

Means defends HHS cuts, calls bureaucracy an ‘utter failure’

He also said the election of Trump was a mandate to make dramatic change in leadership.

By **KELLY HOOPER**

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A top adviser to HHS Secretary Robert F. Kennedy Jr. on Wednesday defended deep job cuts at federal agencies and attacked the medical establishment, which he said is controlled by industry lobbyists in a conspiracy to keep Americans sick.

Calley Means, a fixture in Kennedy’s Make America Healthy Again movement and co-founder of TrueMed, said at POLITICO’s Health Care Summit that the federal health department has been an “utter failure,” pointing to rising rates of chronic disease, lower life expectancy and a culture that is too quick to medicate patients for life without addressing the underlying causes of disease.

“Fundamentally, what Bobby has done is taken over a department that has utterly failed,” Means said.

Means’ comments follow weeks of upheaval at the health department, which has lost roughly 25 percent of its staff, affecting staff who handle everything from pandemic preparedness to oversight of federal health insurance programs.

Means said the election of President Donald Trump was a mandate to make dramatic change in leadership at “these authorities that have overseen an abject devastation in American health.” He said it would be “insane” for Kennedy to keep employing government bureaucrats, like top FDA vaccine regulator Peter Marks — [who was forced out last week](#).

“Those scientists fundamentally have overseen, just demonstrably, a record of utter failure,” Means said. “... Any business in the world, if you went into it with the metrics that HHS has overseen with skyrocketing costs and has caused to skyrocket worse and worse outcomes, with extremely little innovation from industry on actual chronic disease reversal and prevention — just management — you would of course fire a bunch of people and you would of course install new leadership to put that mantle down.”

Rep. Jake Auchincloss (D-Mass.), speaking at the POLITICO summit, chided Means’ disregard for the accomplishments that science and government have achieved over the decades, saying he did not want to be “lectured” by Means, calling his ideas “conspiracy and quakery.”

“I think what we just heard explains and crystallizes the arrogance of these bros that have descended on Washington, D.C.,” he said. “These professional podcasters stand in front of a bunch of career scientists and say ‘What has science ever done?’ I don’t know, science eradicated measles until two months ago.”

Means also said HHS has been controlled by industry lobbyists, including the American Medical Association and pharmaceutical lobbying groups. New leadership at the agency under the Trump administration, including FDA Commissioner Marty Makary and National Institutes of Health Director Jay Bhattacharya will work to lessen lobbyists’ influence on the agency, he said.

AMA President Bruce Scott gently pushed back against Means’ claims in a later panel at the summit, saying it’s a misunderstanding that AMA controls federal health agencies. He said the AMA wants to work with the administration on tackling chronic disease.

Means also took aim at the NIH, saying the agency oversaw the “literal creation of a pandemic” and the “devastation in American health over the past 20 years, with disease rates skyrocketing in America.” Some Republicans have pointed to top NIH officials’ correspondence with researchers who wrote a paper refuting the theory that the Covid virus leaked from a NIH-funded experiment in Wuhan, China, as evidence of a conspiracy. The officials and researchers have denied it.

Means also called for more NIH research on the root causes of disease to inform doctors’ standard of care — even as the NIH has been a target of sweeping cuts from the Trump administration’s Department of Government Efficiency. The administration has terminated millions of dollars in research grants, including for research that focused on infectious diseases like Covid and HIV. Thousands of agency personnel and scientists have been fired, including staff who focused on key issues like pandemic preparedness.

But Means denied that research funding has been cut, claiming that the administration only wants to cut “indirect funding” — the institutions’ administrative and overhead costs. He called for “better” NIH research that focuses on what’s causing and what can prevent diseases.

“More money will be flowing to actual researchers, not university bureaucrats, not government bureaucrats — actual researchers. Not \$1 of services has been cut,” he insisted.