

# Mass firings continue across nation's health agencies

The cuts have raised questions about the extent of the impact on public health.



Robert F. Kennedy Jr., speaks after being sworn in as Health and Human Services Secretary in the Oval Office on Feb. 13, 2025. | Alex Brandon/AP

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The Trump administration carried out more mass firings across the Health and Human Services Department this weekend, continuing a chaotic purge of the federal workforce that career officials and lawmakers warned would hurt key programs and impair efforts to track threats to public health.

The cuts hit staffers at the Food and Drug Administration and the Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services, several people with knowledge of the firings told POLITICO. The administration also terminated some staff at the office responsible for emergency preparedness and response.

The firings were part of a culling of roughly 3,600 probationary employees across the sprawling department that began earlier this week with terminations primarily at the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention and National Institutes of Health.

Trump officials on Friday cast the layoffs imposed by billionaire Elon Musk's unofficial Department of Government Efficiency as methodical decisions meant to spare HHS' core functions. Yet those inside the agencies disputed that portrayal over the weekend, describing deep cuts that at times seemed indiscriminate — with even some Trump political appointees unaware which of their employees were being fired or why.

Those cuts included officials working on Medicare and Medicaid initiatives aimed at improving care for beneficiaries at the Center for Medicare and Medicaid Innovation and at the CMS office that oversees Obamacare, as well as officials at the FDA offices that regulate prescription drugs and medical devices. The layoffs at FDA included some staff who review medical device products, three of the people with knowledge of the firings said, raising fears they would slow the agency's ability to evaluate and approve new devices.

HHS' Administration for Strategic Preparedness and Response was also hit, prompting sharp criticism from public health experts who warned it would damage the government's frontline response to threats like bird flu. The administration is already expected to eliminate most of the CDC's public health fellows — some of whom received termination notices this weekend — including fellows at the Laboratory Leadership Service who do public health research, according to a former HHS official.

“On day one, the new HHS secretary is gutting the agencies that would be necessary to make America healthy again,” said Reshma Ramachandran, a Yale health professor who chairs the FDA task force of the nonprofit Doctors for America.

Democratic lawmakers have blasted the firings as a threat to the government's defense of public health, with Sen. Jon Ossoff (D-Ga.) [warning Friday](#) that deep cuts at CDC “leaves Americans exposed to disease and devastates careers and livelihoods for the world's most talented doctors and scientists.”

The firings at CMS, FDA and ASPR came a day after Trump officials [told POLITICO](#) and other outlets that they were careful to exempt employees in core areas, like those working on Medicare and Medicaid and emergency preparedness.

On Sunday, an administration official insisted that the weekend firings did not contradict those principles. The official argued that the cuts at Administration for Strategic Preparedness and Response only affected those not actively working on emergency preparedness, like those in legislative affairs or human resources. Similarly, the official maintained that CMMI was not one of the offices directly responsible for federal health programs, unlike CMS' Center for Medicare and Center for Medicaid.

Still, health staffers warned that the cuts would, nevertheless, affect those key areas and that some ran counter to new HHS Secretary Robert F. Kennedy Jr.'s priorities —

raising questions about whether the DOGE officials understood what some employees did before deciding to fire them.

“You’ve got policy people operating on a policy vision, but then you have DOGE,” said one former HHS employee. “Nobody knows who those people are. They are coming from the shadows and they’ve got their own set of priorities.”

Arielle Kane, a CMMI official who was terminated on Saturday, told POLITICO she was working on a Medicaid pilot program active in 15 states aimed at improving maternal health outcomes — an area where the U.S. has long lagged behind other countries. Another just-fired CMMI employee, granted anonymity for fear of reprisal, worked on enhancing care for Medicare Advantage enrollees.

At least 80 CMS employees were also cut in the agency’s Center for Consumer Information and Insurance Oversight, which oversees Obamacare and other programs, one of the people with knowledge said. Some of those affected were tasked with implementing a ban on surprise medical billing that passed during President Donald Trump’s first term, as well as combating broker fraud on the Obamacare exchanges.

The FDA firings, meanwhile, included officials working on artificial intelligence and technology, two of the people with knowledge said. Another person with knowledge said there were cuts in the FDA office that conducts inspections and criminal investigations, as well as cancellations of certain information technology contracts.

The Trump administration official defended the decision-making process behind the layoffs, saying DOGE had tasked an HHS employee with speaking with leaders across the department to determine whether or not each employee eligible to be fired contributed “to the overall function of the agency.” The official declined to name the HHS employee.

Yet Trump officials’ description of a methodical process did not square with the situation within the department, the people with knowledge said, which they characterized as mass confusion and disorder in the days leading up to the layoffs.

Managers of offices across several agencies scrambled to scour lists of probationary employees eligible for firing — some laden with errors — and submit justifications for keeping those they believed were essential on tight turnarounds. As DOGE made its determinations, many Trump political appointees at the health department were in the dark on how many would be cut, or what criteria the administration was using.

The firings themselves were conducted haphazardly, with some probationary employees receiving termination letters while others were simply locked out of their email with no notice. At least some of the termination letters, which were obtained by POLITICO, justified firing employees because their “performance has not been adequate” — despite performance evaluations as recently as last month that had determined those employees were excelling.

As 4 p.m. passed on Friday afternoon, supervisors at CMMI assured some worried employees they were safe from what many at the department had dubbed the “Valentine’s Day Massacre.” Though they had never received a final list of those set to be terminated, they believed they’d convinced DOGE officials that the office was critical to the administration’s health agenda.

Then the termination emails started rolling in. Some were fired Friday evening, while others didn’t get their notices until Saturday — forcing employees to call their supervisors to let them know they wouldn’t be coming back next week.

With no guidance on what layoffs remain or when the purge would officially end, those who still have jobs spent Sunday repeatedly checking their emails, searching for any word as to their fate.