



Congress compels the Trump Administration to spend science and health funding

Proposals for huge cuts to NIH and CDC budgets have been rejected, to the relief of scientists. Susan Jaffe reports from Washington, DC.

A budget battle between US Congress and the White House has ended with a rare rebuke. A bipartisan majority in Congress rejected the Trump Administration's request to cut the 2026 budget of the National Institutes of Health (NIH) by 40% compared with last year, and to slash nearly 50% from the budget of the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC)—both agencies are part of the Department of Health and Human Services (HHS). President Donald Trump signed the budget legislation into law on Feb 3. However, the relief of many research scientists and their supporters has given way to a new concern: can the Administration be trusted to spend funds as Congress intended—especially money it did not request for programmes it did not want?

"We are very thankful for what Congress did for science", said Walter Leal, a distinguished Professor of Biochemistry at the University of California, Davis. Last year, Leal helped organise a letter to Congress from 80 Nobel Laureates and more than 3200 other members of the National Academy of Sciences. They warned that the Trump Administration's budget cuts could increase "the risks of economic declines, weakened US competitiveness, disruption of our educational system, loss of scientific talent, and threats to public health and national security".

Senator Patty Murray, of Washington state and the Vice Chair of the Senate Appropriations Committee, told *The Lancet* that: "Destroying the CDC and defunding cancer research were bright red lines for my Democratic colleagues and me, and the final bill we negotiated outright rejects \$33 billion in reckless cuts that President Trump

and [HHS] Secretary Kennedy were pushing. I have no illusion that this bill alone will stop Secretary Kennedy's non-stop attacks on our health system, but protecting these key funds will save lives and—importantly—passing this bill helps ensure that funds must be spent as Congress intends."

The budget law includes about \$48 billion for NIH funding, about \$415 million more than it received during the fiscal year ending Sept 30, 2025, and nearly 40% more than the Administration's \$28 billion request. The CDC received \$9.2 billion, \$5 billion more than the Administration requested. Even NIH Director Jay Bhattacharya, a Trump appointee, was grateful that Congress gave NIH a pay rise. "Congress and the [Administration's] budget folks fight over the exact amount of the budget, and my job is to take the budget that we get", he told *The New York Times*. "And I'm actually quite delighted that Congress just voted through the House a bill to fund the NIH at higher levels than it did last year."

In addition to rejecting the Administration's cuts, the law also prohibits NIH from taking a backdoor approach to limiting research grants. For example, it blocks implementation of a policy announced last year that would provide multiyear grants in a one-time lump sum. That strategy would not leave enough money promised to all grantees. As a result, 2000 fewer grants were funded in the fiscal year ending Sept 30, 2025, according to Senator Murray.

"Even if we're funding the most excellent researchers and the most novel proposals, we're still funding less research", said Jennifer Zeitzer, Deputy Executive Director at the Federation of

American Societies for Experimental Biology. And when grants are limited, younger investigators and early-career researchers are less likely to get funded, jeopardising future scientific discoveries, she said.

The law also blocks the Administration from allocating no more than 15% of a grant to indirect research costs, such as administrative, operating, and other overhead expenses. After 22 states sued HHS to eliminate the cap, a federal judge ordered a temporary halt.

Lawmakers added several other measures in the budget law and its accompanying 211-page joint explanatory statement to help ensure the funds get to the right place. These directives include such details as deadlines for spending specific amounts and restraints on the Administration's ability to transfer money.

Congress added a provision in the budget law requiring HHS to have enough staff to carry out "in a timely manner" the "programmes, projects, and activities" Congress has funded. This comes after the Trump Administration recently confirmed that more than 17 000 HHS employees left the government last year due to early retirement incentives and layoffs. Another provision states that at least 60 days before reorganising or eliminating parts of the CDC, the HHS Secretary must give Congress a detailed plan justifying the changes.

The budget law does not explicitly address the Administration's plan to reorganise NIH by reducing its 27 institutes and centres to eight, among other changes. However, it provides funds to more than a dozen divisions that the Administration

did not request, possibly because it intended to eliminate them or curtail their functions. These divisions included institutes and centres devoted to mental health, human genome research, complementary and integrated health, and minority health and health disparities.

The Administration's budget request eliminated money for the CDC's global health programmes. However, the budget law includes \$693 million—the same amount as last year—including money for the Global HIV/AIDS programme, which must be maintained through to September, 2027. The law's explanatory statement also contains strict instructions directing the Administration to spend the funds at the specified levels, said Jennifer Kates, Senior Vice President and Director of the Global and Public Health Policy Program at KFF. This statement also tells the Administration that its directives are legally binding. However, Kates said that it is not clear whether "Congress's steps are enough to prevent the Administration from attempting to repeat some of what happened last year, when it reduced and even cancelled congressionally appropriated funding to many programmes".

Significantly absent from the budget was the Administration for Healthy Americans, a new department within HHS championed by Secretary Robert F Kennedy Jr to improve efficiency that would include parts of CDC and other agencies. Also missing was any funding for Kennedy's Make America Healthy initiative.

Despite the law's bipartisan congressional support, Leal and others are not confident that it can prevent future reductions in the science and health enterprise. "There are so many things that can go wrong", he said.

"Like all advocates, we need to stay vigilant to ensure that staff shortages, vacancies in the advisory councils that review grants, and other factors don't delay or derail the grant-making

process", said Eleanor Dehoney, Senior Vice President, Policy and Advocacy at Research!America, an alliance of research institutes, medical centres, scientific societies, and patient advocacy groups. "This new funding measure is not a panacea; it's a step forward. People are suffering needlessly from diseases we can overcome. We should be running, not stumbling, toward solutions."

A continuing hiring freeze and the decimation of the CDC workforce has left the agency severely understaffed, said Daniel Jernigan, former Director of the CDC's National Center for Emerging and Zoonotic Infectious Diseases. Jernigan was one of several

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top CDC officials who resigned in protest after Kennedy fired CDC Director Susan Monarez in August, 2025. Much of CDC's funding goes to state health departments that Jernigan said require technical support, guidance, and oversight from CDC. "Even if CDC has a mandate from Congress, if they cannot hire, if they don't have people to get the money out, if they can't travel to verify the oversight, programme implementation is not going to happen the way it used to—or at all", he said.

Hiring experienced people for CDC may be problematic, said Demetre Daskalakis, former Director of the CDC's National Center for Immunization and Respiratory Diseases, who also resigned after Monarez's dismissal. Last year's funding and staff cuts "disrupted the careers of thousands of people

because of capricious decisions that are really about retribution", Daskalakis said. Many of his friends who held mid-level or executive positions in the federal government told him they would not return if they had the opportunity. Some people at HHS who were let go were asked to return, and when they did, they were fired a second time, Daskalakis recalled. If the government's goal "is to drive people away from federal service, they're doing a great job", he said.

Although the US Constitution gives Congress authority to decide how to spend taxpayers' money, Trump officials have insisted they can rescind, cancel, or impound funding for projects that do not comply with Administration policies. Litigation may be the only way to resolve the conflict, said Dorit Reiss, Professor of Law at UC Law San Francisco. "A lot of these lawsuits will win because the Administration is cutting corners and they're not following the rules."

Administration officials have not commented publicly on the increased funds for NIH and CDC. Less than a week after President Trump signed the budget legislation into law, HHS signalled that it would not be bound by some congressional spending mandates. HHS announced it was rescinding \$600 million for public health programmes in four states, and claimed that these activities conflict with agency priorities. Some of the funds were part of the CDC budget that Congress had just approved and included grants aimed at preventing HIV and other sexually transmitted diseases. The four states—all led by Democratic governors—sued HHS and won a temporary court order on Feb 12 preserving the grants. "Agencies cannot pursue the policy objectives of the executive branch through the power of the purse", wrote federal district court Judge Manish Shah.

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For more on Monarez's dismissal see [World Report Lancet 2025; 406:1074-75](#)