

# White House Puts RFK Jr.'s HHS on Tighter Leash After MAHA Setbacks

Administration officials have been frustrated with his department, but the secretary continues to be in good standing with Trump

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- The White House is more tightly controlling HHS's messaging and policies, especially on vaccines, in part due to disorganization ahead of midterm elections.

WASHINGTON—The White House is more tightly controlling the messaging and policies—including around vaccines—coming from the Department of Health and Human Services ahead of the midterm elections, according to people familiar with the matter.

Aides close to President Trump decided to take a more active role in managing Robert F. Kennedy Jr. department in the face of polling that shows his vaccine moves are unpopular, the people said. Although Trump brought Kennedy into his administration with the promise that the vaccine skeptic and ultraprocessed-food critic could “go wild on health,” administration officials grew increasingly frustrated with what they viewed as foul-ups inside Kennedy's department, according to people familiar with the matter. Aides close to Trump grew worried that perceived disorganization and a focus on vaccines could damage the president's party in November, those people said.

Some people close to both Kennedy and the White House said the secretary's standing among some staff is at a new low following a series of setbacks for his Make America Healthy Again agenda. But Kennedy continues to be in good standing with the president himself, according to people familiar with their relationship.

Trump last month [signed an executive order](#) that sought to boost production of the herbicide glyphosate for national-security purposes, angering many in Kennedy's movement. Trump didn't mention MAHA in his State of the Union speech, other than to tout drug-pricing negotiations led by the White House and Medicare chief Chris Klomp.

White House spokesman Kush Desai said that Kennedy is an integral member of the administration and that “the White House continues to work hand in glove” with him and his team.

Klomp, a Trump favorite and a multimillionaire healthcare executive, is central to the White House's efforts regarding HHS, according to people familiar with the matter. Klomp last month was elevated as No. 2 to Kennedy to improve the health department's day-to-day operations and to help Kennedy focus on White House-approved projects, according to people familiar with the matter. Klomp [found favor with the White House](#) after negotiating its drug-pricing deals with pharmaceutical companies. He has been given a

broad mandate and authority to make management decisions inside the department, according to people familiar with the matter.

HHS spokesman Andrew Nixon said Kennedy delivered one of the most consequential first years any HHS secretary has ever had. “Adding management expertise as the mission expands is what strong leadership looks like,” Nixon said.

The president has long valued having a scion of the Democratic family in his cabinet. “He’s doing such a fantastic job,” Trump said of his health secretary in early February. “Who would’ve thought a Kennedy—we love a Kennedy—in the Republican Party?”

The White House sees the administration’s work on drug pricing and some other Make America Healthy Again priorities, such as healthy-eating initiatives, as winning issues that it wants to focus on more as [healthcare and affordability](#) become central to the midterms.

Like other cabinet members, Kennedy is expected to travel widely ahead of the midterms. (Health officials expect his next two weeks to be quiet as he recovers from rotator-cuff surgery.)

Klomp previously worked for both Kennedy and Mehmet Oz, the Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services administrator who is viewed widely in the Trump administration as competent and good on TV. The former TV show host is viewed among Washington’s lobbying class as a potential successor to Kennedy should the health secretary grow bored in his role or sour with Trump.

“Administrator Oz is extremely close with Secretary Kennedy and values his leadership of the Department,” said CMS spokesman Chris Krepich.

A series of miscues over the past year led the White House to shake up leadership at HHS, people familiar with the matter said. Administration officials found fault with Kennedy’s initial tepid response to the [measles outbreak in Texas](#). Top officials in Kennedy’s health department last year were surprised and annoyed by the Food and Drug Administration’s surprise approval of a generic form of the abortion pill, according to officials familiar with the matter. The White House was dismayed by grant cuts for mental health and substance abuse in January—cuts that the department had to walk back quickly after outcry from Capitol Hill. [Drama surrounding the FDA](#) came to be a continuing headache for administration officials.

The White House earlier this year commissioned Brad Smith, a DOGE veteran, to interview health officials and determine what was and wasn’t working, people familiar with the matter said. Smith recommended a series of changes that would quell the infighting in Kennedy’s department and make it run better.

As part of the White House’s shake-up, Deputy Secretary Jim O’Neill was pushed out of his Senate-confirmed role, as well as his gig as acting director of the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. By the morning after the shake-up was announced, his nameplate on the wall outside his office was removed. O’Neill has been nominated to lead the National Science Foundation.

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Two aides were put in place to advise on FDA, long a source of what the White House viewed as unnecessary problems, including the rocky tenure of vaccine chief Vinay Prasad.

Kennedy’s longtime aide, Stefanie Spear, remains in her position as principal deputy chief of staff, but she no longer has control over every project at the health department, people familiar with the matter said.

Kennedy accepted the changes and told subordinates the department was losing “friends,” people familiar with the matter said.

Kennedy had also asked Klomp for advice on how to better manage his department, according to people familiar with the matter. Both Kennedy and White House officials urged Klomp to take the No. 2 role, some of the people said.

Less than a week after the White House's changes were implemented, Trump signed an executive order boosting glyphosate, a pesticide Kennedy has decried as cancer-causing and had spent years litigating against. Kennedy knew about the order in advance, though some environmental and health-agency officials didn't. He voiced his disapproval, but understood the national-security reasons behind the order, according to a person familiar with the matter.

The health secretary's first statement about the action—drafted with help from the White House—voiced support for the order. “We must safeguard America's national security first,” he said.

Amid outcry from his MAHA fans, Kennedy voiced disappointment with the executive order. “It's not something that I was particularly happy with, let me put it that way,” the secretary told podcaster Joe Rogan.

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