

# Medical Research Funding Increase Expected With New Budget Deal

By Jeannie Baumann and Jack Fitzpatrick | July 23, 2019 3:03PM ET

Medical research funding is all but guaranteed an increase in 2020, after the White House and Congress reached an agreement on a budget, a research advocate says.

President Donald Trump and congressional leaders agreed July 22 to raise spending caps and suspend the debt limit until July 2021, a move that would avoid a default on federal payments and steep spending cuts, as long as both chambers can pass the measure and the president signs it into law. The measure would increase spending by \$323 billion over the spending limits set under the Budget Control Act (Pub. L. 112-25).

"I think we're going to see an increase for NIH," Ellie Dehoney, Research America's vice president of policy and advocacy, said in a July 23 interview. "I hesitate ever to say, 'guarantee,' but I do think this permits what is a bipartisan priority."

The budget deal provides legislators the room to get that extra funding to an agency like NIH, which has broad support, Matt Hourihan, director of the American Association for the Advancement of Science's research and development budget and policy program, said. "It definitely clears the way for positive funding outcomes for NIH."

Without that deal, spending caps for the pool of non-defense discretionary programs would have dropped to \$542 billion in fiscal year 2020 from its current authority of \$597 billion, leaving lawmakers with about \$55 billion less to fund programs ranging from public health to national parks and law enforcement, according to the Center on Budget and Policy Priorities.

"At minimum, it will help avoid cuts that would have been really devastating to medical research and a whole host of other domestic spending priorities," Tannaz Rasouli, senior director of public policy & strategic outreach at the Association of American Medical Colleges, said.

The House passed in June a set of four spending bills that would provide the NIH with a \$2 billion increase. While Senate appropriators haven't introduced any 2020 spending bills, Sens. Roy Blunt (R-Mo.) and Patty Murray (D-Wash.) have made clear in past spending negotiations that medical research spending is one of their top health priorities. Blunt and Murray lead the labor-health and human services appropriations subcommittee and have worked with their House counterparts, Reps. Rosa DeLauro (D-Conn.) and Tom Cole (R-Okla.), to increase the agency's funding by 30% since 2015.

Whatever comes out of any House and Senate negotiations, Dehoney said she expects Blunt and Murray will still provide an NIH increase at or near \$2 billion. "I think \$2 billion is a realistic objective, given the level of the caps increase," she said.

But the budget deal for non-defense spending was “a little bit less than what the House was looking for,” Hourihan noted, so the agency may not see the 5% increase the House proposed.

Blunt told Bloomberg Law a number for NIH funding wasn't part of the budget deal, but he says he plans to plow more money into NIH again. When he took over as labor-HHS subcommittee chairman in 2015, the NIH's funding level was about \$30 billion, it's now about \$39 billion.

“I intend to continue to move for more the way we have the last few years. I think we will have a number that will allow us to do that,” Blunt said. But he didn't say specifically that the increase will be \$2 billion, which the NIH has seen in recent years.

Dehoney said she hopes other science agencies, including the Food and Drug Administration and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, also receive funding increases. When Congress has the funding room, they tend to try to “spread the dollars around to multiple research agencies,” Hourihan observed.

Alex Currie, president of United for Medical Research, released a statement July 23 saying the budget agreement “addresses our nation's most devastating and costly illnesses, and preserves our standing as the world's leader in life sciences.”

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