



AMERICAN PUBLIC HEALTH ASSOCIATION

*For science. For action. For health.*

January 23, 2025

The Honorable Mike Crapo  
Chair  
Senate Committee on Finance  
Washington, DC 20510

The Honorable Ron Wyden  
Ranking Member  
Senate Committee on Finance  
Washington, DC 20510

The Honorable Bill Cassidy  
Chair  
Senate Committee on Health, Education,  
Labor and Pensions  
Washington, DC 20510

The Honorable Bernie Sanders  
Ranking Member  
Senate Committee on Health, Education,  
Labor and Pensions  
Washington, DC 20510

Dear Chairmen Crapo and Cassidy and Ranking Members Wyden and Sanders:

On behalf of the American Public Health Association, a diverse community of public health professionals who champion the health of all people and communities, I write to express our deep concerns over the nomination of Robert F. Kennedy Jr. to serve as Secretary of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. The plethora of health challenges currently facing the nation include the H5 bird flu outbreak, the epidemic of preventable maternal deaths, rising health care costs, drug shortages and rural hospital closures, just to name a few. We also have emerging and reemerging health threats on the horizon like growing numbers of people with dementia and increasing cases of vaccine-preventable infectious diseases like measles and pertussis. Addressing these and other challenges will require someone with the knowledge and experience to lead the agency who can hit the ground running. Mr. Kennedy has neither the training nor management experience nor judgment for such an important and complex position.

Throughout his career, Mr. Kennedy has shown poor judgment and a consistent disregard for scientific evidence when he has knowingly made baseless claims and promoted misinformation about the safety and effectiveness of lifesaving vaccines. He now claims he is not anti-vaccine and only wants to ensure they are safe and effective. In fact, his record is just the opposite. He has demonstrated his anti-vaccine positions on numerous occasions and has often led efforts to undermine vaccine confidence both domestically and abroad. This has resulted in loss of public confidence in vaccines. Many experts believe his advocacy in the nation of Samoa helped to embolden anti-vaccine activists who spread misinformation that helped lead to a measles epidemic, which resulted in vaccine-preventable deaths of more than 80 people, most of them children.

He has also claimed on multiple occasions, without evidence, that vaccines cause autism and that no vaccine is safe and effective. He has challenged the well-documented science related to benefits of community water fluoridation, claimed that COVID-19 was targeted toward specific ethnic and socioeconomic groups and spared others, and has suggested that AIDS is not caused by HIV infection. All of these statements are at variance with the scientific evidence we have today and have known for some time. Anyone with these easily disproven beliefs cannot be entrusted with leading the improvement of our nation's health and wellness.

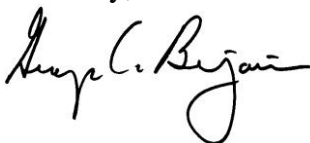
Mr. Kennedy claims he wants to address chronic diseases and “make America healthy again.” We applaud the opportunity to work with the Trump administration on improving the public’s health and investing in the training, programs, behavioral changes and societal investments that will achieve that goal. As 80% of what makes someone healthy occurs outside the medical care environment, broad societal changes and investments in prevention are required to make that happen. We have not heard Mr. Kennedy articulate an evidence-based strategy to improve the health of our population and suggest he be questioned about his strategy and how it will differ from the many other national efforts that have occurred before. We should also point out that chronic diseases are amongst the leading causes of death in our nation, but COVID-19, a vaccine-preventable disease, was No. 4 at one point and crashed the world’s economy. Mr. Kennedy has stated that we should prioritize addressing chronic diseases over infectious diseases. This is not a sensible trade-off. In the case of COVID-19, we learned chronic diseases compounded the severity of illness, demonstrating the strong connection between both infectious and chronic disease. To be successful, the nation’s chief health official will have to lead an organized and integrated effort to address the full spectrum of disease and injury afflicting the nation. This requires a level of expertise and experience Mr. Kennedy does not have.

HHS has a more than \$1.7 trillion budget and Mr. Kennedy has never managed anything as complex or large as even one of the smaller agencies under the department’s jurisdiction. While he will likely have people under him with more management experience, leading a department with over 80,000 employees and 11 operating divisions requires superb management skill and experience. This position oversees the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, the National Institutes of Health, the Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services, the Food and Drug Administration and the Health Resources and Services Administration, among other key health agencies. Together, these HHS agencies oversee everything from drug, vaccine and food safety to pandemic preparedness, medical research and Medicare and Medicaid and should be led by someone with considerable management skills and the medical or public health training to truly understand the wide array of health issues involved.

To effectively lead our nation’s top health agency, a candidate should ideally be trained in health administration, clinical care or a related field. Mr. Kennedy’s training in environmental law, which may be sufficient for environmental advocacy, is insufficient for the breadth of the responsibilities he would acquire in leading HHS. This is a science-based policy position and any candidate should also believe in and follow the scientific evidence that serves as the basis of our nation’s system to protect and promote the public’s health from the many threats we face. Unfortunately, Mr. Kennedy fails on this front as well.

We strongly urge you to make the public’s health and safety a top national priority and reject his nomination. Our nation deserves much better than Mr. Kennedy. We implore the Senate to ensure this critical public health position is filled by a qualified, experienced and trusted individual. Please feel free to contact me if you would like to further discuss our views regarding his nomination.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Georges C. Benjamin". The signature is fluid and cursive, with the first name being the most prominent.

Georges C. Benjamin, MD  
Executive Director