Still Behind Schedule, the House 2018 Budget Lurches Forward

Domestic programs, including those for HIV, seem pitted against defense spending as a government shutdown looms October 1.

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In the past week Congress has made significant progress toward advancing its Fiscal Year 2018 appropriations legislation, but they are still months behind schedule. The August recess is now at hand, and they have yet to pass a budget resolution. After considerable back and forth between House Republican leadership and the two poles of their party, the GOP budget resolution, H. Con. Res. 71, is finally headed to the floor, albeit probably not until September.

In the meantime, House appropriators finally passed a “minibus” package of legislation; this includes funding for the Department of Defense and the Intelligence Community, the Department of Veterans Affairs, the Department of Energy, and the Legislative Branch. This vote, which was taken on Thursday along party lines 235-192, clears a path for consideration of other FY2018 appropriations measures, but also suggests that there is no real viable path for the legislation in the Senate, where Republicans would need help from their Democratic colleagues for passage, who seek increased spending on domestic priorities.

In announcing the package, Chairman Pete Sessions (R-TX) noted that, “There should be no uncertainty when it comes to our security. It is our responsibility to the men and women in uniform—and to the millions of Americans they are charged with protecting—to provide them with the resources they need each and every year, on time.” It is incumbent upon the public health community and HIV advocates to remind appropriators and the entire Congress that as a nation we can’t have true security without robust investments in our prevention and health systems.

While the House tested the waters on a piecemeal minibus approach, a push among leadership to ultimately offer a catch-all 12-bill spending package is seemingly dead in the water following pressure from rank and file members of the Republican caucus. With passage of the minibus the House will soon head into its five-week August recess and will return in September with only 12 legislative days to pass a measure to fund the government before the September 30 shutdown deadline. Speaker Ryan intends to complete the remaining appropriations and budget legislation upon return the first week after recess.

The issues that Republicans are likely to face in gaining the support they need in the Senate were

previewed on Thursday, as House Democrats were vocal in opposition to the minibus legislation that contained a defense spending bill that normally enjoys bipartisan support. Waiting for a budget deal, Senate Majority Leader McConnell has yet to schedule any individual appropriations bills for floor consideration, and the Senate Appropriations Committee has six funding bills that need to go through committee.

With no schedule for budget negotiations between Republicans and Democrats, avoiding a government shutdown on October 1 may prove too close to call. Meanwhile what Congress has been able to achieve falls short of meeting our domestic spending needs. The House measure would break the Budget Control Act agreement with an increase defense spending by $70 billion above 2017 levels and would cut non-defense discretionary priorities by $8 billion below 2017 levels. It is imperative that leaders in Congress invest in the domestic programs that keep us healthy and enable us to lead productive lives.

As we move into the August in district work period, we urge HIV advocates and allies to hold Congress accountable at town halls, rallies, and during meetings at district offices. We must make it clear that any increases in defense discretionary spending must be met with equal increases on the non-defense discretionary side. Domestic programs under the Labor Health and Human Services bills (Ryan White Program, CDC Prevention, Secretary's Minority AIDS Initiative Fund) and under the Transportation Housing and Urban Development bill (Housing Opportunities for Persons with AIDS) must be adequately funded. Our lives depend upon it.

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