

Health Care Funding Hikes Folded Into Congressional Spending Deal

By Shira Stein

Posted Sept. 14, 2018, 4:37 PM

- Compromise includes \$2.3B increase in HHS funding, with NIH getting most of the boost
- \$6.7B total for programs to fight substance abuse and opioid epidemic
- Bipartisan Senate measure to reveal drug prices in ads pulled from final deal

Health programs including medical research will get a funding boost in the congressional deal that covers the fiscal year starting Oct. 1. Now lawmakers need to approve it.

The package (H.R. 6157) would increase funding for the Department of Health and Human Services by \$2.3 billion, or 2.6 percent, in fiscal year 2019, which starts Oct. 1. Much of the increase is a \$2 billion, or 5.39 percent, bump in funding for the National Institutes of Health. The FY 2019 measure also provides \$6.7 billion for programs that fight substance abuse and includes measures that address the separation of children and parents at the southern border.

The Senate is likely to vote on the measure during the week of Sept. 17. The House is off that week, and returns the week of Sept. 24.

The package is free from controversial and last-minute legislative language or riders that could lead to opposition to the bill.

"There's going to be sufficient votes to pass the legislation," Rep. Tom Cole (R-Okla.), chairman of the labor and health appropriations subcommittee, told reporters Sept. 13 ahead of the conference committee releasing a report with their funding compromises.

Opioid Response Funding

The package would include \$6.7 billion in funding to combat the opioid crisis and support access to mental health services. This is in addition to the grant money in a package of opioid-related bills that the Senate plans to vote on Sept. 17.

"This bill provides flexible funding for states to implement the programs that work best for them. The bill directs resources to the hardest-hit states and rural communities," Sen. Roy Blunt (R-Mo.) said in a statement Sept. 13 about the appropriations measure. "This bill reinforces our commitment to ending this epidemic and saving lives." Blunt chairs the Senate Appropriations Committee's subcommittee responsible for HHS funds

States would be eligible to receive \$1.5 billion in grants to respond to the opioid epidemic. \$130 million would be made available for grants to rural communities.

The Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, part of the HHS, would receive \$5.7 billion, an increase of \$584 million from the current fiscal year.

Medication-assisted treatment, a controversial, but effective practice that uses a combination of medication and behavioral therapy to treat substance use disorders, would receive \$89 million in funding.

Research into opioid addiction, the development of opioid alternatives, pain management, and addiction treatment would have \$500 million made available, in addition to the \$774 million available from the NIH.

Research Money

The spending bill “is a tremendous triumph” for the National Institutes of Health and for patients who benefit from NIH research, Ivor Benjamin, president of the American Heart Association, said in a statement Aug. 23.

The National Cancer Institute would receive \$6.14 billion, an increase of \$670 million over the current fiscal year.

Although Republican lawmakers have previously attempted to defund the HHS’s Agency for Healthcare Research and Quality, it, too, received an increase in funding of \$4 million.

A Blunt statement said this is the first time funding for Alzheimer’s research will surpass the goal set forth in the National Plan to Address Alzheimer’s Disease. Funding for Alzheimer’s research will reach \$2.34 billion in 2019, an increase of \$425 million.

“Accelerating medical and public health progress to achieve the bold goals of finding cures for deadly and debilitating diseases requires an unrelenting commitment to providing robust funding to federal health agencies,” Mary Woolley, president and CEO of Research!America said in a statement Sept. 14.

The bill does have a cut for part of the HHS, a \$354 million or 4.29 percent reduction in funding for the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

Family Separation

The package would require Health and Human Services Secretary Alex Azar to submit a plan to Congress by Nov. 15 to “promptly facilitate the reunification of children separated from their parents and placed in the custody of the Office of Refugee Resettlement.”

It would also allow the HHS to accept donations from private and nongovernmental organizations to care for those children. The money can be used for medical goods and services, school supplies, toys, among other necessary items.

Members of Congress have been prevented from entering detention facilities holding undocumented children. The compromise legislation would force the facilities to allow lawmakers to enter to conduct oversight.

Dropped: Drug Ad Disclosures

Missing from the package is a bipartisan Senate measure that would have called for a rule requiring drug companies to disclose drug prices in their consumer advertisements.

The measure, championed by Sen. Dick Durbin (D-Ill.) and Sen. Chuck Grassley (R-Iowa), would have given the Food and Drug Administration \$1 million to put such a regulation into place.

Drugmakers spent \$6.4 billion in 2016 on advertising, according to Kantar, a London-based data investing management division of WPP plc, one of the world's largest consulting groups.

A similar proposal is part of the Trump administration's drug pricing blueprint and was supported by the AARP, American Medical Association, and America's Health Insurance Plans.

Other Measures

The appropriations package includes longstanding bans on federally funded gun violence research and municipal needle exchange programs.

Although the House version of this spending package would have eliminated funding for programs that reduce teen pregnancy, the final version of this package includes \$108 million for those grants. The House version would have also eliminated funding for Title X family planning, but the final spending package includes \$287 million.

—With assistance from Jack Fitzpatrick (Bloomberg Government)

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