How Trump's Surprise Budget Deal Helps People With HIV

In a GOP-controlled Congress, this three-month resolution is very nearly a best-case scenario.

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Donald Trump won the presidency of the United States based, in large measure, on his supposed prowess as a negotiator. Trump's penchant for wheeling and dealing led many to believe his alleged business talents could translate to the Oval Office and its dealings with Congress. Instead we have seen a series of failures on everything from the stalled attempts to repeal and replace the Affordable Care Act and produce a major infrastructure spending package to his pledge to build a border wall and institute massive tax cuts. During his first eight months in office, Trump has come away with nothing.

Fortunately for Congressional Republicans, President Trump finally lived up to some of his own proclamations about his ability to get deals done, agreeing to an appropriations package that would avert a government shutdown, raise the debt ceiling, and provide much-needed financial aid to the victims of Hurricane Harvey. Unfortunately for Congressional Republicans, the deal that President Trump agreed to was proposed by Congressional Democratic leadership and was completely at odds with what was being proposed by Republican leaders on Capitol Hill and his own Treasury Secretary.

This month has already seen Trump changing tactics and cutting a deal with Congressional Democrats that will delay key decisions on government funding until December. As a result, Congress passed legislation that begins to fund the enormous clean-up following Hurricane Harvey, raise the government's debt ceiling and pass a continuing resolution funding the federal government at Fiscal Year 2017 levels for three more months. Yet, key questions about how much money will be allocated to vital domestic programs once the continuing resolution expires in December —including HIV research, prevention, treatment, and housing—still remain.

Much to the chagrin of almost every Republican on Capitol Hill—and to the shock and tempered delight of their Democratic counterparts—President Trump threw his support behind a plan proposed by Senate Minority Leader Chuck Schumer (D-NY) and House Minority Leader Nancy Pelosi (D-CA-12) that would tie $15.25 billion in emergency spending for hurricane relief to a suspension of the debt ceiling and a stopgap Continuing Resolution that would keep the government running through December 8.

Last Friday morning, the House voted 316-90 in support of the plan agreed upon by Trump and Democratic leadership, sending it to the President's desk to be signed into law. The House vote came less than 24 hours after the Senate voted 80-17 for the package, despite opposition from the many of the more conservative GOP members of the House. Ultimately a majority of House Republicans voted in favor of the bill with many in the GOP leery of openly opposing the President Trump and the poor optics of rejecting hurricane recovery funding in the wake of Harvey and with Hurricane Irma scheduled to make landfall in Florida soon after the vote.

In the midst of all of these maneuverings appeared some glimmers of good news for people living with or impacted by HIV. On Thursday, the Senate Appropriations Labor, Health & Human Services Subcommittee released a version of its bill that bodes well for people living with HIV when the appropriations process resumes again in earnest as the continuing resolution starts to wind down. The plan would maintain current funding levels for both the Ryan White Program and CDC HIV Prevention, rejecting $213.6 million in cuts proposed in the President's Fiscal Year 2018 Budget. The bill also would continue Title X family planning funding at its FY17 levels. In another slap to Trump's budget plan, the Senate Labor-HHS bill fully restored funding to the Secretary's Minority AIDS Initiative Fund, whose $53.9 million budget had been eliminated in the House appropriations bill, and SAMHSA's Minority AIDS Initiative programming, which had seen a $17.4 million cut in the House as well.

In an ideal world, a three-month continuing resolution with level funding that provides Democratic leadership with more leverage going into future appropriations talks would not constitute a desirable outcome for HIV advocates. However, in a world where Republicans control Congress and the White House, it is very nearly a best-case scenario. After all, the thing that matters for people living with HIV is that vital funding for treatment and prevention, especially for minority communities disproportionally impacted by the HIV epidemic, will be here tomorrow. HIV advocates will have to renew these same battles in three months' time, but our position will be stronger when it comes time to negotiate on a long-term spending bill in December.

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