Budget Talks for Fiscal Year 2020 Include Increased HIV Funds

But a congressional fight over a disaster relief bill for Puerto Rico doesn't bode well for HIV spending.

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Although the House is surprisingly on-schedule in producing appropriations legislation, a separate funding bill foreshadows potentially difficult reconciliations with the Senate when fiscal year 2020 spending is debated.

A disaster relief bill, intended to grant new money to areas of the country experiencing climate-related emergencies, has been stalling in the Senate for several months in partisan gridlock over funding to support Puerto Ricans recovering from several devastating hurricane seasons. Many Republicans contend that the island has already received enough federal money, while Democrats are holding out for a bill that recognizes Puerto Ricans as American citizens and supports them accordingly and in proportion with other areas' relief funding. The partisan contention highlights some Senate Republicans' unwavering loyalty to President Trump, who vehemently opposes additional support to Puerto Rico — an opposition which Senator Patrick Leahy (D-VT), the top Democratic appropriator in the Senate, suggests stems from racism: "The White House for some reason is opposed to the people who are in Puerto Rico, and I think it's racist."

Because party leaders do not foresee passing many pieces of legislation in the current Congress, lawmakers see this disaster response funding as one of few opportunities to either seek new funding for their states or include policy riders on various topics. For the House's part, Representatives are expected to vote on their own version of their disaster relief bill that includes $600 million in nutrition assistance for Puerto Rico and $3 billion to address flooding in the Midwest.

Meanwhile, fiscal year 2020 discussions are gearing up in earnest, with the House Appropriations Committee approving the subcommittees' spending levels, called 302(b) allocations, as well as the first of the twelve appropriations bills — this year, first up was Labor, Health and Human Services, Education, and Related Agencies (L-HHS), which covers most funding for domestic HIV prevention and care programs. Despite impending sequestration set to be enacted at the end of this fiscal year if Congress does not reach a budget deal, the L-HHS bill proposes elevated spending levels and incorporates the Administration's Ending the Epidemic: A Plan for America, reflected in increases for many programs, including a $116 million increase to the Ryan White Program, as

well as an additional $155 million to the NIH Office of AIDS Research, among other public health and HIV-specific increases.

The L-HHS bill also reflects House Democrats' policy priorities aside from their funding ones. HIV Caucus Chair and long-time reproductive and sexual wellness advocate Representative Barbara Lee (D-CA-13) introduced an amendment prohibiting funds being used to implement the Trump Administration's new "conscience rule," which was passed on a vote of 30 to 23. Further, a rider barring use of federal funds to purchase syringes, a significant barrier to the work of syringe services programs, was removed.

AIDS United strongly supports additional recovery funding for Puerto Rico and will continue to work with allies in Congress to pass legislation, both disaster relief and appropriations, that supports people impacted by HIV and the programs and institutions that serve them. Check back regularly to the AIDS United Policy Updates for all the latest on HIV funding and legislation.

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