



Sept. 19, 2025

Legislative Update: Former CDC Director Dr. Susan Monarez Testifies Before Senate HELP Committee

Witnesses:

- Susan Monarez, Ph.D., former Director of the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC)
- Debra Houry, MD, M.P.H., former Chief Medical Officer of the CDC

Committee Leadership:

- [Chairman](#) Bill Cassidy (R-LA)
- [Ranking Member](#) Bernie Sanders (I-VT)

Overview:

Last month, the Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) abruptly announced the firing of former CDC Director Dr. Susan Monarez, which was followed by the resignation of several CDC officials including former CDC Chief Medical Office Dr. Debra Houry. Despite being the first Senate-confirmed CDC Director, Dr. Monarez served in the position for only 28 days. On Sept. 17, Dr. Monarez and Dr. Houry testified before the Senate Committee on Health, Education, Labor and Pensions (HELP) for a hearing titled: ***Restoring Trust Through Radical Transparency: Reviewing Recent Events at the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention and Implications for Children's Health.***

The hearing occurred one day before the Sept. 18-19 meeting of the CDC's Advisory Committee on Immunization Practices (ACIP), who's entire 17-person membership was removed and replaced earlier this year in an unprecedented move by HHS Secretary Robert F. Kennedy Jr., who promised to take "bold steps" in restoring the public's trust in vaccinations. On Sept. 4, Secretary Kennedy [testified before the Senate Committee on Finance](#), where he defended his decisions in reconstituting the advisory committee that provides evidence-based recommendations to the CDC on the use of vaccines. ACIP's recommendations often determine federal and state vaccination guidelines, as well as parameters for insurance coverage of vaccinations. On August 27, the Food and Drug Administration FDA approved three COVID-19 vaccines for the 2025-2026 respiratory season with narrower eligibility for children and adults, while removing the emergency use authorizations that enabled broader access to vaccines for children under 12. Members of the medical community, including Democratic and Republican medical providers serving in Congress, have shared concerns about the new members of ACIP who [have voiced skepticism](#) on federal vaccination guidelines in the past.

The hearing itself centered around several topics, including the timeline of events leading up to Dr. Monarez's firing; Secretary Kennedy's position on vaccines; the role that CDC plays in maintaining the

United States' public health and infectious disease response; mandates and guidelines established during the COVID-19 pandemic; and potential changes to the country's federal childhood vaccination schedule. While many of the Republican members of the HELP Committee position questions around potential conflicts of interest among CDC officials and the possibility that the witnesses had conspired to undermine Secretary Kennedy and President Trump's Make America Healthy Again initiatives prior to and after their removal, Democratic members' questions revolved around concerns over the dangerous of political influence on public health. Members of both parties alluded to the safety and efficacy of childhood vaccines, with the GOP primarily highlighting evidence of potential dangers while Democrats focused on the ability of vaccines to save lives. Notably, HELP Committee Chairman Bill Cassidy (R-LA), a practicing physician himself, contrasted from many of his colleagues by espousing support for childhood hepatitis B (hep B) vaccines. Chairman Cassidy also promised to invite HHS officials such as Secretary Kennedy to speak before the HELP Committee and refute the witness' claims at a later date.

Opening Statements:

Chairman Cassidy: The Chair opened the hearing by stating its function as a direct response to President Trump's commitment to unleashing radical transparency into government operations. Chairman Cassidy's statement alluded to his roles as both a practicing physician and Senator. He spoke to his experience of treating children and families for over 25 years, including his obligation to do the best he can for his patients. He also spoke to the need for doctors to have clear guidance from federal public health agencies to inform medical decisions, children and adults health at risk. In his role as a Senator, Cassidy focused on fact that Dr. Monarez was the first CDC Director to require Senate confirmation to assume the position, and how the same Senate help was proud to confirm her a few months ago. President, senators, RFK All spoke to her credentials upon her confirmation.

Senator Cassidy pondered whether his Senate colleagues had erred in initially confirming Dr. Monarez to the role of CDC Director in July, or if the witnesses would explain why their later firing was unjustified. The Senator stated that turmoil of the nation's top health agency is not good for the American people. He launched a staff working group on improving the CDC earlier this year but was also careful to celebrate President Trump's priorities for unleashing radical transparency. He claimed that the allegations made by CDC staff need to be scrutinized, and plans to invite HHS officials, including Secretary Robert F. Kennedy Jr., to refute anything said today at a later hearing. He closed his statement by shifting it's focus from politics, to protecting children's health and rebuilding trust in institutions.

Ranking Member Sanders – Senator Sanders stated that Dr. Monarez was sworn in as the first Senate-confirmed CDC Director, and that Secretary Kennedy said Dr. Monarez had unimpeachable scientific credentials and was confident in her CDC leadership. Senator Sander stated that Secretary Kennedy now viewed, Dr. Monarez as "untrustworthy" and "a liar." The Senator asked how she went from being an expert with full confidence to a liar in less than a month. Senator Sanders stated that Dr. Monarez was fired for refusing to be a rubber stamp for Secretary Kennedy's preferred vaccine policies. Specifically, 1. She refused to pre-approve recommendations from new anti-vaccine members of ACIP. and 2. Refused to get rid of career scientists for doing their job, including former CDC Chief Medical Officer Dr. Houry. Senator Sanders stated that this hearing isn't just about finding out why they were fired but relates to Secretary Kennedy's "dangerous war on science and public health." Senator Sanders claimed that the HHS Secretary does not believe in established science and only listens to

conspiracy theorists. The Ranking Member alluded to statements from the American Academy of Pediatrics, American Medical Association, and World Health Organization who called vaccines one of the country's greatest public health achievements.

Dr. Monarez – During her confirmation hearing, Dr. Monarez stated that she would lead the CDC to restore public trust and protect Americans from infectious disease. She was honored to have President Trump and Secretary Kennedy's support upon confirmation. Officials claimed she resigned, was untrustworthy, or didn't align with the administration's priorities – which she does not find to be true. Dr. Monarez stated that “today is not about me, it should be about the future of trust in public health.” On Aug. 2nd, Dr. Monarez learned that CDC's ACIP liaison had been removed. On Aug. 8, a gunman upset about COVID-19 vaccines fired hundreds of shots at the CDC headquarters in Atlanta, killing a police officer. Dr. Monarez was focused on security and the CDC mission after the attack. On Aug. 19, Secretary Kennedy required prior approval from political staff for CDC policy and personnel changes. On Aug. 25, Secretary Kennedy demanded that Dr. Monarez commit to approving every ACIP recommendation regardless of evidence and also directed her to dismiss career officials responsible for vaccine policy. If unwilling, Secretary Kennedy stated that Dr. Monarez should resign. Dr. Monarez claimed that Secretary Kennedy had already spoken with White House about having her removed. She agrees with President Trump's public position, who said vaccines work.

Dr. Monarez stated that she is committed to working with Congress on protecting American's health. She also alluded to the Sept. 18-19 ACIP meeting, and the risk that recommendations could restrict vaccine access to children and could be adopted without a Senate-confirmed CDC director in place. Dr. Monarez stated that if vaccine protections are weakened, preventable diseases will return. At her confirmation hearing, spoke to the value of hard work and dedication to science – and on Aug. 25, she could have stayed silent, and nobody would have known. She could've kept the office but would've lost her integrity.

Dr. Houry – Dr. Houry resigned as the CDC's Chief Medical Officer three weeks ago. She alluded to her role as a doctor, scientist, and mom. Her career has shifted from emergency care to a focus on public health and spent 10 years at CDC under six directors and four administrations. Each time, priorities shifted, but decisions were still based in science. Dr. Houry claimed she resigned as CDC leaders were reduced to rubber stamps. She stated that Secretary Kennedy stripped leaders' power, and she could not remain in good conscience. She stated that “when we erode institutions and processes, as Secretary Kennedy is doing, we trade proven gains for avoidable harm.” She stated that CDC saw the highest number of measles cases in decades, while Secretary Kennedy promoted unproven treatments. CDC is the nation's first line of defense against pandemics, while global flu and COVID sample submissions dropped by over 70% in the past year. Dr. Houry learned of changing CDC recommendations on COVID-19 vaccine policies only from a Twitter/X post. Dr. Houry stated that her goal today is to provide examples of the damage CDC has faced and provide steps for Congress to address the issue.

Witnesses before the Senate HELP Committee are not traditionally sworn in prior to providing testimony. Senator Collins (R-ME) asked for unanimous consent to swear the witnesses in, while Ranking Member Sanders objected. Secretary Kennedy was not sworn in prior to his recent Senate Finance Committee hearing, and Ranking Member Sanders objected to changing standing committee rules in this instance.

Question + Answer Summary:

Chain of events: July 29 – Aug. 27:

- Chairman Cassidy asked several questions about the timeline of events leading up to Dr. Monarez's firing on Aug. 27.
 - Dr. Monarez met with Secretary Kennedy twice during her swearing in ceremony on July 31 and on Aug. 11 during a post-CDC shooting campus tour. The pair met three times on the on Aug. 25, where Secretary Kennedy first asked Dr. Monarez to commit to firing career scientists and pre-commit to approving ACIP recommendations on vaccines. Dr. Monarez claimed that Secretary Kennedy stated that if she couldn't commit to these actions, she needed to resign. Secretary Kennedy said he spoke to the White House several times about having Dr. Monarez removed. He did not discuss changing childhood vaccine schedule with her until Aug. 25 and stated it would be changing in September. Dr. Monarez claimed that Secretary Kennedy had spoken to the President several times about changing the childhood vaccine schedule. Secretary Kennedy also wanted Dr. Monarez to speak with Aaron Siri, a trial attorney who led previous efforts to remove polio vaccines from circulation. According to Dr. Monarez, Secretary Kennedy also claimed there was no scientific research to back up the current childhood vaccine schedule.
- Senator Roger Marshall (R-KS) – Asked if Dr. Monarez encouraged CDC staff to work remotely, despite the President's order that federal employees return to in-person work. His questions also revolved around allegations that Dr. Monarez removed political appointees from physical offices.
 - Dr. Monarez did, but only following the Aug. 8 shooting at CDC headquarters. She also alluded to the fact that there are a limited number of offices at the CDC headquarters.
- Senator Maggie Hassan (D-NH) asked what directive Dr. Monarez was ordered to take that would violate her oath of office.
 - Dr. Monarez stated that Secretary Kennedy asked her to compromise her scientific integrity and to fire individuals without cause.
 - Dr. Monarez also claimed that during the Aug. 25 series of meetings, Secretary Kennedy grew upset and claimed that CDC failed in its duties to evaluate scientific evidence. He also made pointed assertions of CDC, calling it "the most corrupt federal agency", claiming that CDC employees were killing children and didn't care, that the agency was bought by big pharma, forced people to wear masks during COVID-19, and told hospitals to turn away COVID-19 patients until they had blue lips. Dr. Monarez took particular offense to the latter claim.
- Senator Tommy Tuberville (R-AL) asked about a claim made by Secretary Kennedy, that Dr. Monarez stated that she herself was "untrustworthy."
 - Dr. Monarez claimed that Secretary Kennedy told her he could not trust her, because she shared info related to their conversations beyond CDC staff. "If you cannot trust me, then you can fire me," Monarez stated.
- Senators Jim Banks (R-IN) and Ashley Moody (R-FL) both asked questions about the political affiliations of Dr. Monarez's counsel she retained following her Aug. 27 firing.

- Dr. Monarez said that she did not discuss politics with her counsel and had not colluded with fellow CDC staff prior to her abrupt termination.
 - Chairman Cassidy chimed to explain that is entirely appropriate for someone with oversight concerns to contact the HELP Committee
- Senator Lisa Murkowski (R-AK) asked if Dr. Monarez was asked not to speak with career CDC officials.
 - Dr. Monarez stated she was directed by Secretary Kennedy to not speak to career officials during the Aug. 25 meetings.
- Senator Markwayne Mullin (R-OK) asked a series of questions relating to the conversations between Secretary Kennedy and Dr. Monarez on Aug. 25, claiming that he also had a voice recording of said meetings.
 - Dr. Monarez continued to assert her claim that Secretary Kennedy stated a lack of trust, and that she was fired for her resistance to accepting ACIP recommendations without a review of scientific evidence.
 - Senator Cassidy later chimed in to state that such evidence had not been shared with all Committee members, in violation of standing Committee rules.
 - *Senator Mullin later explained to reporters that he was mistaken in understanding that meetings had been recorded.*
- Senator Andy Kim (D-NJ) recirculated Secretary Kennedy's claim that he did not have a private meeting and did not force Dr. Monarez to accept ACIP recommendations without evidence. He asked if any other HHS officials attended the meeting.
 - Dr. Monarez explained that there were five other participants in addition to the Secretary, including the HHS Deputy Secretary, Chief of Staff, Deputy Chief of Staff, a member of the General Counsel staff.
- Senator Kim asked the witnesses to confirm that Secretary Kennedy essentially told them the child vaccine schedule *would* change in September
 - Dr. Monarez affirmed this statement.

Childhood vaccination schedule:

- Chairman Cassidy asked Dr. Houry who decided on the upcoming ACIP September meeting agenda.
 - Dr. Houry stated that the HHS Counselor and a senior advisor worked with CDC staff to develop the agenda.
- Senator Rand Paul (R-KY) asked for a medical reason to give hep B vaccines to newborns if mom is hep B negative and stated that kids should not be given vaccines that are not backed by scientific evidence.
 - Dr. Monarez agreed with the latter statement but reiterated that she would not commit to approving recommendations without evidence.
- Senator Patty Murray (D-WA) alluded to recent changes to CDC guidelines on COVID-19 vaccinations and asked what role the witnesses played in such decisions.

- Dr. Houry only learned of the change after viewing a Twitter video posted by the official HHS account, while still serving as the CDC's Chief Medical Officer. Dr. Houry said she was provided with the guidance, that HHS had a written memo that differed from the video announcement, and that she requested data but did not receive any.
 - Dr. Houry and Dr Monarez were not aware of any evidence recommending a change of age for the initial hep B dose for children.
- Senator Murray asked the witnesses if they are confident in trusting current ACIP recommendations.
 - Both witnesses had significant concerns with lack of public information regarding the meeting, while others in the medical community have voiced concerns with the new ACIP member's credentials.
- Senator Tammy Baldwin (D-WI) Asked what an increase in the diseases covered by vaccines to be reviewed by ACIP would mean for children.
 - Dr. Houry explained that these diseases, such as MMR and hep B, have long term consequences, we don't want children to die.
- Senator Marshall stated that the CDC recommends roughly 70 – 80 shots over a child's lifetime and asked the witnesses if they supported this viewpoint.
 - Dr. Monarez explained that the data associated with these recommendations has been validated and vetted and that parents should have opportunity to discuss with their physicians and pediatricians.
 - Senator Marshall also asked if the CDC should mandate these vaccinations, but Dr. monarez explained that the CDC only provides recommendations, not mandates.
- Senator Tim Kaine (D-VA) spoke about rising measles cases identified in his state, and that cuts to federal health programs hampered state and local responses to infectious diseases. He asked if Dr. Houry had ever personally briefed Secretary Kennedy on measles outbreaks across the country.
 - Dr. Houry did not, but we did speak to CDC political staff. She also explained that 80% of CDC funding goes out to state and local health departments, and that cuts for CDC will trickle down to state and local agencies' ability to respond.
- Senator Ed Markey (D-MA) spoke to the role of the hep B vaccine in reducing annual cases among Americans from 300,000 to 22,000. He asked Dr. Houry if she believes an ACIP-recommended change to the hep B vaccine would be based on a n objective review of data.
 - Dr. Houry does not believe this to be the case.
- Senator Markey followed up by asking if Secretary Kennedy's beliefs were driving the change to vaccine recommendations.
 - Dr. monarez said that is the concern. Dr. Houry received email from HHS political staff suggesting they looked at Hep B and hoped the hearing would make ACIP reconsider potential recommendations.
 - Dr. Monarez was also not asked to provide data on hep b for the upcoming acip meeting.

- Senator John Husted (R-OH) shared concerns about failure of the public health establishment to build public trust. He also spoke to the CDC's response to COVID-19, including masking guidance. He asked if parents with school aged children were endangering the lives of their children by not giving COVID-19 vaccines.
 - Dr. Monarez agreed that there was a need for public health officials to have productive conversations with people about the safety efficacy and necessity of vaccines.
 - However, Dr. Monarez also stated that the CDC does not make or enforce mandates, it only provides recommendations. She again spoke to the need for parents to speak with their pediatricians about necessary vaccinations.

Role of the CDC and U.S. Public Health Officials:

- Ranking Member Sanders asked about the long-term implications of CDC officials rubber stamping ACIP vaccine recommendations.
 - Dr. Monarez stated built career on scientific integrity and did not want to reduce access to lifesaving vaccines.
 - Dr. Houry stated that preventable diseases will return in the long run. She added that we're already seeing childhood vaccine rates decrease, and are now at an elevated risk for measles outbreaks. Staff cuts means less ready responders and visibility into global pathogen trends.
- Senator Susan Collins (R-ME) stated that turmoil at the CDC has undermined public confidence in the agency and asked questions regarding implications for public health if political appointees are in charge of recommendations.
 - Dr. Monarez stated that these are important discussions made by experts. A willingness to sign off on decisions without reviewing applicable evidence puts Americans in danger.
 - Dr. Houry added that HHS' response to measles outbreaks differed from previous infectious disease responses. CDC officials were never asked to brief the Secretary, but instead shared notes to leadership to refute Secretary Kennedy's claims regarding vaccines.
- Senator Baldwin asked about Secretary Kennedy's initiative to provide radical transparency into HHS, including specific instructions given to CDC officials regarding interactions with Congress.
 - Dr. Monarez stated that she reached out to the HELP Committee on Aug. 25 to voice her concerns. The Secretary was aware of this and concerned, later telling Dr. Monarez to never do it again.
 - Dr. Houry added that she believes the Secretary is advised by his own conspiracy theories. She finds his approach to working with scientific experts to be non-existent.
- Senator Marshall asked if there was doubt the witnesses could work with Secretary Kennedy.
 - Dr. Monarez stated that no, she's worked with politicians for 20 years. Data is always paramount in science and medicine.

- Senator Chris Murphy (D-CT) asked several questions regarding the precedence of recent turnover at the CDC. – this is an unprecedented moment. Is there any precedent for a new admin to dismiss the full ACIP board? -
 - The witnesses were not aware of any previous administration removing all members of ACIP previously. There is also no precedent for a CDC Director to be required to clear decisions with political staff or pre-approve recommendations without reviewing evidence.
- Senator Murphy also asked questions about the safety of CDC personnel after a gunman fired 180 shots at the CDC's campus in Atlanta.
 - Dr. Monarez shared concerns about the safety of CDC personnel and was subject to threats herself. She stated that misinformation will not only harm children but also exacerbate existing tensions.
 - Dr. Houry clarified that the gunman fired roughly 500 rounds, while 180 hit the building itself, adding that each bullet was meant for a person. Her staff wanted to remove their names off of published research as they fear for their lives. Currently, ACIP meetings don't have the names of subject matter experts presenting at meetings in order to protect staff.
- Senator John Hickenlooper (D-CO) asked several questions about vaccine access, as Secretary Kennedy claimed that everyone who wanted a COVID-19 vaccine could get one.
 - Dr. Monarez stated that her mother had difficulty accessing the vaccine in Virginia in recent days.
 - Dr. Monarez also spoke to her intentions to implement guardrails on ACIP recommendations, including transparency, accountability, and integrity. She wanted to require any info used by ACIP to be made available to public 6 weeks in advance of a meeting, to allow others to review the data. Dr. Monarez also encouraged Congress to foster transparency into these decisions, in line with Federal Advisory Committees Act guidelines.
- Senator Lisa Blunt-Rochester (D-DE) asked about Secretary Kennedy's allegations that former ACIP members as being plagued by conflicts of interest.
 - Dr Houry stated that CDC has publicly posted conflicts of interest of ACIP members for two decades and had a rule that any sort of bias meant a recusal from votes. Dr. Houry could not speak to the current makeup of the advisory committee.
 - Dr. Monarez hadn't interacted with the fired ACIP members but could not find reasonable justification for their removal.
- Senator Murkowski spoke to the vulnerability of the CDC and other public health institutions and asked what happens to the mission when public health experts are removed from their positions.
 - Dr. Houry stated that continuity is important, openness to change is important. She claimed to be the last career official left in the CDC's Office of the Director. The CDC does have career Center Directors but 80% are now in an acting capacity.
- Senator Kim asked about Secretary Kennedy's intentions in firing officials to meet his viewpoints.

- Dr. Monarez believes that officials who wouldn't reply would be replaced with their deputies. Secretary Kennedy would continue to fire and promote until someone in that position was willing to go along with his demands.

COVID-19 Response:

- Senator Rand Paul (R-KY) asked several questions relating the safety and efficacy of COVID-19 vaccines.
 - While Dr. Monarez and Dr. Houry claimed that the vaccine reduces transmission and death even among children under 18, while Senator Paul continued to dispute their claims.
 - Senator Paul also pointed to studies claiming that the vaccine increased risks of myocarditis among children.

Links

- [Hearing recording](#)