

RFK Jr.'s Revamp Creates Office to 'Make America Healthy Again'

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- Kennedy's overhaul consolidates some agencies, cuts others
- Changes by HHS secretary received both praise and caution

Robert F. Kennedy Jr.'s reorganization and consolidation of several federal health agencies into a new office to carry out his "MAHA" agenda will create short-term uncertainty but may provide long-term benefits, several policy watchers said Thursday.

The plan to slash the full-time workforce at the Health and Human Services Department by Secretary Kennedy was expected for weeks, but the scope and sweep of the overhaul took many by surprise.

Chief among the changes is the creation of an Administration for a Healthy America (AHA) that moved several agencies into a new unit to carry out Kennedy's "Make America Healthy Again" agenda, which is aimed at "ending America's epidemic of chronic illness by focusing on safe, wholesome food, clean water, and the elimination of environmental toxins," the department said in a statement.

The new unit drew praise for addressing complaints with the status quo but was also criticized for pulling together disparate agencies with different missions.

Health agency cuts should be done "with incredible care and consideration for the hundreds of millions of Americans who rely on their work to stay healthy and get treatment when they're sick," Chiquita Brooks-LaSure, administrator of the Centers for Medicare & Medicaid Services under President Joe Biden, said in a statement.

"You're taking a wrecking ball to the people who are out across the country ensuring our parents and grandparents can get safe, affordable care as they age. You're taking a wrecking ball to cancer patients who need a new, innovative treatment to be covered. You're taking a wrecking ball to mothers and newborns who are both at the most critical points of their lives," said Brooks-LaSure, now a senior fellow at The Century Foundation.

The AHA will consolidate five HHS agencies: the Health Resources Services Administration (HRSA); the Office of the Assistant Secretary for Health (OASH); the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA); the Agency for Toxic Substances and Disease Registry (ATSDR); and the National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health (NIOSH).

"I think that the specialized knowledge that staff have from working in one part of HHS may not automatically transfer to working in a different part of the agency," said Allison Orris, a senior fellow and the director of Medicaid policy at the Center on Budget and Policy Priorities.

The HHS also announced plans to consolidate the department's 10 regional offices to five.

"Based on the initial information in HHS's announcement, I think there's a real risk that HHS and possibly CMS, could be hamstrung in responding to state requests for technical assistance and review of state requests for approval of various authorities," Orris said.

Organ Transplants

The HRSA reorganization could be beneficial because the agency hasn't provided strong oversight of the nation's organ transplant system, said Jennifer Erickson, a senior fellow at the Federation of American Scientists.

The HHS agency oversees the [Organ Procurement and Transplantation Network](#), a public-private partnership that runs the national organ waiting list, and the computer system that matches patients in need of transplants with newly donated organs.

The transplant system has faced frequent criticism for not fully using donated organs, using outdated technology, and not being accountable to patients on the organ wait list.

"Reorganizing and reforming transplantation is critical for patients," Erickson said.

"The Trump administration was right in 2020 to acknowledge the status quo failings of HRSA and its contractors to oversee the organ donation system. The most important thing in this reorganization is a chance to make sure that life-and-death reforms are implemented in patients' interests—putting a stop to endless studies, and instead moving to action."

Other Changes

But plans to move NIOSH from its current location within the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention to the new Administration for a Healthy America raised concerns about "diluting" the standards for worker safety, said Carol McLay, president of the Association for Professionals in Infection Control and Epidemiology (APIC).

"I think that's what we're going to see by moving it out from CDC, unfortunately," McLay said in an interview with Bloomberg Law. "And that may be the intent, to weaken the workplace safety standards."

NIOSH does scientific research on health and safety related to occupational health. By "trying to align" NIOSH with Kennedy's priorities, "I fear that it's going to hinder any independent research," by the agency, McLay said.

Another plan as part of the restructuring to divide the work of the Administration for Community Living across three agencies also drew a strong rebuke from Fred Riccardi, president of the Medicare Rights Center.

The ACL advocates across the federal government for older adults, people with disabilities and family caregivers. Their work will now be split among the Administration for Children and Families (ACF), the Assistant Secretary for Planning and Evaluation (ASPE), and the CMS.

“Just as you cannot slash billions from Medicaid or close Social Security field offices without harming older adults and people with disabilities, you cannot curtail CMS capacity, dismantle the Administration for Community Living” or “otherwise weaken critical HHS programs, services, and functions without causing irreparable damage,” Riccardi said in a [statement](#).