to help people know what vaccines to get. NPHC also shared COVID vaccine recommendations. Sharing this kind of information used to be what HHS did.

After the CDC changed their webpage on autism and vaccines, WCHA made a statement. They said that vaccines do not cause autism. It is very unusual for states to say things that go against the U.S. government. It is a very big deal that states have to fight against the U.S. government to share true information about vaccines.

States and health organizations have been working together. They can help people get the health information they need when HHS won't. Groups outside the government can affect what the public thinks about important health information. And states can give out good information instead of HHS.

But this can also cause different problems. States can have very different ideas or rules about vaccines. Some states might have the same ideas as RFK Jr. Those states would not get good vaccine information. People will need to learn how to know what information is true and false. Then, they can make better choices for their health.

For example:

Florida said the state would end all vaccine mandates. That means most families will not have to vaccinate their children. This means many children could be in danger of getting diseases. They could get diseases that vaccines used to get rid of.

Florida changed this rule because of RFK Jr. and HHS. Florida's policy change confused people. The changes made people worried about getting sick with diseases vaccines could stop. Other states could also change their rules to make it harder to get vaccines.

Experts also said states and the U.S. government should give out the same information about vaccines. When states and the government give out different information about vaccines, people get confused. They might not know which information is true. They could end up not getting the vaccines they need.

RFK Jr.'s ideas changed what people know about vaccines, and who gets vaccines. More people have gotten certain diseases since RFK Jr. joined HHS. In 2000, there were no more people getting sick with measles in the U.S. But in 2023, more than 1500 people in the U.S. got measles. Experts are worried measles will become more common here again. More people are also getting sick from pertussis, or "whooping cough".

HHS has done other things to make it harder to get vaccines. One example is closing centers that helped plan for pandemics, like COVID-19. People will have a harder time getting health information they need during a pandemic. This can lead to people choosing to not get vaccinated, even though there is lots of proof that vaccines save lives.

RFK's ideas hurt people's health

RFK Jr.'s ideas confuse people. They make people unsure about what the right thing to do is to stay healthy. RFK Jr.'s ideas can hurt people's health. Some ways HHS has hurt people's health is by:

- Making it harder for people to get vaccines
- Changing who is in charge at HHS
- Changing where money goes at HHS.

Making it harder to get vaccines

RFK Jr. was not a popular choice to become the Secretary of HHS. When RFK Jr. got chosen, he made many promises to the **Senate Health, Education, Labor, and Pensions (HELP) Committee**. The Senate HELP Committee is the part of the Senate in charge of health care laws.

RFK Jr. told the Senate HELP Committee that he would not change how vaccines are made and given out. He also said he would not change who was on the ACIP. But RFK Jr. broke both of these promises.

RFK Jr. has said for a long time that vaccines are not safe. So RFK Jr. used his social media and HHS to make people scared of vaccines. He made people lose their trust in science. He used his first year at HHS to try to stop people from getting vaccines, and change how people see them.

Some things RFK Jr. did were:

- Getting rid of all the old ACIP members, and putting in new ACIP members that do not like vaccines
- Taking away HHS money from the Gavi, a group that gives out vaccines around the world.
- Firing CDC Director Susan Monarez. Monarez got fired for disagreeing with RFK Jr. about vaccines.
- Putting out a statement about what is important to the CDC. The statement said the CDC wanted to find the causes of autism and research vaccines
- Using ACIP to change recommendations for vaccines like the:
 - COVID-19 vaccine
 - MMR vaccines
 - hepatitis B vaccine

Changing who is in charge and what matters at HHS

RFK Jr. made people trust the U.S. government less about health. Then, RFK Jr. changed who worked at HHS. He chose people to work with him who agree with his ideas.

U.S. government offices are usually filled with some of the people best at their jobs in the country. These workers try to help HHS's mission. This is usually true no matter who is president. HHS usually tries not to change how they work to fit a president's ideas.

But RFK Jr. and President Trump ignored this. RFK Jr. hired HHS workers to push his own ideas. RFK Jr. used those workers to make his plan against vaccines.

RFK Jr. fired a lot of people when he started at HHS in February 2025. At the same time, the communication freeze made it harder to understand what happened in HHS. Groups whose job is to make sure HHS follows rules don't know much about what happened in HHS from February to April.

RFK Jr. used these events to change who is in charge at HHS. He hired people with false ideas about vaccines, and fired long-time staff. Many leaders left CDC after RFK Jr. fired CDC Director Monarez for disagreeing with him about vaccines. To replace them, RFK Jr. brought in people who think vaccines could be dangerous. This let him change what HHS said was important.

RFK Jr. has made choices on his own about vaccines without talking to vaccine scientists. There have already been lots of studies done to show vaccines don't cause autism. But RFK Jr. hired vaccine skeptic David Geier to research a link between vaccines and autism. He fired CDC Director Monarez for disagreeing with him about vaccines. He brought people who have said bad things about vaccines into the CDC.

At the start of June 2025, RFK Jr. got rid of ACIP members. He said the old members had conflicts of interest. Even though he said that, RFK Jr. brought in new members of ACIP who have conflicts of interest. RFK Jr. made sure the new ACIP had members who shared his ideas about vaccines.

After RFK Jr. changed the people on ACIP, ACIP said we should:

- Get rid of thimerosal in flu vaccines. ACIP said this even though studies show that thimerosal is safe and keeps vaccines from going bad.
- Separate the MMR vaccine into 3 separate vaccines. This could lead to fewer people getting vaccines. The U.S. does not make MMR as three separate vaccines. People could end up not getting vaccinated because the vaccine doesn't exist yet.
- Changing recommendations for certain vaccines. ACIP said some groups of people don't need COVID or Hepatitis B vaccines. This could make it harder to get vaccines and lead to more people getting sick.

Changing where money goes

Another way Kennedy is changing HHS is deciding where money goes, and what gets studied. In March, HHS canceled \$11.4 billion in federal grants to state and community health departments. Those grants were first given to help stop the COVID pandemic. States used them to lower how many people got sick and to give people vaccines.

In August, HHS canceled \$500 million in grants on mRNA vaccine research. RFK Jr. said that mRNA was dangerous. But experts say that mRNA vaccines saved millions of lives. mRNA has been used for a long time, and experts agree it is safe. mRNA vaccines take less time to make than other vaccines, so they can get used faster to stop new viruses. mRNA technology is a very important tool to fight the spread of disease. The mRNA vaccines also teach the body tools it can use to fight other diseases.

Stopping mRNA research means the U.S. government is stopping new mRNA vaccines from getting discovered. That means people could get sick from illnesses vaccines could have stopped. Making mRNA vaccines seem dangerous could cause another problem too. It could make people think mRNA vaccines we already use are dangerous. They might not want to get mRNA vaccines.

RFK Jr. made changes in research funding to line up with his ideas about vaccines and autism too. NIH lowered funding for autism research by around \$31 million in the first four months of 2025. A lot of money was taken from research that talked about “diversity” or “gender”. Diversity and gender can affect what autism is like for different people. Understanding diversity and gender can help researchers know how to support autistic people’s needs.

In September, the CDC said it would give a grant to Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute. The grant was to research the fake link between autism and vaccines. RFK Jr. has tried to prove a link between vaccines and autism for decades. He keeps trying even though there is lots of good evidence that says there is no link.

RFK Jr. has changed research to line up with his ideas. He did this by ending good autism research projects. He put that money into research that fit his conspiracy

theories instead. Research changes policy, medicine, and how people think. RFK Jr.'s research choices can cause problems for many years in the future.

These actions show how RFK Jr. is using HHS to scare and hurt people. He uses wrong ideas about the autistic community to make people feel afraid. He uses people's fear to change how HHS works for the worse.

Acetaminophen and Autism

RFK Jr. and the White House have a pattern they use to change what people think. RFK Jr. usually starts by saying something untrue that links two things that are not related. HHS then finds one source of bad evidence to back up his ideas. Any staff members or scientists that work at HHS who disagree are fired.

Doing this tricks the public into believing the story. This is true even when outside experts say the evidence is bad. This happens even when the public does not like the story.

This pattern has been used over and over by RFK Jr. During RFK Jr.'s time at HHS, he used the autistic community to make people scared about different public health problems. Blaming people is an important part of RFK Jr and HHS's pattern of spreading bad information.

Understanding RFK Jr.'s plan may be easier to understand by looking at an example. This section will talk about how RFK Jr. tried to link autism to acetaminophen:

In April 2025, RFK Jr. said HHS would announce what caused autism by September. Many people assumed HHS would say vaccines cause autism. But HHS said that Tylenol (acetaminophen) taken by pregnant women could cause their kid to be autistic. They also said a vitamin called folate could affect whether or not someone is autistic.

RFK Jr. tried to link autism and acetaminophen many times during his time at Children's Health Defense. Lots of people filed lawsuits against the company that makes Tylenol. But all the lawsuits were cancelled in 2024.

RFK Jr. also worked with Andrea Baccarelli. Baccarelli wrote a big study in August 2025. The study looked at a bunch of other studies about autism and acetaminophen. Baccarelli said she thought there was a link between acetaminophen and autism.

RFK Jr. talked about that study with the public. Even though the study did not prove acetaminophen caused autism, RFK Jr. said people should still know about it. RFK Jr. said he was “giving answers” to families of autistic people. At the same time, President Trump told parents, “do not take Tylenol.”

This was all part of RFK Jr.’s plan. RFK Jr. made his ideas seem normal, even though proof showed that they were not. Other, better studies did not find any link between autism and acetaminophen. But RFK Jr. chose the one studied that lined up with his ideas.

RFK Jr. kept spreading false information about autism in late September and early October. On October 9th, RFK Jr. said there is a link between kids being circumcised and autism. Kids who get circumcised usually take acetaminophen for pain. So RFK Jr. said that they became autistic after taking acetaminophen.

RFK Jr. talked about some studies that found this. But one study did not check if mothers used acetaminophen. The other study had too many other things being measured to tell if autism and circumcision were linked. The second study also did not talk about acetaminophen being linked to autism after someone is born. RFK Jr. talked about these studies in a now deleted X (formerly Twitter) post. Instead of talking about the problems with the studies, he said he never said circumcision caused autism.

RFK Jr.’s ideas led to policy changes at HHS. The FDA put out a notice to doctors about lowering acetaminophen use during pregnancy. Then, RFK Jr. stopped talking about the link between acetaminophen and autism. This could be because the makers of Tylenol said they would sue RFK Jr. for lying. But it could also be because RFK already achieved his goal of making people trust acetaminophen less.

In a year, RFK Jr. has changed HHS to help meet his own goals. He says he cares about helping sick and disabled people, and fixing health problems. He tries to

say the people doing this work before him did not do a good job. Then, RFK Jr. fires anyone who disagrees with him, and starts making all the important choices himself. He uses dishonest arguments to make him seem smarter.

RFK Jr. promised Americans he would follow what science says while at HHS. But RFK Jr. has not kept this promise.

How have RFK Jr. and HHS affected the autistic community?

People have made conspiracy theories about public health for a very long time. People being scared about getting hurt or becoming disabled was a very big fear. That fear was so big it could make people doubt science that people trusted for a long time. That fear could make people make big changes to try and keep themselves and their families safe. People might make these changes even when it hurts them.

The U.S. government has played a part in spreading fear about disabled people throughout history. The U.S. did this with policies that made disabled people seem like we weren't human. One example is when the U.S. stopped disabled people from having children. Another example is when the U.S. forced disabled people to live in institutions instead of in our own homes.

People's fear of disability sometimes gets used to stop people from following good, trusted science. Fear could make people turn to pseudoscience and conspiracy theories instead. The idea that vaccinations and autism are linked came up more in the past. These ideas scared people into believing conspiracy theories about health and wellness. But these ideas did not get very popular with most people.

Autistic people have been treated like we are less than human for a long time. Autistic people get used to make non-autistic people feel afraid for their health. Treating us like we are not full, equal people causes us problems. It leads to us losing our right to make choices about our own lives. It pushes the idea that we don't have or deserve the same rights as people without autism.

The ideas the RFK Jr. has started decades ago. RFK Jr. spread pseudoscience and fear about people with disabilities in the early 2000s. He worked with other people who are now on the MAHA commission. HHS keeps spreading the same bad information on vaccines and autism from 25 years ago.

RFK Jr. has worked with conspiracy theorists for years. But he has much more power as the Secretary of HHS. He can spread his dangerous lies to many more Americans.

RFK Jr. tries to connect disability with false information about public health and vaccines. RFK Jr. and President Trump have been very focused on autism. They have both said over and over that they want to find the causes of autism. They use words usually saved for emergencies when talking about autism. Most disabled people find his language hurtful. It makes disabled people feel less human.

When RFK Jr. announced the NIH autism registry, disability organizations saw a problem right away. Hundreds of parents canceled testing for autism. The parents said they were scared to get their children diagnosed. They worried their child would end up on the registry, or their private information would get shared with the government.

Autistic community members shared what they thought about the government starting an autism registry. They said the registry needed to be clear about what information it gets from people. Registries should also only collect information from people who say it is okay. Autistic people said there should also be a committee to make sure the registry follows rules. These rules protect people's rights and privacy. But the autism registry the government tried to make didn't follow any of this advice.

HHS later said they would not make an autism registry after all. But the autistic community was still worried that HHS had the idea in the first place. They worried that HHS could still try to get private information from autistic people.

RFK Jr. has shown he does not understand autism. He focused on the cause of autism so much, he forgot about government services to help autistic people. He keeps trying to research vaccines and autism even though there is scientific proof there is no link.

The CDC said their focus is to find the causes of autism and other neurodevelopmental disabilities. The CDC says these disabilities are “epidemics”. An **epidemic** is a disease that more and more people get at one time. Autism is not an epidemic. Some people think that more people are autistic nowadays, but that is not true. The truth is that we have gotten better at diagnosing and understanding autism. That means more people know they are autistic now.

The CDC also called autism a “chronic illness.” But autism is a lifelong disability, not a chronic illness. The CDC does not talk about autism in a good way. Talking about autism like it ruins lives and causes trouble hurts autistic people.

Conclusion

Other government decisions in and out of HHS have also hurt disabled people in the past year. Funding got cut from Medicaid, which makes it harder for people to get services they need. When people get fired at HHS, it makes it harder for others to do good work. Some of the people who left HHS were experts who worked there for many years.

HHS also wants to get rid of the Administration for Community Living (ACL). This would hurt many kinds of people with disabilities who get help from ACL to live in the community. ACL staff was already cut in half by one of the many groups of firings.

Bad changes to funding or staff also happened at:

- Administration for Children and Families’ (ACF) Office of Head Start
- ACF’s Office of Refugee Resettlement
- The Offices of Civil Rights and Special Education and Rehabilitative Services

These cuts make it harder to be autistic, or disabled in any way, in America.

HHS also hurts the disability community by talking about fluoride in drinking water. HHS said that fluoride causes “neurodevelopmental disorders” and people should not drink it. This idea makes people scared of intellectual disabilities.

HHS also made new rules to lower how much food dye gets used. They said that food dye can cause diabetes, obesity, depression, and ADHD. The MAHA Report also claimed autism may be linked to food dye. But HHS's information on food dyes has mostly focused on other disabilities since then. RFK Jr. talks about different disabilities as a way to make parents scared. This makes it easier for RFK Jr. to convince people about conspiracy theories.

This report focuses mostly on how HHS affected vaccines and autism last year. We hope this report will help people understand how HHS works. We hope people can look back at this report for information the government or others might get rid of. Future government members could use this report to help get HHS back to how it was before RFK Jr. joined.

Under RFK Jr., HHS has shared pseudoscience that hurts people. RFK Jr. has done a good job making HHS what he wants it to be. But this hasn't helped RFK Jr. be popular with everyday people.

RFK Jr. might have convinced some people not to trust vaccines. But most people don't trust RFK Jr. or HHS. The disability community keeps speaking out against RFK Jr. and HHS. They are worried that disabled people will lose their rights to live in the community and be included. Health experts also worry that changing vaccine policies will make people more sick. The government needs to make changes so Americans can trust HHS and have the information they need to stay healthy.

Moving Forward: Recommendations for Next Steps

What should happen next to make HHS better?

There has been a big change in HHS policies this past year because of RFK Jr.

Under RFK Jr., HHS has:

- Pushed pseudoscience
- Made it harder to get science-based public health advice
- Made vaccine policies worse
- Harmed people with disabilities, especially autistic people.

These all show that RFK Jr.'s plan to confuse lots of people worked. RFK Jr.'s actions threaten the progress that the disability community fought for.

The disability community fought for things like:

- More access to community living
- Better accessibility
- Better disability inclusion

Health experts say that RFK Jr.'s changes to vaccine policy and public health guidance can bring back some deadly diseases. That includes diseases we had gotten rid of in the United States before.

Here is what we think RFK Jr. and HHS should do. We're making these suggestions after looking at everything RFK Jr. and HHS did this past year. Our goals by making these suggestions are:

- To try to rebuild trust in the federal government

- To make HHS answer for the lies and ableism from this administration, and
- To make sure people have good information about vaccines.

We wrote these suggestions for lots of kinds of people. We wrote that way to show how much work that it will take to undo Kennedy's harmful plan.

The suggestions give information for:

- State and U.S. policy makers
- Disability rights advocates
- Public health advocates

We also make suggestions for things scientists should research in the future.

Federal Policy Recommendations

Testifying and Rules for HHS

The United States government has three branches of government. HHS is part of the executive branch. HHS' actions do not just affect HHS.

The legislative branch has policy makers. Policy makers make laws. The legislative branch does important work to make sure the executive branch follows the rules. We would like to see the Senate Health, Education, Labor, and Pensions (HELP) Committee bring RFK Jr. and other HHS workers to the Senate. They should testify about their actions. **Testifying** means answering official questions about something you or someone you know did. It is illegal to lie when you are testifying.

The issues we would like to see RFK Jr. testify about are:

- The September 22nd White House Press Conference on acetaminophen
- The November 19th change to the CDC autism and vaccines webpage
- Re-making the Interagency Autism Coordinating Committee (IACC)

- RFK Jr. changing the Childhood Vaccine Schedule on his own

Everyone should know more about how HHS and RFK Jr. decided to make these choices. We think the HELP Committee should ask for testimony. We think the Committee should tell HHS to share good public health information to fix their mistakes.

We think that if RFK Jr. lies to the HELP Committee while he is testifying, Congress should fire him from his job running HHS.

If RFK Jr.'s answers show that he did a terrible job running HHS, Congress should fire him.

If RFK Jr.'s answers show that he can't do the job well because his ideas are so extreme, Congress should fire him.

If RFK Jr.'s answers show that the way he did his job was not morally okay, Congress should fire him.

And if RFK Jr. won't give answers that will help the Committee understand and look into what he did, Congress should fire him.

There are rules that let Congress fire someone who runs a federal agency like HHS. This is called impeaching the person. Impeaching someone is when Congress decides they should not be allowed to work for the government anymore because they did something bad. If Congress impeaches RFK Jr., they should replace him with someone who can run HHS well.

Both Republicans and Democrats said they want to make rules for the different parts of the executive branch. Those rules would try to make the executive branch their regular jobs and spend their budget normally. We think this is a good idea.

We also think those rules should push harder. Rules need to make sure that all parts of the executive branch have their power checked by the other branches. The executive branch needs to let the legislative branch and the judicial branch make rules about what the executive branch does. We should re-design how the executive branch works. We should make sure new staff cannot fire everyone that

works there. And if the federal government breaks federal laws, they should be punished fairly.

The **Department of Justice** is the part of the U.S. government in charge of making sure the law gets followed. Usually, the DoJ will make sure everyone follows the law. But right now, the DOJ is only focusing on making some groups of people follow the law. The DoJ ignores when the White House or people like RFK Jr. break the law. That needs to change. The DoJ should have rules that treat everyone the same under the law.

We would like to know more about why RFK Jr. and other HHS workers made these choices. We want them to say those reasons in court and on the record. We would also like to see the HELP Committee put pressure on HHS to share correct public health information. HHS should be responsible for fixing the wrong information shared before.

Research and Funding

The Autism Collaboration, Accountability, Research, Education, and Support (CARES) Act is the main law focused on funding autism research. The most recent form of the Autism CARES Act was signed into law in December of 2024. In 2024, the IACC put out a strategic plan that said what kinds of autism research they think should get funding. We think the Autism CARES Act should fund autism research that matches what the past IACC said. For example, we would like to see funding to continue to support the work of autism centers of excellence and initiatives taken on by the Health Resource Services administration.

We are especially interested in research about:

- Supporting autistic people through our whole lives,
- Improving services and supports for autistic people,
- Helping autistic people communicate,
- Understanding more about health conditions that happen with autism, and how to treat them.

The Leadership Education and Neurodevelopmental and Related Disabilities (LEND) program is also funded through the Autism CARES Act. LEND trains people on how to make policies that make sure people with intellectual and developmental disabilities get good support. It is important that funding continues for this program.

The Autism CARES Act of 2024 also had a new part asking the NIH to say how much it will spend on autism research. The IACC also told the NIH to share this information. But as of this report, NIH has not said how much it will spend on these things in 2026. This information is important to understanding how NIH is spending and giving out Autism CARES research dollars. This information will help us understand whether the NIH is giving money to projects that match what autism scientists and the autistic community say is important.

We would also like to see the materials that NIH made for the 2024 update to the IACC strategic plan. These materials focused on health problems that autistic people can have. This work that NIH has already done should be added to the work that is happening right now.

Medicaid

The largest Medicaid cuts in history passed in 2025. This happened with a law called H.R. 1. A lot of autistic people, and people with disabilities in general, get health care through Medicaid. H.R. 1 could cause a lot of problems for people with disabilities.

The biggest effect these cuts will have on disabled people are cuts to **Home and Community-Based Services (HCBS)**. HCBS are services people get to live in the community instead of institutions. Some kinds of HCBS are in-home helpers and help getting transportation around the community.

Right now, it is optional for states to provide HCBS through Medicaid. **Optional** budget items are parts of the budget the state does not legally have to spend money on. That means when there is not enough money, optional services like HCBS are the first to be cut.

We would like to see Congress pass the HCBS Access Act in the 119th Congress. This bill would make it so Medicaid always has to pay for HCBS. This would also end the institutional bias. The institutional bias is that states have to save money to pay for disabled people on Medicaid to live in institutions. But states do not legally have to save money for HCBS for those same people.

H.R. 1 also adds work requirements to Medicaid. **Work reporting requirements** are rules that say people have to work to get Medicaid. They would have to let Medicaid know they are working on a regular basis. They might have to send in forms to prove they are working.

Work reporting requirements would make it much harder for people to get and keep Medicaid. Medicaid should not have work reporting requirements.

We would also like the Medicaid asset limit to match and grow with inflation. An **asset limit** is how much money someone can save while on Medicaid. If the asset limit was matched with inflation, the amount would go up a little every year.

Agency Recommendations

HHS is a federal agency. Federal agencies usually have people who make it their jobs to help others. Agency workers swear they will serve Americans, no matter what beliefs the President has. President Trump and others, like RFK Jr., have tried to ruin how federal agencies usually work.

In HHS, many groups help people with disabilities and give services. For example, the Administration for Community Living (ACL) helps disabled and aging people. The ACL got made through years of advocacy from the disability and aging communities. They forced the government to focus on disabled people having independence, and living in the community. But now, HHS is trying to get rid of ACL. That shows HHS does not respect people with disabilities and older adults.

Many of the agencies in HHS that help disabled people were the agencies that had the most people fired. Some staff who got fired are:

- Staff who made sure grants are given to disability services

- Staff who protect the civil rights of people with disabilities
- Staff who made sure disabled people are being included in their communities

To move past this, future HHS members must rebuild the programs that serve disabled people.

It is also important that agencies make sure they follow rules made by Congress. RFK Jr. is doing things that are against the law. HHS is not supposed to have as much power as RFK Jr. is giving it. RFK Jr. does not respect Congress and the way federal agencies usually work. Following the rules is what makes laws work. HHS, and all other agencies, need to follow the rules.

The Centers for Medicare & Medicaid Services makes the rules about Medicaid. In 2026, CMS will work on rules for H.R. 1. That's why we don't know yet exactly what H.R. 1 will do to Medicaid. CMS can give advice on which groups of people don't have work reporting requirements. CMS should let caregivers and disabled people not have to do work reporting requirements to get care.

State Level Policy Recommendations

State governments need to keep or start to give good public health information. They need to take on responsibilities that used to be the U.S. government's job. States should take over wherever and whenever HHS does not do its own job.

HHS normally gave states good information to make vaccine recommendations. States should continue to do good work on vaccines, even without that help. States should make sure people do not have trouble getting vaccines or learning about vaccines.

States should teach people about vaccines. States should give people good, honest information. This will help fight back against the bad information from RFK Jr. and HHS. States should check to make sure everyone in the state can get the information they need. This can help lower the amount of people getting sick and dying from diseases that have vaccines.

Right now, HHS is not helping states. HHS keeps cancelling funding for research. It is working very slowly because staff keep getting fired. That's why states need to stay on top of their public health programs. Many states have programs in place to help people with disabilities and continue the work that happens in HHS. States must work to make sure their systems are well staffed and are able to give services people need.

Many states need funding from HHS to give services to people with disabilities and make programs work. Since HHS has taken away money before, there's always a chance it will happen again. Or, problems at HHS will make money take more time to get to states.

States will need to get more creative to keep programs working. State government workers should meet with disabled people. That can help the state understand what needs are not being met because of the changes at HHS. Government workers should ask what can be done instead to meet needs at the state level.

Sometimes public health information gets written in inaccessible ways. States should make sure information about public health is accessible. For example:

- Using plain language
- Adding pictures to help people understand better
- Making sure webpages are screen-reader accessible
- Having ASL interpretation and captions on videos

This makes sure disabled people understand the information they need to make important health decisions.

A new rule passed in 2026. The rule says if states get government funding to make something on the internet, it must be accessible. States should try and do even more than just what the rules say. They should try to make things as accessible for people with disabilities as possible.

Recommendations for Advocacy

Advocacy is important for people with disabilities. But some advocates say they are overwhelmed by what the government is doing. It can be hard to know where to start. Advocates should use this time to:

- Work with their local communities
- Build support networks
- Learn from other advocates in their area

This report shows that RFK Jr. used his power at HHS the wrong way. He spread false information. He said hurtful and false things about autism and other disabilities. He did this to scare people about autism and disability.

RFK Jr. often does not follow the government's rules. He breaks the promises he made when he was hired. Advocates should reach out to their members of Congress. Advocates should share they are upset with RFK Jr. and HHS leadership. Advocates should tell their members of Congress how HHS' actions affect them.

Lawmakers need to hear about how HHS and RFK Jr.'s actions hurt our community.

It is also important to contact your state's government about what HHS is doing. For example:

- State legislators (state representatives and state senator)
- State health department officials,
- Governor

Vaccinations are life-saving. Having good information about vaccines protects yourself and your family. MAHA and other groups put out bad information about vaccines. That's why you should be careful when reading public health advice. Use good scientific evidence when making decisions.

Some good organizations for public health advice are:

- American Academy of Pediatrics
- American College of Obstetricians and Gynecologists
- American Academy of Family Physicians

Recommendations for More Research

This report focuses mostly on vaccines and autism. There are other topics people should look into if they care about public health in the U.S.

The government did a lot of things last year that had a big effect on the disability community. We could not fit all this information into this report. Future researchers could also make reports like this. They could look at HHS's actions, but focus on groups besides autistic people. For example, researchers could focus on how HHS actions affected Black people, or people who use wheelchairs. Or, they could do a project about all people with disabilities.

This report only looked at RFK Jr. and HHS. But researchers could do a report on other parts of government. They could check how these parts of government help or hurt different groups of people. Researchers could study:

- Department of Education
- Department of Justice
- Department of Housing and Urban Development
- Congress
- Courts
- and more

This report only covered the one year that RFK Jr. has led HHS so far. It would be good to write another report each year for the next few years. Then, we can compare how things have changed over the years.

Conclusion

HHS's job is to help Americans get and stay healthy. Their mission says they will do that by giving good health services and human services. They also say they will support good work in health sciences, like medical research.

HHS has failed at this mission under RFK Jr. HHS continues to put out false information that makes people scared. And HHS continues to say bad things about autistic people instead of giving us services and support.

Policymakers at all levels of government need to protect their people. They need to understand RFK Jr.'s plan to spread misinformation. If RFK Jr.'s plan works, it will break our whole government public health system. We must all work together so everyone gets good public health information. We must work together so we can trust the government about our health again.