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# White House tries to clarify Trump federal spending freeze as confusion spreads

Hours after the Trump administration issued its directive, officials braced for seismic interruptions to key federal programs and services.

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6 min



President Donald Trump arrives to speak about infrastructure and artificial intelligence in the Roosevelt Room of the White House on Jan. 21 in Washington, D.C. (Jabin Botsford/The Washington Post)

By [Tony Romm](#), [Jeff Stein](#), [Jacob Bogage](#) and [Emily Davies](#)

Hours after the [Trump administration announced a sweeping freeze on federal spending](#), the U.S. government on Tuesday found itself mired in confusion and chaos, as it looked to stave off potential interruptions to programs that promote food safety, combat crime, provide housing aid, produce medical research and respond to natural disasters.

Few in Washington appeared to understand the scope and intention of a White House memo that initially directed agencies to “temporarily pause” the disbursement of key funds, leaving thousands of government services — totaling billions of dollars and dedicated primarily to Americans’ health, safety and well-being — at risk of shutting down, at least temporarily.

The uncertainty forced the White House to clarify its approach by midday: In a new directive, the Office of Management and Budget said it sought only to bring

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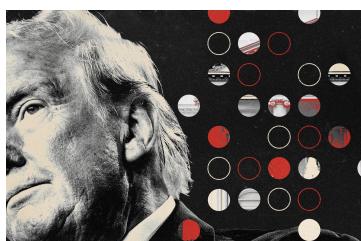
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spending in line with the president's recent executive orders, including those that clamp down on foreign aid and funding for diversity, equity and inclusion, or DEI, which Trump has called "radical and wasteful."

But the conflicting and muddled instructions proved far more disruptive, imperiling a broad swath of federal services even before the freeze was supposed to take effect at 5 p.m.

Tuesday.

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Many states reported issues accessing funds under the Medicaid low-income health insurance program, for example, which was never supposed to be affected by the White House spending halt. Preschool centers struggled to obtain reimbursements under the federal program known as Head Start, putting some child care services at risk.

A web portal that housing providers use to draw down money for government voucher and rental assistance funds stopped working Tuesday, though the cause was not immediately clear. And federal health and education officials similarly said they had to halt work amid the mixed messages from the White House. That delayed money for some after-school programs, charter schools and the Special Olympics, a spokesperson for the Education Department confirmed.

The early disruptions outraged Democrats, who expressed renewed alarm about the administration's willingness to subvert Congress on matters of federal spending. And it triggered a bevy of new legal threats, as Democratic state attorneys general prepared to file a lawsuit challenging the legality of Trump's spending freeze.

"The actions taken yesterday are a callous disregard for the rule of law and a drastic abuse of power that will harm

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millions of Americans across the country,” said Skye Perryman, president of Democracy Forward, a left-leaning group that also sued on behalf of public health officials, businesses and nonprofits affected by the policy.

The freeze demonstrated in the starker terms to date that the Trump White House is willing to test the limits of the president’s authority to control spending. Under the U.S. Constitution, it is Congress that holds the power of the purse, but Trump has signaled he could seek to circumvent lawmakers to cut the budget and stop funding programs he objects to.

Under a 1974 budget law, the White House can temporarily delay federal funds only if certain procedures are met and conditions followed. Enacted after the Watergate scandal, the statute allows a president to halt funds only in select circumstances — not simply because the White House disapproves of its purpose, according to David Super, an administrative law professor at Georgetown Law School.

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But Trump and his incoming budget chief, Russ Vought, have indicated they believe that law is unconstitutional. Instead, they have publicly embraced a controversial power, known as impoundment, that could allow them to reduce or eliminate spending regardless of the amounts enacted by Congress.

Dan Jacobson, who served as the budget office’s general counsel under the Biden administration, said in an interview the pause is “very likely illegal,” adding: “There’s a lot of money that can get swept up under this that couldn’t be paused even if they did follow the law’s framework.”

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The controversial stance has primed the White House for a constitutional clash over its budgetary authorities, while worrying Democrats, who have argued that Trump is setting a dangerous precedent that carries significant costs for the millions of families and organizations that rely on uninterrupted federal aid.

“The scope of what you are ordering is breathtaking, unprecedented, and will have devastating consequences across the country,” warned Rep. Rosa DeLauro (Connecticut) and Sen. Patty Murray (Washington), the top Democrats on their chambers’ appropriations committees, in a letter to the OMB on Wednesday.

The scramble began late Monday, after the White House budget office circulated a list of spending programs under scrutiny that seemed to implicate virtually every function of the federal government. The funds it identified for review included a vast array of initiatives that help the poor, potentially arresting funds that provide rental vouchers, nutrition benefits and college aid to low-income Americans.

The administration also pointed to federal programs that inspect meat, poultry and eggs for potential foodborne illnesses, and payments to farmers whose crops are ravaged by natural disasters. And they included a sizable roster of initiatives to protect public health, seemingly aiming to freeze money meant to fight the spread of AIDS, research cancer causes and detection, and prepare for bioterrorism attacks.

Many budget experts could not tell if the administration actually intended to target each of those programs, since its list appeared to encompass such a significant amount of federal spending. But its exhaustive nature still set off alarm bells, particularly at a time when the White House has actively punished federal officials seen as disobeying Trump’s orders.

"In some ways this is tantamount to a federal government shutdown," said Sharon Parrott, president of the Center on Budget and Policy Priorities, a left-leaning group. "There's nothing here to say at 5 p.m. this evening these things will continue, and funding will continue to flow. It's destructive chaos that will hurt real people."

As the initial guidance roiled federal agencies, OMB officials soon tried to clarify their approach. In a follow-up message, they stressed the freeze is not supposed to affect services that provide "direct benefits to individuals," including Social Security, Medicare, Medicaid and food stamps, according to a copy of the document obtained by The Washington Post.

The Trump administration also said it had set up a process for agencies to work with the White House on evaluating their funding, and already had approved "many programs to continue" operating normally. Otherwise, OMB said some spending could come back online in as quickly as a day, as the White House looked to deflect criticism that it had taken radical action.

"To individuals at home who receive direct assistance from the federal government, you will not be impacted by this federal freeze," White House press secretary Karoline Leavitt told reporters, later adding the administration is "analyzing the federal government's spending, which is exactly what the American people elected Donald Trump to do."

*Laura Meckler, Dan Diamond and Rachel Siegel contributed to this report.*

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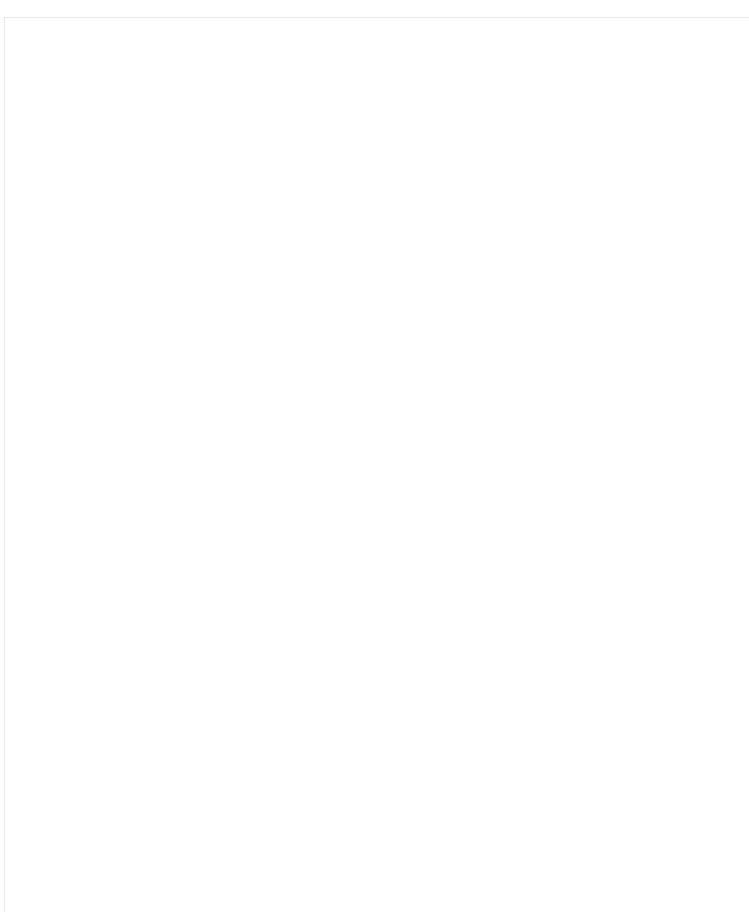
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