

Robert F Kennedy Jr: 1 year of failure

In his first speech as Secretary of the US Department of Health and Human Services (HHS), Robert F Kennedy Jr laid out a plan to restore trust. The COVID-19 pandemic saw public faith in Federal health and science plummet—between April, 2020, and September, 2023, the percentage of polling respondents who trusted coronavirus and vaccine information from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) “a great deal” or “a fair amount”, fell from 83% to 63%—and the HHS employees to whom he was speaking were facing devastating mass lay-offs and funding cuts. Although Kennedy did not mince words about the likely fate of staff resistant to his ambitions, he promised open and honest engagement with everyone willing to work towards making the USA healthy again. To the Senate committee who confirmed his nomination, Kennedy promised a receptive and collaborative relationship, and to the public from whom he claims his mandate, he promised a new era of unbiased science without hidden conflicts of interest, secrecy, or profiteering. Radical transparency, gold-standard science, ethics, compassion, competency, and pride would restore to HHS the unimpeachable authority that the USA needs and deserves. Politicians are known to break promises, but Kennedy’s record, 1 year in, has been a failure by most measures, especially his own.

10 days after his speech about trust and openness, HHS rescinded a 54-year-old policy of soliciting public comments for new rules and regulations, silencing the voices of many of the stakeholders he pledged to serve. Kennedy has summarily dismissed advisers and experts, communicated policy changes on paywalled media, fired a whistleblower, and overseen the revisions of guidelines and recommendations, contradicting decades of established science, often to the benefit of industries he formerly condemned. Under Kennedy’s leadership, the National Institutes of Health (NIH) shuttered programmes studying the health effects of air pollution, HHS withheld a report linking alcohol consumption to cancer, and the Food and Drug Administration (FDA) withdrew warnings of potential harm from consuming products (such as raw milk and chlorine dioxide) falsely marketed as treatments for autism. His changes at CDC have driven 26 states to reject official guidance on vaccine policy,

and in December the CDC awarded an unsolicited \$1.6 million grant to conduct a vaccine study in Guinea-Bissau that raised so many ethical concerns—the design would have risked exposing thousands of unvaccinated children to hepatitis B—that it has been compared to the infamous Untreated Syphilis Study at Tuskegee.

HHS under Kennedy has made a habit of throwing good money after bad science. Amid the Trump administration’s cuts to research funding and personnel there has been a harmful shift in priorities. Cutting-edge discoveries and clinical investigations—on subjects ranging from mRNA vaccines to diabetes and dementia—are denied crucial resources while junk science and fringe beliefs are elevated without justifiable explanation. Under Kennedy’s leadership, politicisation at the NIH, FDA, and CDC is imperilling the future of US science and innovation and throttling the public health enterprise that keeps the country safe today.

The mechanisms maintained by the Federal Government to monitor and report health concerns such as drug overdoses, maternal mortality, and food security have been as beleaguered as the doctors and scientists who rely on them; thousands of datasets are no longer publicly available, leaving Americans—and the world—unprepared to respond to future crises. And crises are looming: in November, 2025, the first human infection (and death) from the H5N5 strain of avian flu was recorded in Washington state; pertussis, which killed 13 people in the USA in 2025, continues to spread across the country; and the measles outbreak that began in January of last year now threatens the elimination status of the USA and Mexico.

Despite these developments, Kennedy has continued to spread misinformation and push politicised agendas at the expense of the country’s most vulnerable. When called to account for his decisions by Congress, he has been evasive and combative. The destruction that Kennedy has wrought in 1 year might take generations to repair, and there is little hope for US health and science while he remains at the helm. Calls for his resignation now number in the thousands. Congress must exercise its duty of oversight and hold Kennedy accountable for his record, or else accept responsibility for endorsing President Trump’s decision to let him “run wild on health”. ■ *The Lancet*



Kent Nishimura/Bloomberg via Getty Images

For more on **trust in the Federal Government** see <https://www.kff.org/public-opinion/kff-polling-on-health-information-and-trust/>

For more on the **firing of Jeanne Marrazzo** see <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2025/oct/03/rfk-jr-jeanne-marrazzo-nih-fired>

For more on **how a key report on alcohol and health was not published** see <https://www.statnews.com/2025/09/04/federal-alcohol-health-study-not-released-dietary-guidelines/>

For more on the **withdrawal of warnings** see <https://www.propublica.org/article/rfk-jr-fda-removes-autism-treatments-warning>

For more on the **state of US vaccine policy** see <https://www.cidrap.umn.edu/childhood-vaccines/state-us-vaccine-policy-feb-19-2026>

For more on **concerns regarding the Guinea-Bissau vaccine study** see [World Report Lancet 2026; 407: 559–60](https://www.thelancet.com/article/S0140-6736(25)01406-0)

For more on **cancelled studies** see <https://www.statnews.com/2025/08/30/diabetes-prevention-program-restored-impact/>

For more on **data collection** see <https://www.notus.org/trump-white-house/federal-data-is-disappearing>

For more on the **spreading of misinformation** see <https://www.nytimes.com/2025/11/21/us/politics/rfk-jr-cdc-vaccines-autism-website.html>

For more on **how political aims are being prioritised over health** see <https://www.americanprogress.org/article/how-the-trump-administrations-embrace-of-oil-gas-and-chemical-industry-interests-will-endanger-childrens-health/>