

INSIGHTS

Senate HELP Committee
Hearing on Nominees for
HHS Deputy Secretary, US
Surgeon General, and
Assistant Secretary for
Mental Health and
Substance Use

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On September 16, 2026, the Senate Health, Education, Labor, and Pensions (HELP) Committee [held](#) a hearing to consider the nominations of Chris Klomp, to be Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) Deputy Secretary, Dr. Nicole Saphier, to be US Surgeon General, and Dr. Timothy Westlake, to be Assistant Secretary for Mental Health and Substance Use. The nominees must next be voted out of Committee, Mr. Klomp by the Senate Finance Committee and the others by the HELP Committee, before consideration by the full Senate.

OPENING STATEMENTS

- [Chairman Bill Cassidy \(R-LA\)](#)
- [Sen. Tammy Baldwin \(D-WI\)](#)

WITNESS TESTIMONY

- Chris Klomp, MBA, to be HHS Deputy Secretary - [Testimony](#)
- Nicole Saphier, MD, to be US Surgeon General - [Testimony](#)
- Timothy Westlake, MD, to be Assistant Secretary for Mental Health and Substance Use - [Testimony](#)

MEMBER DISCUSSION WITH MR. KLOMP

Improving HHS

As with Mr. Klomp's hearing before the Senate Finance Committee, there was bipartisan interest in how Mr. Klomp plans to improve the function and coordination of HHS. Sens. Tim Kaine (D-VA) and Lisa Murkowski (R-AK) both had concerns about the lack of coordination between HHS and Congress and the Indian Health Service, respectively, in providing technical assistance and consultation. Mr. Klomp assured the senators he intends to improve HHS coordination and wants to continue to work with their offices to provide assistance as needed. Sen. Roger Marshall (R-KS) asked about the status of technological advancement at HHS. Mr. Klomp shared that he is actively working with the Centers for

Medicare and Medicaid Services (CMS) to update their information technology systems by bringing in qualified professionals and funding projects. Sen. John Hickenlooper (D-CO) asked how HHS intends to preserve scientific integrity. Mr. Klomp said there needs to be a distinction between science and policy, and that policy conversations should be based on science. Mr. Klomp also committed to publishing HHS research.

Other Topics

- Sen. Tammy Baldwin (D-WI) requested that Mr. Klomp work to restore the “press 3” option on the 988-suicide hotline, which was a specific option for LGBTQ+ youth. Mr. Klomp shared that a new contract for the 988 hotline has been awarded and includes the “press 3” option.
- Sen. Andy Kim (D-NJ) wanted to understand the plan to ensure safe staffing requirements for nursing homes, after the agency rescinded the Biden-era staffing rule. Mr. Klomp stated that he strongly believes in safe staffing levels and will work with experts and the senator’s office to develop a plan on this topic.
- Sen. Patty Murray (D-WA) requested that Mr. Klomp work to repeal the Wasteful and Inappropriate Services Reduction (WiSeR) model. Mr. Klomp did not commit, but shared that he would evaluate the model after the report is published by the CMS Innovation Center.
- Sen. Jim Banks (R-IN) asked how HHS intends to improve and speed up Food and Drug Administration (FDA) inspections of both domestic and international manufacturing facilities. Mr. Klomp responded that slow inspections harm manufacturers and that international inspections need to be held to a high standard and include surprise inspections.
- Sen. Banks then asked if the FDA should use clinical research data collected in China in their evaluation, especially if the sites have not been inspected and do not comply with good clinical practice. Mr. Klomp shared the senator’s concern and stated that international data should be held to the same standards as domestic data.

MEMBER DISCUSSION WITH DR. SAPHIER

Role Priorities

Members on both sides of the aisle asked questions about Dr. Saphier’s priorities if confirmed as the surgeon general. Sen. Ashley Moody (R-FL) requested that Dr. Saphier explain the skills that she brings to the role, especially regarding improving the health of children. Dr. Saphier explained that as a physician she can only touch a few patients, but she wants to improve children’s mental health and well-being. Sen. Marshall asked how she plans to address chronic disease. Dr. Saphier shared that she is committed to ensuring people have information about small modifications that can improve health, as well as access to cancer detection and screening. Sen. Susan Collins (R-ME) asked her to expand on cancer screening

work, especially as it relates to breast cancer. Dr. Saphier stated that she plans to increase messaging on the importance of early detection and work with other leaders within HHS to improve access and coverage for cancer screenings, as well as finding creative ways to mobilize the health care sector. Sen. Hickenlooper questioned how Dr. Saphier intends to preserve scientific integrity in her role. Dr. Saphier shared that integrity is very important to her as a physician, as well as her commitment to academic medicine.

Vaping

Multiple senators raised concerns about recent actions taken by the FDA in approving additional flavors of vape products and the possible effects of marketing flavors to adolescents. Sens. Kaine, Murkowski, and Collins all asked Dr. Saphier to clarify her position on smoking and vaping, as well as the effects of vaping on adolescents. Dr. Saphier shared that she believes all smoking is harmful for adolescents and is not supportive of marketing encouraging smoking behaviors.

Vaccines

Chairman Bill Cassidy (R-LA) pressed Dr. Saphier on her views about the safety of the Measles, Mumps, and Rubella (MMR) vaccine and whether she believes it causes autism. Dr. Saphier stated that she supports MMR vaccination and has not seen evidence that the vaccine causes autism. Chairman Cassidy then asked if Dr. Saphier supports the recommendation of universal Hepatitis B vaccination for newborns. Dr. Saphier expressed support for Hepatitis B vaccination.

MEMBER DISCUSSION WITH DR. WESTLAKE

Youth Mental Health

There was bipartisan questioning of how Dr. Westlake plans to improve youth mental health. Sen. Marshall asked how to empower the community health model of care. Dr. Westlake shared that it is important to look at the work providers are already doing and find ways to support the needs of each individual community. Sen. Moody questioned how to improve mental health issues related to social media. Dr. Westlake emphasized the need for more connection between families and communities outside of social media. Chairman Cassidy requested a plan to improve the identification and treatment of psychosis after the first episode. Dr. Westlake agreed and shared that he wants to understand what strategies are currently successful and how best to replicate them in other settings. Sen. Murkowski requested Dr. Westlake commit Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA) resources to improving youth suicide rates, especially in remote and underserved areas. Dr. Westlake agreed and shared that SAMHSA will work with states to see what resources are needed.

Other Topics

- Sen. Maggie Hassan (D-NH) requested Dr. Westlake's commitment to restoring policy that allows grantees to purchase fentanyl test strips with federal funds as well as reinstate the Drug Abuse Warning Network. Dr. Westlake shared that there is no evidence that fentanyl test strips reduce overdoses so he cannot commit restoring that policy. Dr. Westlake also said he is not aware of the warning network but will look into it and put forward the best policy.
- Sen. Baldwin also asked Dr. Westlake to restore the "press 3" option on the 988-suicide hotline for LGBTQ+ youth. Dr. Westlake stated that he was not at the agency when the decision to remove the press 3 option was made, but he committed to working through the bureaucratic silos to understand what happened.

We trust you found this summary useful. Please reach out to [us](#) with any questions.

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