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INSIGHTS

Senate Fiscal Year 2027 HHS Budget Hearings

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On April 21 and 22, 2026, Health and Human Services (HHS) Secretary Robert F. Kennedy, Jr. appeared before the [Senate Appropriations Labor-HHS Subcommittee](#), the [Senate Finance Committee](#), and the [Senate Health, Education, Labor, and Pensions \(HELP\) Committee](#) to defend the fiscal year 2027 (FY 27) president's budget request for HHS. During these hearings, Sec. Kennedy focused on the administration's work on prior authorization, increasing transparency, and emphasizing whole foods. There were bipartisan concerns about vaccines and health care affordability, with an emphasis on most-favored-nation drug pricing deals. Senators also discussed nutrition initiatives and rural health issues, among other topics.

OPENING STATEMENTS

- [Senate Appropriations Labor-HHS Subcommittee Chair Shelley Moore Capito \(R-WV\)](#)
- [Senate Appropriations Labor-HHS Subcommittee Ranking Member Tammy Baldwin \(D-WI\)](#)
- [Senate Finance Committee Chair Mike Crapo \(R-ID\)](#)
- [Senate Finance Committee Ranking Member Ron Wyden \(D-OR\)](#)
- [Senate HELP Committee Chair Bill Cassidy \(R-LA\)](#)

WITNESS TESTIMONY

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

MEMBER DISCUSSION

Vaccines

One thing that distinguished the Senate hearings from the House hearings was that concerns about certain vaccine policies pursued by Sec. Kennedy were bipartisan. During the Senate Appropriations Labor-HHS Subcommittee, Sen. Jeanne Shaheen (D-NH) asked whether HHS was planning to release the funding allocated to the GAVI Vaccine Alliance for FY 25 and FY 26. Sec. Kennedy explained that, in his view, GAVI has been intransigent and previously gave a lot of money to the World Health Organization (WHO), but he said he is willing to work to resolve these issues. During the Senate Finance Committee hearing, Ranking Member Ron Wyden (D-OR) and Sen. Ben Ray Lujan (D-NM) questioned if the rise of measles cases was due to lower vaccination rates, to which Sec. Kennedy responded that there has been a global rise in measles cases and that the US is handling it better than other countries.

(R-WY) raised concerns that changes to the vaccine schedule and the Advisory Committee on Immunization Practices (ACIP) were creating confusion for families and providers. He requested that the secretary commit to ensuring vaccine guidance is clear, evidence-based, and trustworthy. Sec. Kennedy assured Sen. Barrasso (R-WY) that new vaccines would undergo placebo-controlled trials to ensure their safety, but said he could not say more due to ongoing litigation. Sen. Michael Bennet (D-CO) expressed concern that the US experienced the highest modern childhood mortality rate from influenza in 2025, noting that most children who died had not received the flu vaccine. Sec. Kennedy responded that the flu vaccine's efficacy is low. When Sen. Roger Marshall (R-KS) asked if there was work to create a more effective flu vaccine, Sec. Kennedy said that he is hoping to create a complete flu vaccine that would not need to be given annually. During today's hearings, Sen. Maggie Hassan (D-NH) asked if President Trump approved of firing members of ACIP and changing the charter. Sec. Kennedy did not know whether President Trump personally approved the decisions, but stated that the domestic policy council approved them.

In contrast to concerns about Sec. Kennedy's vaccine policies, Sen. Ron Johnson (R-WI) raised an alarm at the Senate Finance Committee about adverse events, including deaths, from COVID-19 vaccines, asking if HHS is creating an ICD code for vaccine injuries. Sec. Kennedy shared that HHS is actively working on an ICD code and that studies on vaccine injuries will be completed by HHS

At the HELP Committee hearing, Chairman Bill Cassidy (R-LA) did not directly question Sec. Kennedy's personal opinions on vaccines, but noted his disagreement with Sec. Kennedy's conclusion that a certain study indicated that vaccines were not the cause of a decrease in childhood mortality. Chairman Cassidy (R-LA) said that the study actually found it was a cause, among other factors. Sen. John Hickenlooper (D-CO) questioned Sec. Kennedy's support for vaccines. Sec. Kennedy countered that he is supportive, citing the recent approval of a cancer vaccine.

Affordability

There were bipartisan concerns about health care affordability across the Senate hearings. During the Appropriations Labor-HHS Subcommittee hearing, Sen. Jon Husted (R-OH) asked about 340B and ways to ensure it actually helps those in need. Sec. Kennedy shared his concern, citing fraud and abuse as the main problem that has allowed more hospitals to use the program. He noted the current litigation surrounding the program but said that Congress is the only body that can make changes. Sen. Mike Rounds (R-SD) specifically asked about the proposal to turn 340B into a rebate model, which would require hospitals to pay upfront. Sec. Kennedy didn't know where the proposal sits but committed to ensuring it doesn't just benefit pharma. Sen. Jeff Merkley (D-OR) requested that details of the most-favored-nation agreements be shared with Congress so they could understand exactly what they were being asked to codify. Sec. Kennedy explained that some aspects can be shared, but others are proprietary and contain sensitive information. He directed Sen. Merkley (D-OR) to talk directly with Chris Klomp, Director of Medicare and Deputy Administrator of the Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services (CMS). During

the Finance Committee hearing, Ranking Member Wyden (D-OR) and Sens. Elizabeth Warren (D-MA), Peter Welch (D-VT), and Bernie Sanders (I-VT) also requested information on the most-favored-nation pricing agreements, pointing out that many times the drugs with agreements on the TrumpRx website are cheaper to purchase in other nations or through insurance plans. Sec. Kennedy again responded that some information would be shared and that the drug prices are the lowest in the world for the specific brands of drugs advertised. Sen. Tom Tillis (R-NC) questioned how the most-favored-nation pricing deals would actually lower drug costs compared with other pricing agreements that, in his view, have not worked. Sec. Kennedy explained that each agreement was unique and that the agreements have proven to be helpful. Sen. Tillis (R-NC) then asked how Congress was expected to codify deals that are so unique to each company, to which Sec. Kennedy said that Klomp was working on the legislative language. Sen. Cassidy (R-LA) and Sen. Rand Paul (R-KY) asked if Sec. Kennedy supported expanding access to Health Savings Accounts (HSAs) to improve health care affordability. Sec. Kennedy was in favor of the proposals.

Research

There was bipartisan concern about investment in biomedical research, specifically maintaining the U.S. status as a leader. During the Appropriations Labor-HHS Subcommittee hearing, full Committee Chair Susan Collins (R-ME) asked about the proposed 15% cap on indirect research costs across the board, which she opposes and that Congress rejected in FY 26 negotiations. Sec. Kennedy stated that nobody wants to cut anything from the agencies, but the U.S. has a debt that needs to be addressed, and HHS was asked to cut costs by 12%. Appropriations Labor-HHS Subcommittee Ranking Member Baldwin (D-WI) asked specifically about cancer and Alzheimer's research funding under the National Institutes of Health (NIH). Sec. Kennedy shared her belief that there should be more research on both and stated that the National Cancer Institute (NCI) is one of few agencies with a proposed budget increase, which Sen. Baldwin (D-WI) countered is only a .01% increase.

Rural Health

Across the hearings, there was bipartisan questioning on the future of rural health. Appropriations Labor-HHS Subcommittee Chair Capito (R-WV) asked generally what Sec. Kennedy plans on doing to address rural health concerns. The secretary explained that both Republicans and Democrats have made it clear that rural health is a priority, which is why they implemented the Rural Health Transformation Program (RHTP) to improve rural facilities and care. Sen. Jerry Moran (R-KS) later asked if he was pleased with the rollout of the RHTP. Sec. Kennedy shared that he couldn't be happier as money is out the door and they can begin seeing impacts. Sen. Cindy Hyde-Smith (R-MI) questioned how to adjust the CMS Area Wage Index (AWI), which she argued is destabilizing rural hospitals, and how to retain the Office of Rural Health at the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC). Sec. Kennedy agreed that the AWI is very dangerous, but it is up to Congress to make any changes. The secretary explained that he is working to return the CDC to their core mission of addressing infectious diseases, but he expects congressional

feedback. During the Senate Finance Committee hearing, Sen. Marsha Blackburn (R-TN) highlighted the success of RHTP for rural communities and requested Sec. Kennedy's support for altering the AWI for rural hospitals. Sec. Kennedy once again voiced his support for the change but stated that action would need to come from Congress before HHS could make changes. Sen. Marshall (R-KS) highlighted the rural emergency hospital model and the positive effects of using telehealth in emergency rooms. Sec. Kennedy agreed with the model, saying that emergency care is highly needed in rural areas and telehealth is extremely helpful. Chairman Crapo (R-ID) was curious about the most innovative uses of RHTP funding. Sec. Kennedy shared that the state applications were extraordinary and that he is most excited about the use of telehealth to improve care delivery and efforts to improve residency programs.

Nutrition

Senators also spent time clarifying the various nutrition initiatives HHS plans to pursue. During the Appropriations Labor-HHS Subcommittee hearing, Sen. Katie Britt (R-AL) asked what HHS is doing to strengthen and expand Head Start. Sec. Kennedy explained that they have proposed maintaining the budget at FY 26 levels and allocating additional funds to develop school infrastructure to provide fresh, nutritious food. Sen. Rounds (R-SD) raised concerns with lab-grown fake meat. Sec. Kennedy shared his concern and committed to exercising FDA oversight. Sen. Brian Schatz (D-HI) focused his questioning on glyphosate and its dangers. Sec. Kennedy agreed that glyphosate is not healthy to consume and can cause cancer. However, he defended Trump's executive order boosting domestic production because the EO doesn't increase glyphosate use. Sen. John Kennedy (R-LA) asked how HHS plans to communicate concerns about ultra-processed foods best and ensure Americans aren't eating them. Sec. Kennedy explained that HHS has developed a definition under review, and once it is approved, it will enforce mandatory front-of-package labeling. During the Senate Finance Committee hearing, Chairman Crapo (R-ID) asked how HHS plans to build on actions taken to improve nutrition education. Sec. Kennedy shared that many medical schools have committed to including nutrition education in their curricula, and he is working with states to develop legislative plans on the topic. During the Senate HELP Committee hearing, Ranking Member Sanders (I-VT) questioned the timeline for placing warning labels on unhealthy foods. Sec. Kennedy said that HHS had recently completed their definition of ultra-processed foods and that it was now undergoing interagency review. Ranking Member Sanders (I-VT) also asked if Sec. Kennedy agreed with banning TV ads for junk food, and Sec. Kennedy affirmed. Sens. Ashley Moody (R-FL) and Tommy Tuberville (R-AL) praised the secretary for his accomplishments in improving nutrition and asked about next steps. Sec. Kennedy highlighted work on reviewing substances generally recognized as safe and empowering physicians to give better nutrition advice. Sen. Hassan (D-NH) agreed on the importance of healthy food options but questioned how families could afford fresh meat and produce amid high food prices. Sec. Kennedy shared that the cost of food is affordable and that families have many options for healthy food.

HHS Management

There was also bipartisan questioning during the hearings about the management of certain HHS agencies and funding for various projects within them. At the Senate Finance Committee, Sen. Barrasso (R-WY) raised strong concerns about the fate of the US Preventive Services Task Force (USPSTF), specifically whether the task force will continue to meet and how the evaluation process will work. Sec. Kennedy assured Sen. Barrasso (R-WY) that he agrees that the task force is important and that new members will be selected shortly. From there, Sec. Kennedy said meetings will resume and the task force's functions will remain the same, with additional representation from a broader range of specialties. Sen. Tina Smith (D-MN) associated herself with Sen. Barrasso's comments and questioned why Sec. Kennedy is proposing cuts to various screening programs, such as those for women's health, depression, and smoking cessation. Sec. Kennedy affirmed his commitment to preventive health and shared that, under the proposed budget, preventive care is being returned to states through block grants, so each state can administer the care. Sen. Raphael Warnock (D-GA) asked Sec. Kennedy about the low funding levels for CDC programs on rabies and prion diseases. Sec. Kennedy explained that cuts were necessary and that these diseases affect very few people each year, so focusing the budget on chronic disease makes more sense.

During the Senate HELP Committee hearing, Sen. Andy Kim (D-NJ) raised concerns about the proposed elimination of many programs and departments that support individuals with disabilities. Sec. Kennedy stated that he was asked to make funding cuts across the board but would be happy to talk to Sen. Kim about how to support the disability community. Sen. Alan Armstrong (R-OK) questioned the consolidation of many agencies into the Administration for a Healthy America. Sec. Kennedy emphasized that the reorganization would streamline the agencies, reduce overlap, and improve efficiency.

Other Topics

During the Appropriations Labor-HHS Subcommittee hearing:

- Appropriations Chair Collins (R-ME) asked how HHS plans to address health disparities in women, as there has been a 31% decline since 2025 in research projects that include the word 'women'. Sec. Kennedy referenced grants studying Alzheimer's and diabetes, his focus on chronic disease, and the perinatal pilot program.
- Sen. Dick Durbin (D-IL) shared his concerns surrounding tobacco and the promotion of vaping. Sec. Kennedy explained there is intra-agency controversy as career scientists see vaping as a tool to reduce tobacco use, but there is also concern with marketing vapes to minors.
- Sen. Chris Murphy (D-CT) asked about the decision to overturn the minimum staffing rule in nursing homes. Sec. Kennedy responded, saying there was pressure from Congresspeople representing rural areas about the damage it was causing. Sen. Murphy (D-CT) then asked him to share any data showing the rule's impact on rural areas. Sec. Kennedy said he would do so.

During the Finance Committee hearing:

- Sen. Steve Daines (R-MT) requested an update on safety studies for Mifepristone and reimplementing in-person prescribing requirements. Sec. Kennedy stated that he could not comment due to ongoing litigation.
- Sen. Maria Cantwell (D-WA) asked for the secretary's support in fully funding Federal Medical Assistance Percentage (FMAP) for urban Indian hospitals. Sec. Kennedy agreed to work with the senator.

During the HELP Committee hearing:

- Sen. Josh Hawley (R-MO) requested that HHS investigate the health risks of data centers. Sec. Kennedy said that some studies were already underway but more would follow.

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