

White House Official Booed at Conference for Defending Health Agency Cuts

The event occurred one day after the HHS began implementing a directive from RFK Jr. to dismiss 10,000 workers.

Photographer: Al Drago/Bloomberg

By Rachel Cohrs Zhang

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Calley Means, a White House adviser working on implementing Health and Human Services Secretary Robert F. Kennedy Jr.'s chronic disease agenda, was booed, shouted down and laughed at during a health conference while defending [mass layoffs](#) at the agency.

Means forcefully pushed back at the unusually vocal crowd at the Politico Health Care Summit in Washington, DC, Wednesday. The event occurred one day after the HHS began implementing a directive from RFK Jr. to [dismiss 10,000 workers](#), including senior leaders who oversaw drug reviews, tobacco products and scientific research.

“You can paint breathless stories with anecdotes all the time. Fundamentally, what Bobby has done is taken over a department that has utterly failed,” Means said, referring to RFK Jr.

Among the thousands of people cut on Tuesday, some entire divisions were gutted, including groups working on sexually transmitted diseases, environmental health, global health and birth defects, according to people familiar with the matter. Swaths of the agency's communications and federal records teams were also laid off.

Means said that voters' support for President Donald Trump and Kennedy means they were fed up with federal health agencies and supported upheaval at the agencies.

He also accused the [National Institutes of Health](#) of creating the Covid-19 pandemic, criticized the [Food and Drug Administration](#) approval process for being too expensive and not resulting in enough innovative medications and slammed the [Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services](#) for being “controlled by the American Medical Association.”

Means personally attacked Peter Marks, a top FDA regulator whose departure caused biotech stocks related to vaccines, and cell and gene therapies [to dip](#) on Monday. He said Marks “went against expert opinions in favor of the pharmaceutical industry” and criticized the regulator’s role in the [departure](#) of two top vaccine scientists over disagreements over Covid booster shots.

As the crowd of health policy experts, communications professionals and lobbyists loudly disagreed with Means’ on-stage comments, he criticized them, too.

“The lobbyists in this room are laughing when we have the sickest children in the developed world,” Means said.

During a later panel, Representative Jake Auchincloss of Massachusetts, a Democratic member of the House Energy & Commerce Committee, responded to Means.

Auchincloss highlighted scientific advances that led to the measles vaccine and cystic fibrosis therapies, and technology that has allowed parents to have children through in vitro fertilization.

“Science is core to who we are as Americans, and their excuse for destroying our scientific enterprise with their conspiracy and quackeries is because they’re the first ones who ever thought that chronic disease was a problem,” Auchincloss said.