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Funds for fight against HIV/AIDS paused in Trump aid freeze

The President's Emergency Plan for AIDS Relief, or PEPFAR, is credited with saving 25 million lives worldwide and has generally enjoyed bipartisan support.

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6 min



Secretary of State Marco Rubio at the State Department this week. (Elizabeth Frantz/Reuters)

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President Donald Trump's 90-day pause on foreign aid, an executive order signed the day after he took office, applies not only to new funding but existing funding as well, according to a memo that many U.S. diplomats were surprised to receive Friday. The far-reaching move could disrupt U.S. programs around the world, including a widely lauded effort to combat HIV worldwide that is credited with saving some 25 million lives, U.S. officials warned.

"It's bad, bad," said one State Department official who works on the HIV program, which is called the President's Emergency Plan for AIDS Relief, or PEPFAR. The official, who, like others, spoke on the condition of anonymity as they were not authorized to speak publicly, said the consequences could be dire. "It's not hyperbole to say that people will die."

PEPFAR, a sprawling multiagency public health program led by the State Department, disburses billions of dollars in aid to partners around the world to fight HIV every year.

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The State Department memo, which The Washington Post reviewed, was signed by Secretary of State Marco Rubio and written to clarify an executive order signed by Trump that called for a 90-day pause on foreign assistance. A stop-work order will apply to all existing foreign assistance until reviewed by Rubio, the memo said.

The extension of the pause to include existing funding caught many officials off-guard. While incoming administrations often pause and review new funding, halting existing funding and issuing stop-work orders is not standard. Though the memo made some exemptions — including for the

billions of dollars of U.S. aid to Israel and Egypt — there appeared to be no exemption for many other programs, including PEPFAR, which received \$7.5 billion annually.

“A 90-day pause in foreign assistance was expected, as laid out in President Trump’s executive order,” said Jennifer Kates, director of global health and HIV policy at KFF, a health policy organization. “However, the instruction provided today seems to have gone much further, applying this pause to awards already made and calling for a stop-work order on services in the field.”

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The full scope of the stop-work order was unclear, leaving officials waiting for more guidance on Friday. A waiver for emergency food assistance was issued, but a U.S. official said “there is no clear process for seeking that,” resulting in confusion and concern throughout large parts of the federal bureaucracy about the many affected programs around the world.

“It’s very hard to communicate the scope of this,” said one USAID official. “We’re still getting guidance on this from our agency leadership, but it looks like every development assistance program that’s not military aid to Israel or Egypt or emergency food assistance would stop. The effect would be staggering.”

The likely impact on PEPFAR, which was started by President George W. Bush in 2003 and generally supported by lawmakers from both major parties, shocked advocates.

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“This is deadly,” said Asia Russell, executive director of Health GAP, a group that campaigns for access to AIDS treatment. “For PEPFAR, which is the bulk of the global AIDS response, it means stopping service delivery, many people will die and become HIV positive.”

“I really have to wonder if the people mandating this at the State Department have any tangible idea of what this will mean in practice,” said Jeremy Konyndyk, president of Refugees International and a former USAID official. “If this is implemented as written, it means that nutrition and water programs fighting famine in Sudan will stop work. Health clinics in Gaza providing lifesaving health care will stop work. HIV patients will stop receiving their antiretroviral treatments.”

“The reputational damage this would do to America’s image abroad is hard to overstate,” Konyndyk added. “It’s hard to imagine a bigger public diplomacy win for China than going forward with this kind of clumsy destruction of U.S. credibility.”

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It is possible that the Trump administration will issue waivers for PEPFAR and other programs over the coming days. However, some advocates said that the pause appeared to be designed to be disruptive. “The call to review all foreign aid, and pause funding, was part of the Project 2025 playbook,” Kates said, referring to [the policy blueprint coordinated by the conservative Heritage Foundation](#) that is seen as influential within the Trump White House.

Though Project 2025 offered praise for PEPFAR, writing that it had saved “countless lives” and represents the United States’ “most successful aid program,” the Heritage Foundation has also led criticism of the program over recent years, alleging that funds were being diverted for abortions in breach of U.S. law.

The allegations were denied by officials involved in the program and remain unproven. However, last week, Republican members of Congress called for further investigation after officials from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention informed U.S. lawmakers that funds had been used to partially pay the salary of four health workers in Mozambique who also provided abortions outside of their PEPFAR-funded work.

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Though abortions are legal in Mozambique and the money — around \$4,100 — was returned to PEPFAR, Republican lawmakers such as Sen. James E. Risch (R-Idaho), chair of the Foreign Relations Committee, said it left the future of the program “in jeopardy.”

The official that drafted the State Department memo released on Friday, Pete Marocco, served in various roles during the first Trump administration, including as a senior policy official for Africa at the Pentagon and an official for conflict-related matters at the State Department and USAID. His government tenure was [marked by employee complaints](#) about his [management](#).

Marocco could not immediately be reached for comment.

Global health advocates have called on Trump to continue to support PEPFAR in his second term. In a letter addressed to the U.S. president on Wednesday, the executive director of UNAIDS, Winnie Byanyima, praised Trump’s prior support for PEPFAR and said the United States had “the opportunity to accelerate the global HIV response and end AIDS by 2030.”

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Abby Maxman, who heads aid and advocacy group Oxfam America, noted that U.S. foreign aid programs have long enjoyed broad bipartisan support in Congress. “Humanitarian and development assistance accounts for only around one percent of the federal budget,” she said in a statement earlier this week. “It saves lives, fights diseases, educates millions of children, and reduces poverty.”

“We need to see these programs allowed to proceed immediately,” Maxman added in a later statement.

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