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## **Wyden Statement at Finance Committee Hearing on Nomination of O'Neill and Andres to be HHS Deputy Secretary and Congressional Liaison**

*As Prepared for Delivery*

It's been 82 days since Robert F. Kennedy Jr. was sworn in to be America's chief health officer. It's fair to say his tenure thus far has been nothing short of a disaster.

The United States is on track to experience the worst measles outbreak since 1992. As of Friday, there have been 935 cases reported across 30 states. Two children have died. Robert Kennedy continues to peddle lies and junk science that are dissuading parents from vaccinating their children. 96 percent of the cases are among unvaccinated individuals. Robert Kennedy continues to cherry pick scientific studies and twist them to promote his own viewpoint on issue after issue, from vaccines, to fluoride in drinking water, to autism.

Unfortunately, Mr. O'Neill, who has been nominated to serve as Mr. Kennedy's right hand man, has been cheering him on every step of the way, including as recently as last week when he told my staff that he thought Robert Kennedy was doing a "good" job on addressing the measles outbreak. I want members of this committee to stop and listen to Robert Kennedy's own vile words on Americans living with autism, quote, "these are kids who will never pay taxes, they'll never hold a job, they'll never play baseball, they'll never write a poem, they'll never go out on a date." He goes on to say that "autism destroys families."

His job is to speak to the American people about their health care. His words matter. When parents of a child with autism hear him say things like that, it matters.

I'm confident that every member of this committee has met with a family or an individual with autism. The things Robert Kennedy has said about these Americans is not only false, it demonstrates that he views those with autism as less than a whole person.

This reckless rhetoric is also stoking fear. Robert Kennedy is talking about creating a national registry for kids with autism. If you're a parent, what are you supposed to think when an individual who thinks "autism destroys families" also wants to create a national registry for their children?

It's bone-chilling behavior from someone responsible for every Americans' health and well-being, and the consequences are already coming into view. Parents who think their children might have autism are scared to seek a diagnosis or treatment out of fear of what this administration will do to them.

Democrats on this committee warned the public about the consequences of Robert Kennedy's bizarre views and blatant disregard for science.

It was equally clear that some Republicans on this committee shared those views. But that concern was not great enough to overcome the overwhelming pressure from Donald Trump and his allies to rush through the nomination.

All of that has taken place amid a sweeping and chaotic upheaval at the Department of Health and Human Services, where Mr. O'Neill is nominated to serve as the Deputy Secretary. This position amounts to the Chief Operating Officer at the agency.

Over the past several weeks, HHS has lost 20,000 workers. That ranges from cancer researchers, to those who help seniors access Meals on Wheels, to those who track death and injury rates for Americans. As one fired public health expert put it, "we will not know what's killing us."

Unsurprisingly, this meat cleaver approach resulted in essential personnel and critical research getting cut. That included fundamental national priorities, like eliminating lead exposure for children. Robert Kennedy has said as many as one in five fired workers at HHS could be reinstated while media reports confirm there are no such plans. Either Robert Kennedy has no idea what is going on in his own agency or he is lying, once again. I suspect both are true. Mr. O'Neill sounds like yet another yes-man for Trump and Kennedy.

It's worth noting that Mr. O'Neill's views made him too extreme to be confirmed to a position at the FDA during Donald Trump's first term in office. While historically the FDA evaluates products for safety and efficacy, Mr. O'Neill has stated that only safety should be considered. In effect, the FDA should be rubber-stamping drug approvals regardless of whether there's evidence that the drugs work. If Mr. O'Neill had his way, Americans would still be using "Benjamin Bye's Soothing Balmy Oils" to cure head and neck cancers.

The consequences of the Trump Republican health agenda on American families is in center focus as Republicans finalize their plans to cut hundreds of billions from Medicaid, which will terminate health insurance and Medicaid benefits for millions of Americans, including kids and seniors.

Before I wrap up, I want to touch on the nomination of Gary Andres to be the congressional liaison at HHS. Since Donald Trump's inauguration, senators on this side of the committee dais have not received a single substantive response to dozens of inquiries.

It seems clear that the majority has surrendered any pretense of congressional oversight, but in my state and the states of my Democratic colleagues, Americans are demanding answers. Robert Kennedy

promised “radical transparency” when he came before this committee, but what the country has received instead is radical secrecy.

Mr. Andres is going to be responsible for course-correcting on that front, and I hope there will be a bipartisan commitment to hold him accountable for that. In his current role, Mr. Andres released House Republicans’ wishlist of more than \$2 trillion in proposed Medicaid cuts and hundreds of billions more from programs that help families afford food, energy bills, and child care. Mr. Andres should also answer for this anti-family grab-bag of cuts targeting our country’s most vulnerable citizens.

A web version of this statement is [here](#).

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