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The American Pope



Leo XIV breaks ground as first U.S.-born pontiff. Page 16A

SUNDAY, MAY 11, 2025 | COURIERJOURNAL.COM

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CHEMICALS, MOLD, BATS AND BROKEN BONES

WORKERS CONCERNED OVER SAFETY AT BLUEOVAL SK PLANT **10A**



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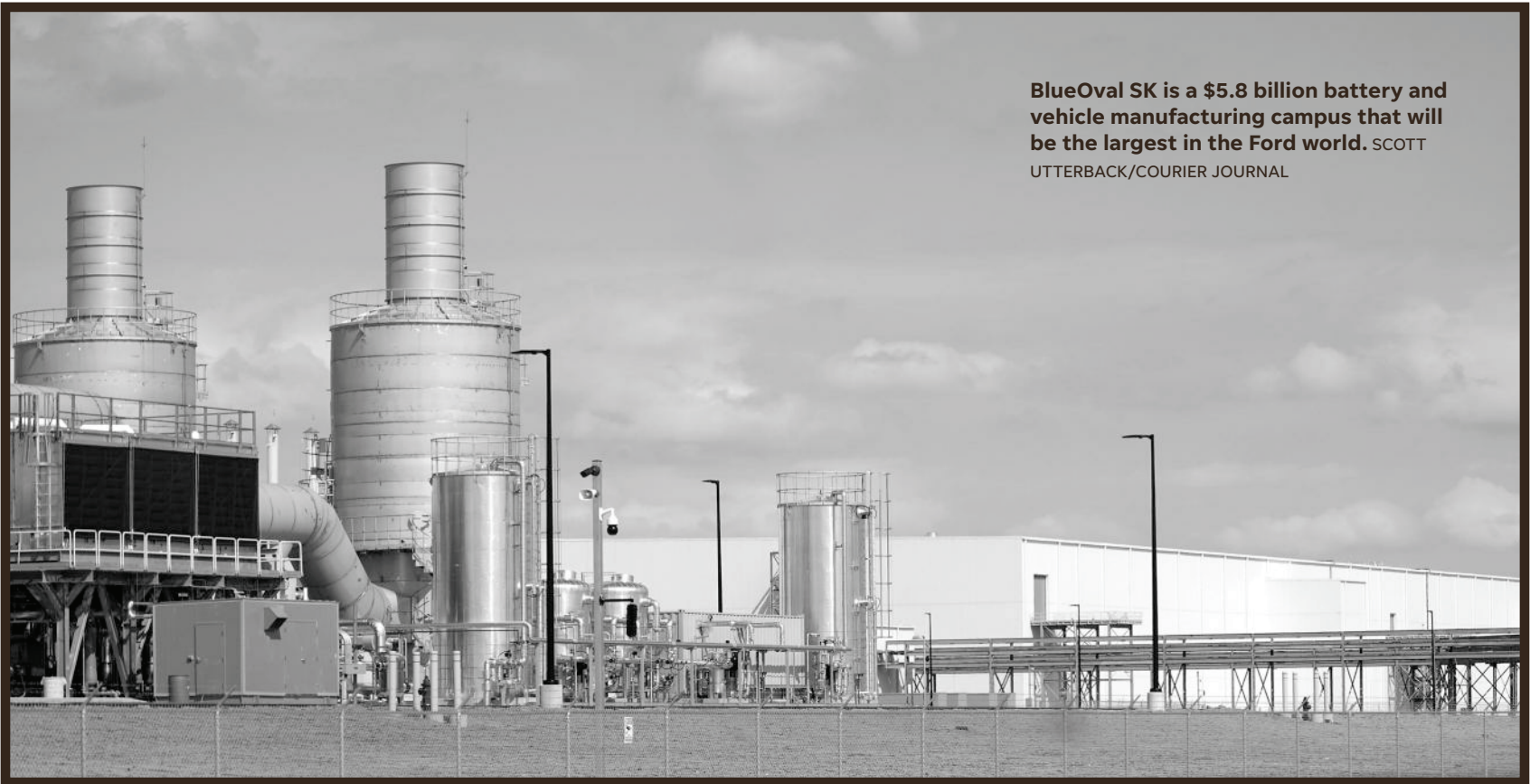
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BlueOval SK is a \$5.8 billion battery and vehicle manufacturing campus that will be the largest in the Ford world. SCOTT UTTERBACK/COURIER JOURNAL

CHEMICALS, MOLD AND BATS

Olivia Evans and Connor Giffin

Louisville Courier Journal | USA TODAY NETWORK

When Amanda Johnson, the first production supervisor hired at the massive BlueOval SK Battery Park, started her job in 2023, the single mom of a child with autism called it an “answered prayer.” The job provided a pay increase and an opportunity to play a role in the growing electric vehicle industry. In her 19 months at the plant, she went beyond her job description by creating tools to track cleaning and safety measures, advocating for other workers and making period bags for female coworkers during the construction phase, when only portable toilets were available. But in January, managers terminated Johnson’s at-will employment. She believes her firing was retaliation for speaking up about safety concerns, including workplace injuries and hospitalizations, and questioning management’s anti-union strategy in the new battery factory.

While currently seeking legal retribution through the National Labor Relations Board and the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission, she remains worried about the wellbeing of her former coworkers.

Employees have filed a slew of occupational safety and health complaints about the facility with authorities — often multiple per month — prompting state investigations. As of April 16, officials had open investigations related to 15 complaints.

The Courier Journal reviewed thousands of pages tied to those investigations, in addition to photos and employee-provided MyChart medical records.

The review found: dozens of workplace injuries; hospitalizations related to respiratory issues; unshakeable mold contamination; a bat-infested training facility; blocked emergency exit doors; and chemical exposure risks.

After two employees wrote an op-ed in the The Courier Journal describing their safety concerns at the plant, BlueOval SK began publishing adver-

A contract worker left a voicemail with state officials, describing sickness and lung irritation from mold in the plant, and said his supervisor told him, “Don’t tell anybody.”

tisements on Facebook and Instagram, featuring an unidentified person calling some of the workers’ claims in the piece “inaccuracies” and “blatant lies.”

Contractors and BlueOval SK workers said they feared termination for speaking up or filing complaints to state labor officials. One complainant “stated he would like to be kept anonymous to the company, because they terminate anyone who reports any issues,” state records show.

“If you want to stay employed, you do what you’re told,” Chad Johnson, who works in the plant’s quality module lab, told The Courier Journal.

State law prohibits discrimination or termination of workers for filing labor complaints or requesting a state inspection.

A contract worker left a voicemail with state officials, describing sickness and lung irritation from mold in the plant, and said his supervisor told him, “Don’t tell anybody.”

BlueOval SK has publicly denied

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The Blue Oval SK Battery Park under construction in Glendale in July 2024. MICHAEL CLEVENGER AND SAM UPSHAW JR./COURIER JOURNAL

With support from substantial federal and state subsidies, BlueOval SK is expected to create 5,000 jobs. SCOTT UTTERBACK/COURIER JOURNAL



BlueOval SK is a \$5.8 billion vehicle battery manufacturing campus in Glendale, Kentucky. SCOTT UTTERBACK/COURIER JOURNAL

Gov. Andy Beshear has touted BlueOval SK as a bridge to the middle class for thousands of Kentuckians. OFFICE OF GOV. ANDY BESHEAR

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workers' assertions of unsafe conditions. In a statement, spokesperson Mallory Cooke said the company "follows strict federal, state, and local regulations to ensure our facilities are safe for employees and the surrounding communities."

"BlueOval SK regularly evaluates safety practices and has an open-door policy with team members," Cooke said. "Concerns are always investigated and addressed."

The enormous Hardin County plant is the product of a joint venture between Ford Motor Co. and SK On to produce electric vehicle batteries.

SK On is part of the larger SK Group — the second-largest conglomerate in South Korea, overseeing more than 175 different companies. SK has built a sprawling, multinational enterprise around energy, pharmaceuticals, telecommunications and other industries.

At a cost of \$5.8 billion, the Hardin County plant is poised to be a center of gravity for Kentucky's nascent EV industry, and represents the largest single economic development project in Kentucky history.

With support from substantial federal and state subsidies, it's expected to create 5,000 jobs.

For Gov. Andy Beshear, who has described electric vehicles as the future of the auto industry, the project is a point of pride. He has touted it as a bridge to the middle class for thousands of Kentuckians.

"Providing good-paying jobs and world-class educational opportunities are the keys to creating the better Kentucky we all desperately want for our kids and our grandkids," Beshear said in 2022 at the plant's groundbreaking. "And all that comes together with a project of this magnitude."

Workers who spoke with The Courier Journal also described a feeling of excitement and pride in being part of a new frontier in Kentucky's storied automotive industry, helping to power the promised "electric vehicle revolution."

"I was so excited to be part of Ford Motor Co. in some way," said Bill Wilmoth, who works in formation production at the battery park. "It didn't take long before those happy feelings just evaporated."

Known chemical risks, and some unknown

Workers' occupational safety complaints started trickling in at the battery park well before the dust of con-



BlueOval SK Battery Park in Glendale, the future home of Ford's electric vehicle battery production, opened its job training center May 8, 2024. OFFICE OF GOV. ANDY BESHEAR

struction had settled.

But as the plant prepares to start production this year, the risks of exposure to the chemical ingredients of electric vehicle batteries have become a central concern.

In interviews and in state records, workers described their concerns about handling hazardous chemicals with risks they did not fully understand. BlueOval SK has denied assertions of unsafe conditions.

An internal investigation by the company — just a single page buried in thousands of pages of state records — shows at least one toxic chemical spill has already occurred in the plant.

The spill involved n-Methylpyrrolidone, or NMP. It's a solvent used in electrode production, a key part of lithium-ion EV batteries. The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency has identified a range of toxic effects from exposure to NMP, including organ damage and harm to reproductive health and the nervous system.

In October, during maintenance work in the plant, NMP "rushed out" of an open pipe, traveling "roughly 2 meters in all directions," according to BlueOval SK's initial investigation report. "As an immediate reaction, a maintenance member used their hand to stop flow of NMP," before a pressure gauge could be refastened.

An internal analysis of the incident described a lack of "preparations for spills or leaks," among other missteps.

Industry groups say NMP is an irreplaceable ingredient for the nation's

growing battery production sector. But workers are afraid of how it could be affecting their health — a valid concern, according to EPA scientists, who have determined NMP "presents unreasonable risk to human health" in many use cases.

"I understand that the use of NMP is not uncommon," said Halee Hadfield, an incoming quality control worker, but "we're dealing with pure NMP. This is not a joke."

NMP is not the only hazardous material that has workers concerned. The month after the spill, workers filed complaints with the Kentucky Occupational Safety and Health Program, describing gallons of "unknown, unlabeled chemical containers" lying around the plant "on a daily basis."

Workers described it as a chemical slurry, "a black tarry liquid," and said the company had not provided safety data sheets for the slurry — a standard tool for communicating the risks of a hazardous material to the workers handling it.

In interviews with The Courier Journal, current and former BlueOval SK employees said the plant's policies for personal protective equipment, or PPE, were inadequate for settings with highly toxic chemicals and heavy metals. While PPE is provided, some workers said it is often not sufficient to protect worker health.

The company has denied this. Cooke, the BlueOval SK spokesperson, has previously called claims about inadequate PPE policy "not only false, but malicious," and in a statement to The Courier Journal said all employees "are provided PPE and instructed on how it is to be properly worn for optimal protection."

Hadfield said she feels uneasy about her persistent exposure to a range of chemicals in the plant, and what she described as insufficient protection for workers.

"The way that this is happening, I may as well just take some of the cathode powder and mix it in with deionized water and just ... drink it," she

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"Providing good-paying jobs and world-class educational opportunities are the keys to creating the better Kentucky we all desperately want for our kids and our grandkids. And all that comes together with a project of this magnitude."

Gov. Andy Beshear



Workers have expressed concerns about what could happen if stricter safety measures aren't enacted at the battery plant. SCOTT UTTERBACK/COURIER JOURNAL

Safety

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said.

Other workers expressed concerns about what could happen if stricter safety measures aren't enacted at the battery plant.

"It's most worrisome to me that the employees at BlueOval SK LLC are around dangerous chemicals, high fire risk product, and are not being informed or trained to the degree that they need to be on these subjects," Cody Williams, a former module quality supervisor, wrote in a letter shared with The Courier Journal.

"Someone is either going to get sick with a serious medical condition or get severely injured and possibly die," he wrote, "just because they didn't truly understand the product or chemical they're expected to work with on a daily basis."

Injuries, persistent mold issues and a bat infestation

Since construction started at the plant in December 2022, more than 30 worker injuries have been reported, including those suffered by BlueOval SK employees and contractors, state records show.

Injuries ranged from minor — insect bites and pulled muscles — to more serious incidents, such as broken bones and lacerations.

Amanda Johnson recounted how a coworker "tripped and fell over a scaffold," leading to a broken hip, which was also described in records obtained by The Courier Journal.

"I will always remember that day," said Johnson, who was the supervisor in charge. "It was heart-

breaking..."

As construction-related injuries accumulated, employees were also raising alarms about mold contamination, introduced to the plant via equipment crates shipped from overseas.

Even after mold contamination was reported, the contractor, Abel Construction, "continued with normal operating procedures for a couple of months before implementing cleaning solutions" and personal protective equipment for workers, state investigators found.

"Many employees were getting ill and sought medical treatment at emergency rooms and urgent care centers," the state found through employee interviews. "All of the ill employees had experienced similar respiratory issues and many were prescribed antibiotics for bacterial infections."

In May 2024, the state issued a citation to Abel with a penalty of less than \$2,000. The contractor contested the state's findings, bringing the issue before a state review commission.

"Safety remains our utmost priority, reflected in our extensive safety program," said Scott Yaroma, director of safety for Abel, in a statement, adding the company has "embraced a collaborative and communicative approach with OSHA."

As complaints have continued to roll in from workers, state officials — including the governor — have stopped short of characterizing workers' safety concerns at the plant as a crisis.

"The number of complaints received is not unexpected," said Jill Midkiff, a spokesperson for the Kentucky Education and Labor Cabinet, based on "the scope of the project, number of workers and subcontractor companies on site,

"Never in my life did I expect to be a bat wrangler."

Amanda Johnson
former employee

The Blue Oval SK Battery Park under construction near I-65 in Glendale on July 25, 2024. SAM UPSHAW JR./COURIER JOURNAL

and the cost of the project."

Midkiff also stressed the state's commitment to keeping employers in compliance and "ensuring that all Kentucky workers have a safe and healthy workplace."

In November 2024, when asked during a regular weekly press conference for an update on the health concerns, such as the mold at the battery park, Beshear said, "I believe they've all come back OK, or some issues that are being worked through, but I don't think we found any issues that would endanger the health of the workers."

Employees said the mold problem still hadn't subsided as of early this year. Upon returning to the plant in late December 2024 from a holiday break, Wilmoth, the employee who works in formation production at the battery park, was hit with a moldy, mildew smell.

"This would knock you down," he said.

After two days back at work, Wilmoth noticed his eyes and throat were burning. He reported these symptoms and saw an on-site nurse who recommended he see a doctor to be tested for flu and COVID-19.

After seeing a Baptist Health provider, Wilmoth received a negative result for both flu and COVID-19 and was diagnosed with "Exposure to mold," according to medical records he shared.

As of mid-April, Cooke with BlueOval SK said the mold issue "has been remediated and has no impact on BlueOval SK employees or the buildings themselves."

Meanwhile, some employees were also spending time in a bat-infested training center.

Before working in the plant, many employees spent days in the temporary training center set up in a nearby Hardin County middle school. They soon discovered bats in the building.

"Never in my life did I expect to be a bat wrangler," Amanda Johnson said.

Photos reviewed by The Courier Journal show bats lying on the ground, clinging to a pair of work boots, and hanging from water-damaged ceiling tile.

"I had a lot of run ins with bats — big bats — like I didn't think bats could be that big," she said.

In addition, Barton Malow, one of the site's primary contractors, was cited for blocking emergency exit doors at the plant — despite past bomb threats and workers raising concerns about chemical and fire safety.

Barton Malow also contested the penalties, records show.

Workers believe health issues are tied to their job

Through interviews and by sharing medical records, BlueOval SK workers outlined how working conditions at the Glendale plant could be affecting their health.

"My health took a drastic turn when I started going in the plant every day," Amanda Johnson told The Courier Journal.

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During her time working at the plant, she had to visit a doctor repeatedly. She was diagnosed by a Baptist Health provider with allergic rhinitis and developed mild intermittent asthma, medical records show.

Her provider prescribed her an inhaler for the first time in her life. She also had to start taking three different allergy medicines and two migraine medicines to manage her symptoms.

Within weeks of her termination, Amanda Johnson said via email, "I have completely stopped using my inhaler, my anxiety and depression has improved, and my migraines have dramatically decreased! Physically and emotionally, I feel so much better, but as happy as I am about that, my concern for my former coworkers grows."

A note from her provider in a medical record from March 17 states, "Patient has recently lost her job but since that her migraines, allergies, and asthma has improved."

Hadfield, 26, the youngest of the workers The Courier Journal interviewed, retains a detailed list on her phone of all the potentially hazardous materials she encounters at work.

"I want to do something that's cool," Hadfield said of her reasons for taking the BlueOval SK job. "I knew that this was probably going to be cool, and now I'm looking at it like ... am I going to wake up at 36 with a cough I can't get rid of, and go to the doctor just to be told, 'You're not going to live more than six, eight months because you have cancer from graphite and other heavy metals having been absorbed into your skin?'"

Similar issues at SK Battery America plant in Georgia

Occupational safety issues workers have raised at the plant in Glendale appear similar to labor violations already identified by offi-



BlueOval SK workers have been pushing to unionize the Glendale plant, in hopes the UAW can help demand changes and accountability. BlueOval SK is discouraging unionization. SCOTT UTTERBACK/COURIER JOURNAL

In Kentucky, safety concerns have been a driving factor in workers' efforts to unionize the Glendale plant with the United Auto Workers. But BlueOval SK has worked hard to curb this effort.

cial at another plant tied to the SK brand, The Courier Journal found.

In January 2024, SK Battery America in Georgia, a subsidiary of SK On, was cited by OSHA for six serious violations, racking up more than \$70,000 in fines.

Violations included employee exposure to respiratory hazards such as cobalt, nickel and manganese without proper respirators, failing to provide access to eye-wash stations and emergency showers, and subjecting employees to continuous noise levels exceeding the regulated limit and leaving workers who handle certain chemicals vulnerable to respiratory hazards by not providing proper protection.

Months later, the Georgia location was once again cited for five serious violations amounting to more than \$77,000 in fines for exposing workers to inhalation hazards, failing to train on-site emergency responders for lithium battery fires, failing to train workers on hazardous chemicals in their workspaces and more.

Workers push to unionize Glendale plant

In Kentucky, safety concerns have been a driving factor in workers' efforts to unionize the Glendale plant with the United Auto Workers.

But BlueOval SK has worked hard to curb this effort.

Through advertisements on social media, in addition to paper flyers and other communication, the company has sought to convey a simple message: Working in the plant is safe, and the UAW is an unwelcome distraction.

"Bringing in a union would slow progress, force new training, and reset everything we've built," a BlueOval SK ad says. "Don't let unnecessary changes hold us back."

But some workers are hoping the UAW can help demand changes at the plant and accountability over safety.

"If you're not pro-union when you go there, it won't take very long," Chad Johnson said, "once you see what you have to put up with."

Contact business reporter Olivia Evans at oevans@courier-journal.com or on X at [@oliviamevans](https://twitter.com/oliviamevans). Connor Giffin is an environmental reporter at The Courier Journal. Reach him at cgiffin@gannett.com or on X [@byconnorgiffin](https://twitter.com/byconnorgiffin).

New surgeon general pick stirs debate

Means known for her focus on chronic disease

Savannah Kuchar, Kayla Jimenez and Swapna Venugopal Ramaswamy
USA TODAY

President Donald Trump on May 7 announced a new pick for U.S. surgeon general, naming Dr. Casey Means, a Stanford-educated ally of Health and Human Services Secretary Robert F. Kennedy Jr. with a large online following for her commentary on chronic diseases.

It was a decision that quickly sparked drama among some of Trump's supporters, skepticism from some people who practice traditional medicine and cheers from many of her online followers.

"Casey has impeccable 'MAHA' credentials," Trump wrote in a May 8 Truth Social post referencing Kennedy's "Make America Healthy Again" slogan. "Her academic achievements, together with her life's work, are absolutely outstanding. Dr. Casey Means has the potential to be one of the finest Surgeon Generals in United States History."

Means was tapped at the same time Trump pulled his first pick for the role, Dr. Janette Nesheiwat.

According to a source familiar with the president's decision, Nesheiwat's previous positions on masking, social distancing and her support of COVID-19 vaccines do not mesh well with the MAHA vision. In his social media post, the president said Nesheiwat will work with Kennedy "in another capacity."

Trump said he doesn't know Means personally and took her on Kennedy's recommendation.

"Because Bobby thought she was fantastic," he said, calling her a "brilliant woman."

Means, a 37-year-old physician, is also a New York Times bestselling author with a large online presence and following. The surgeon general appointee had 765,000 Instagram followers on May 8.

Nesheiwat, the president's first choice for surgeon general, had faced sharp criticism from conservative podcast host Laura Loomer.



The Means siblings are advocates for the "Make America Healthy Again" platform. OLIVER CONTRERAS/AFP VIA GETTY IMAGES FILE

Now, Means too has caught the ire of the MAGA activist and Trump ally.

"MAHA is literally being taken over by Marxists and Grifters," Loomer wrote on X early May 8, amid a series of posts, many of which called Means out by name. "The entire MAHA movement is being taken over by Marxist Trump haters. It's a full-fledged vetting crisis."

Nicole Shanahan, Kennedy's previous 2024 running mate, expressed her disappointment with the nomination in a post splitting with Trump and Kennedy.

"Doesn't make any sense," Shanahan wrote on May 7. "I was promised that if I supported RFK Jr. in his Senate confirmation that neither of these siblings would be working under HHS or in an appointment (and that people much more qualified would be)."

"I don't know if RFK very clearly lied to me, or what is going on," she continued, adding, "With regards to the siblings, there is something very artificial and aggressive about them."

Means graduated from the Stanford University School of Medicine and pursued a surgical residency at Oregon Health & Science University. She dropped out of the residency program

and later founded Levels, a glucose monitoring tech company which claims to help people see how food impacts their health with "AI-powered food logging" and "habit tracking."

"I love using Levels as my personal food journal (even when I'm not using a glucose monitor) so I can make sure I'm staying accountable to my goals," Means wrote on the company's website. "It makes knowing if you're hitting your goals for protein and fiber (and other macros you want to track) completely effortless."

She is the sister of Calley Means, a close adviser and outspoken supporter of Kennedy. The siblings are advocates for Kennedy's focus on addressing chronic diseases and have championed his "Make America Healthy Again" platform.

On his website, Calley Means says his mission is to steer more health care dollars to "incentivize metabolic habits at the root of disease," including healthy food, exercise, sleep and stress management. In a recent interview with Politico, Calley Means said Kennedy has taken on a department that has "utterly failed" and defended recent mass workforce reductions at the Department of

Health and Human Services and the \$1.8 billion in funding cuts from the National Institutes of Health's budget.

"The FDA completely boxes out any innovation. It's a tool for large companies to get their large drugs approved, with very little pathways for new therapeutics, AI therapeutics - therapeutics that actually can help you diagnose and understand what's going on inside your body and be more preventive," he said. "These institutions are broken."

The siblings co-authored the 2024 book "Good Energy: The Surprising Connection Between Metabolism and Limitless Health" about the rise of chronic disease.

Means, the surgeon general appointee, said that she wrote the book because "the metabolic health crisis is the biggest threat we face" in an Instagram post from last August.

"The biggest lie in healthcare is that type 2 diabetes, cancer, heart disease, dementia, Alzheimer's, depression, arthritis, infertility and more are totally different diseases requiring separate doctors and pills for like," she wrote in the post. "The siloing of chronic disease has been the costliest mistake in the history of modern medicine."

The caption was accompanied by a photo of her with Andrew Huberman, who is a professor of neurobiology and ophthalmology at Stanford University and host of the popular Huberman Lab podcast.

Means and her brother gained attention after an appearance on Tucker Carlson's podcast last August and have since appeared on several other popular podcasts including Huberman's and Joe Rogan's.

On Rogan's podcast, Casey Means said she wants Americans to be able to speak about how to get on top of metabolic health "without the fear of being called a totally, alt-right crazy person for even talking about the things."

The siblings said their mother died of stage 4 pancreatic cancer weeks after receiving the diagnosis and their experience with attempts to get her treatment that would keep her alive had led them to question the health care system since, according to Stat, an online publication with reporting on health and medicine.