

Takeaways From The Times's Inside Look at the C.D.C.

Many current and former employees say the actions of Health Secretary Robert F. Kennedy Jr. are undermining the agency's role in safeguarding public health.



By Jeneen Interlandi

March 23, 2026

When Donald J. Trump announced that he was choosing Robert F. Kennedy Jr. to lead the Department of Health and Human Services, he promised to let Kennedy, who had amassed a large following while spreading falsehoods about vaccines, “go wild on health.”

Since his confirmation in February 2025, Kennedy has tried to do exactly that. He has taken particular aim at the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, calling it “the most corrupt agency at H.H.S. and maybe the government.” At least 2,400 people, or 18 percent of the C.D.C. staff, have been fired or have resigned since January 2025. The secretary's critics say that his goal is to dismantle the nation's vaccination programs, in which the C.D.C. plays a key part.

For my full magazine article, I interviewed more than 40 people who work at the C.D.C. or who left during Trump's second term. Some sources spoke on the condition of anonymity because they feared that speaking out would cost them their jobs or subject them to retaliation from the administration.

What you should know about anonymous sources. The Times makes a careful decision any time it shields the identity of a source. The information the source supplies must be newsworthy, credible and give readers genuine insight.

Learn more about our process.

In response to my requests for comment and a detailed list of questions, Andrew Nixon, a department spokesman, said in a statement: “Within a year, Secretary Kennedy restored the C.D.C. on its core mission of fighting infectious disease by eliminating mission creep and replacing leaders who resisted reform.”

But current and former employees expressed fear that agency scientists are being sidelined, political appointees are taking charge and a vital public health institution is being remade into a vehicle for ideologues.

Communications were ‘hijacked’

An early directive that all public communications by agency staff had to be reviewed before it was released left scientists unable to communicate with outside partners or even internally.

Daniel Jernigan, the former director of the National Center for Emerging and Zoonotic Infectious Diseases, told me:

You had the president and whoever else saying, “Stop talking.” I think what they probably meant was, “Don’t engage publicly or in a high-profile way.” But you had a whole new layer of people with no public health experience, no government experience and no scientific knowledge, and they didn’t know what to do. And so everybody was told: “Don’t engage. You can’t even get on the phone.”

The C.D.C.’s public communications would be taken over by political appointees. Susan A. Wang, a former senior medical adviser in the global immunization division, said:

We had a very stringent scientific process for vetting information that would get published on the C.D.C. website. Everything was checked and double-checked. And for political appointees to take over the means of communication is devastating, and also dangerous. Now, some things are correct and some are not, which means that you can't trust any of it.

Amid a measles outbreak, Kennedy promoted unproven remedies instead of vaccines

After a child in Texas died of the measles, the health secretary downplayed the outbreak as “not unusual” in cabinet meetings and television appearances, even though it was the largest since the disease was declared eliminated in the United States in 2000. Demetre C. Daskalakis, the former director of the National Center for Immunization and Respiratory Diseases, said:

Even as the outbreak grew, R.F.K. was still just praising the doctors who were giving snake-oil treatments like budesonide, a corticosteroid, and clarithromycin, an antibiotic, to kids with measles and saying how they saved hundreds of lives, which was absolute garbage. We were asked to add those treatments to the measles guidelines. We managed to mitigate that by including the words on the guidelines but saying that none of these were proven. Giving people the wrong medicines delayed lots of care for lots of kids.

Kennedy replaced the C.D.C.'s vaccine experts with people who share his views

In June, Kennedy fired all 17 voting members of the Advisory Committee on Immunization Practices, who set the C.D.C.'s vaccine recommendations. He replaced them with people who had far less expertise but shared his views on vaccination. The new committee went on to change several longstanding vaccine recommendations for flu, hepatitis B and M.M.R.V. (measles, mumps, rubella and varicella).

Fiona Havers, a former medical epidemiologist in the respiratory viruses division, said:

I got a text from my team's deputy that all of ACIP had just been fired. And I thought, I guess my career at C.D.C. is done. I didn't want to be part of any machine that they were going to use to spread false information about vaccines or to take vaccines away.

This month, a federal judge temporarily halted Kennedy's reconstitution of ACIP and the changes he made to the childhood vaccine schedule, saying that he had violated the Administrative Procedure Act and calling the health secretary's changes to vaccine recommendations "arbitrary and capricious."

The agency has been left without a permanent director for most of the past year

C.D.C. employees told me that the agency has been largely leaderless since Trump took office. Kennedy appointed Susan Monarez acting director last January, but when she stepped away in late March, pending her Senate confirmation as permanent director, no one was left in charge, they say.

When senators raised this issue with Kennedy in a contentious hearing, he said that Matt Buzzelli, the agency's chief of staff, was its temporary leader. Monarez was confirmed in late July. She was fired 29 days later and testified before the Senate that Kennedy was leading public health to "a very dangerous place" and that the nation's children would be harmed by his policies.

Jeneen Interlandi, a staff writer at The New York Times Magazine and the Opinion section of The Times, writes about public health.