



# FRIDAY ALERT



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**September 5, 2025**

## HHS Secretary Grilled About Medicaid, CDC Firings, and Vaccines During Contentious Hearing



[During a tense hearing on Thursday](#), members of the Senate Finance Committee pressed HHS Secretary **Robert F. Kennedy Jr.** about his position on a number of issues, including Medicare drug price negotiation, vaccine skepticism, recent firings at the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), and Medicaid funding for rural hospitals.

“As the committee gathers today, the United States is in the midst of a health care calamity. The largest cuts to American health care in the history of our nation, and they are approaching like an avalanche,” said Ranking Member **Ron Wyden** (OR) during his opening remarks. “**Robert Kennedy's** tenure is so far marked by three calling cards: One is chaos at federal health agencies, leaving doctors, families and the entire nation confused and frightened; corruption that benefits **Robert Kennedy, Donald Trump**, and their friends at the expense of taxpayers; and higher health costs for families.”

Secretary **Kennedy** [declined to directly answer](#) many questions during the hearing and even asserted – without evidence – that some members were “making things up” or were acting as shills for pharmaceutical corporations, which he frequently critiqued throughout his testimony.

Sen. **Catherine Cortez Masto** (NV) pointed out that this stance is incompatible with his support for the Republican tax law, which gave a major windfall to the pharmaceutical industry by exempting certain drugs from Medicare price negotiation: “So my question to you Mr. Secretary is how do you justify claiming to take on Big Pharma while supporting a bill that shields drugs like Keytruda and other cancer drugs from Medicare negotiation?”

**Kennedy** indicated he is not fully committed to Medicare drug price negotiation, [saying](#) the program and the Inflation Reduction Act were “well-intentioned but were poorly structured.” He also continued to show a lack of understanding about how Medicare works. He was unable to say exactly how much Part B and Part D premiums will increase for enrollees next year nor could he come up with any specifics about how he will keep health care costs down for seniors when asked for details.

Sen. **Peter Welch** (VT) implored Secretary **Kennedy** to take action to lower drug prices. “Senator **Cortez Masto** spoke about the legislation that we now have that would reverse the \$5 billion handout to Big Pharma in the ‘One, Big Beautiful Bill,’ and when I leave today with Senator **Wyden** we are going to go to the floor and seek unanimous consent to pass our legislation that would reverse that giveaway,” said Sen. **Welch**. “I ask you to put your policy and your body where your mouth is and join us in supporting that bill to restore price negotiation power so those pharma prices can come down from being the highest in the world to something within the range of reason.”

Medicaid funding for rural hospitals was of particular concern for several committee members, including Sen. **Mark Warner** (VA), Sen. **Bernie Sanders** (VT) and Committee Chairman **Mike Crapo** (ID). **Kennedy** falsely claimed that “there were no Medicaid cuts” in the new tax law and insisted that Republicans’ \$50 billion rural hospital fund will be enough to provide relief. But experts have already said the fund [will only cover about a third](#) of what rural hospitals will lose to Medicaid cuts.

Senators questioned Secretary **Kennedy** about shakeups at the CDC, including his unprecedented decision to fire all 17 members from the Advisory Committee on Immunization Practices (ACIP) and [replace them](#) with individuals who have spread vaccine misinformation. They also sought to clarify the circumstances surrounding his recent ouster of Former CDC Director **Susan Monarez**.

“Secretary **Kennedy’s** testimony only heightens our concerns over his ability to properly manage health care for seniors and all Americans,” said **Robert Roach, Jr.**, President of the Alliance. “He’s putting our health insurance and care at risk. We urge him to focus on bringing down health care costs and support evidence-based science or promptly resign.”

## **Social Security Administration Watchdog Begins Customer Service Wait Time Audit**

Social Security Administration (SSA) [Acting Inspector General Michelle Anderson](#) [told Axios](#) on Wednesday that an audit of customer service wait time data is underway and provided a year-end time frame for the project.

The data has recently received increased scrutiny, thanks to the Department of Government Efficiency’s (DOGE) workforce cuts and SSA Commissioner **Frank Bisignano’s** claims that the agency has reduced call wait times during his tenure. Sen. **Elizabeth Warren** (MA) had a private

meeting with **Bisignano** in July after [releasing a report](#) that questioned the precision of the statistics he cited.

Axios previously reported that wait times are [currently difficult](#) to assess, especially now that SSA [has stopped](#) providing historical phone and claim service metrics that it used to show publicly.

The agency's decision to perform an audit comes amid pressure from Senate Democrats and new reports about DOGE's mishandling of Americans' sensitive data. [A whistleblower claim](#) from former SSA Chief Data Officer **Charles Borges** emerged just last week, asserting that DOGE operatives copied sensitive data to a vulnerable server despite objections and violated a temporary restraining order in a lawsuit filed by the American Federation of State, County, and Municipal Employees (AFSCME), the Alliance, and the American Federation of Teachers (AFT).

"We welcome any efforts from SSA to be transparent and reflect what's actually going on with wait times in the wake of DOGE cuts and turmoil at the agency," said **Richard Fiesta**, Executive Director of the Alliance. "We urge Commissioner **Bisignano** to begin posting all historical data that was previously revoked and restore full staffing levels at field offices."

### **New Report Reveals Dangerously Low Nursing Home Staffing Levels**

A majority of nursing homes across the country have inadequate staffing numbers and provide less care than required for residents, [according to a new analysis](#) from the Long-Term Care Coalition.

90 percent of nursing homes included in the report have staffing levels far below the recommended amount of 4.95 hours per resident day (HPRD), reporting just 3.75 total nurse staff HPRD on average. Nursing homes in only three territories – Alaska, Oregon, and Puerto Rico – have staffing levels that actually meet or exceed recommendations. The imbalance is even more pronounced for registered nurses (RNs), as 42 percent of nursing homes report RN levels lower than recommended figures.

Illinois has the lowest average staffing. The state's nursing homes report levels that are 38 percent below the necessary range on average. Nursing homes in Texas, Missouri, Georgia, New Mexico, Indiana, Virginia, and New York also perform poorly in terms of workforce numbers, all falling short by at least 29 percent.

"This report is eye opening. Seniors and their loved ones should be able to expect adequate staffing levels and high quality care at nursing homes," said **Joseph Peters, Jr.**, Secretary-Treasurer of the Alliance. "Lawmakers must work to correct this situation, especially now that the Administration [has rescinded](#) the nursing home staffing rule that would have addressed this issue."

## **KFF Health News: Social Security Praises Its New Chatbot. Ex-Officials Say It Was Tested But Shelved Under Biden.**

**By Darius Tahir**

John McGing couldn't reach a human. That might be business-as-usual in this economy, but it wasn't business; he had called the Social Security Administration, where the questions often aren't generic and the callers tend to be older, disabled, or otherwise vulnerable Americans.

McGing, calling on behalf of his son, had an in-the-weeds question: how to prevent overpayments that the federal government might later claw back. His call was intercepted by an artificial intelligence-powered chatbot.

No matter what he said, the bot parroted canned answers to generic questions, not McGing's obscure query. "If you do a key press, it didn't do anything," he said. Eventually, the bot "glitched or whatever" and got him to an agent.

It was a small but revealing incident. Unbeknownst to McGing, a former Social Security employee in Maryland, he had encountered a technological tool recently introduced by the agency. Former officials and longtime observers of the agency say the Trump administration rolled out a product that was tested but deemed not yet ready during the Biden administration.

[Read more here.](#)