Securing HIV Funds Amid National Plans to Fight the New Coronavirus

The emerging health crisis sidetracks lawmakers working on the upcoming federal budget.

February 28, 2020 By AIDS United

Federal appropriators—those who put together the federal budget—should have had an easy appropriations course for the upcoming fiscal year, FY 2021, with top-line levels established in last year's Bipartisan Budget Act. But the emergence of the new coronavirus—and the funding needed to prepare health departments and communities for its impact—is throwing a wrench into Congress's moderately well-laid plans

On Monday, February 24, the White House requested $2.5 billion of supplemental funding to address the new coronavirus, half of which would be repurposed from other federal funding streams. House Democrats immediately rejected the proposal on two grounds: first, that it would be insufficient to support local health officials and business already affected by the burgeoning pandemic, and second, that it would allow the Trump administration too much authority to reshuffle already-appropriated funds—a tactic that has been used by the administration, much to appropriators' displeasure, to support border wall funding in recent years. Democratic lawmakers saw the administration's proposal to gut yet-unspent Ebola response funds as particularly egregious.

House Appropriations Committee Chair Nita Lowey (NY-17-D) assured that the House would be drafting a new spending package quickly in response, one that "fully addresses this global emergency without allowing this administration to steal from other necessary programs." The Coalition for Health Funding outlined Speaker Nancy Pelosi (D-CA-12) and Senate Minority Leader Chuck Schumer's (D-NY) requirements for a package that Democrats in both chambers would accept:

1. New funds should not be transferred to anything other than coronavirus and fighting infectious disease

2. Vaccines should be affordable and accessible to all who need them.

3. Interest free loans should be made available to businesses affected by the outbreak.

4. State and local governments should be reimbursed for costs incurred while assisting federal response to the new coronavirus outbreak.

Other appropriations discussions regarding FY 2021 appropriations outside of emergency funding bills will likely be stalled as a result of this partisan approach to public health response; however, the House Labor, Health and Human Services, Education, and Related Agencies—where most domestic HIV funding is housed—appropriations subcommittee continued business as usual this week, holding a hearing featuring HHS Secretary Alex Azar to discuss the department's budget request for the coming fiscal year.

AIDS United will continue to work with Congressional allies to advocate for adequate funding for the communities across the country doing the vital work of HIV care and prevention to end the domestic epidemic. We are hopeful that, despite the issues surrounding the coronavirus and the difficulties of increasing spending during an election year, that Congressional appropriators will find a way to include the $716 million in funding asks from the Trump administration for their Ending the HIV Epidemic initiative while also rejecting that same budget's $80 million cut to the Housing Opportunities for People With AIDS program, as well as catastrophic reductions in funding for social safety net programs and health research at the National Institutes of Health.

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