



HEALTH CARE

< RFK Jr. stands by deep cuts to health budget during contentious hearings

MAY 15, 2025 · 6:49 AM ET

2-Minute Listen

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A MARTÍNEZ, HOST:

Secretary of Health and Human Services Robert F. Kennedy Jr. is standing firm on the sweeping cuts to his agency - cuts he says were suggested by Elon Musk and his team. That's the takeaway from hours of congressional testimony by Kennedy yesterday, as NPR's Selena Simmons-Duffin reports.

SELENA SIMMONS-DUFFIN, BYLINE: The topic was the 2026 budget, but a lot of other issues came up in the hours of questions from lawmakers, including Kennedy's moves on autism and vaccines, the measles outbreak in West Texas, and the 20,000 employees that have been fired or taken buyouts from HHS. On the reorganization under way at HHS, Kennedy said he was advised by his attorneys to speak in generalities because of lawsuits under way, but he did answer some of the many questions members of Congress had about the sudden firing of staff and shuttering of some divisions and labs. Here's Democratic Representative Steny Hoyer of Maryland in the House Appropriations Committee.

(SOUNDBITE OF ARCHIVED RECORDING)

STENY HOYER: Who made those decisions - you or Musk?

SIMMONS-DUFFIN: Kennedy said he pushed back in certain cases, like preventing Head Start from being cut. That's an early education program. He did seem fuzzy on the specifics of what was cut. He said he would look into issues like delayed payments to community groups and problems with clinical trials. And he said some people who were fired were being brought back. Republican Representative Riley Moore of West Virginia thanked Kennedy for un-firing staff at a CDC lab in Morgantown that did research related to coal miner safety.

(SOUNDBITE OF ARCHIVED RECORDING)

RILEY MOORE: My understanding is that the Coal Workers' Health Surveillance Program at NIOSH will be fully reinstated. Is that correct?

ROBERT F KENNEDY JR: Yes, the program will – it will continue to function with continuity.

SIMMONS-DUFFIN: That led ranking member Rosa DeLauro of Connecticut to ask why Republicans seem to be able to call and get programs brought back.

(SOUNDBITE OF ARCHIVED RECORDING)

ROSA DELAURO: Tobacco prevention, lead poisoning, oral health. Who do we have to call to be able to get those things reinstated?

SIMMONS-DUFFIN: On vaccines, Kennedy was asked several times in the House hearing and the Senate about the measles vaccine in particular, and he did not clearly endorse it. He said instead he didn't think people should be getting their medical advice from him.

Selena Simmons-Duffin, NPR News, Washington.

(SOUNDBITE OF LUNGFISH'S "SANDS OF TIME")

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