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LETTERS

# The thought of RFK Jr. leading HHS rocks the public health world

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Robert F. Kennedy Jr. spoke with reporters in Philadelphia on Sept. 10. KENNY HOLSTON/NYT

## Mass. legislation would be a critical bulwark

As one of the oldest public health organizations in the country, the Massachusetts Public Health Alliance has witnessed dozens of presidential administrations and their government appointees. The news that President-elect Donald Trump has nominated Robert F. Kennedy Jr. to be secretary of health and human services is certainly one for

the history books ([“Kennedy is Trump’s pick for health post,”](#) Page A1, Nov. 15).

While one might find common ground in issues Kennedy has raised regarding access to healthy food and reducing harmful chemicals and pollutants, his overall disdain for the role of public health experts and his penchant for conspiracy theories rather than science are cause for deep concern.

The chaos and disinformation spread by the first Trump administration — from COVID-19 to climate change — threatened the health of our communities, especially those experiencing racism, poverty, and xenophobia. Proponents of public health saw the power of working in alliance with community groups to insist on policies that were data-driven, evidence-informed, community-centered, and focused on health equity.

As we write, [legislation to bolster local public health](#) awaits [Governor Maura Healey’s signature](#). The [State Action for Public Health Excellence Act](#) (SAPHE 2.0) ensures that municipal officials can protect the public’s health every day — in times of calm and crisis. It is a critical step for Massachusetts at a pivotal moment for our country.

Regardless of who ultimately heads HHS, working in alliance — across communities, demographics, and sectors — is essential to meeting the public health challenges of today and tomorrow.

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*The organization changed its name from the Massachusetts Public Health Association in September.*

## **She's lived through the pre-vaccine days. We can't go back.**

When the president-elect announced his plan to nominate Robert F. Kennedy Jr. to lead the Department of Health and Human Services, I recalled my father's frantic phone call, in 1960. "I'm calling about your brother," Dad said. "He might not make it."

I had just returned from my grandfather's funeral, which my brother, sick with measles, had missed. Dad also said that the doctor was worried about brain damage and that my Uncle George, who also had measles, was in an iron lung at the hospital. It was touch and go for days before my brother and uncle recovered.

My family celebrated when [vaccines for common childhood diseases](#) were created. We knew people crippled by polio; my brother and I had classmates whose mothers had rubella when pregnant and gave birth to children with disabilities. We heard about babies who died of whooping cough. My grandmother lost two of her siblings to diphtheria when she was a child.

Is this the world we want to return to? Have Americans forgotten how many died of COVID-19 before vaccines were available? It would be irresponsible and dangerous to put a vaccine denier such as Kennedy in charge of our country's health.

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