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HIV Activists Protest the Latest Blockage of Funds for Global HIV Program PEPFAR

Project 2025 architect Russell Vought is withholding HIV funds approved by Congress. In protest, AIDS activists staged a DC sit-in.

September 2, 2025 By Trent Straube

“VOUGHT LIES. PEOPLE DIE. SAVE PEPFAR NOW!”

HIV advocates yelled the chant during a sit-in on the streets outside the Office of Management and Budget (OMB) and near the White House on Tuesday afternoon. They were protesting “billions in unlawfully withheld funds” for the global HIV program PEPFAR (the U.S. President’s Emergency Plan for AIDS Relief).

The public act of civil disobedience was spearheaded by a collection of HIV organizations, including Housing Works, Health GAP and Treatment Action Group along with former staffers of PEPFAR and USAID (the U.S. Agency for International Development, another global program gutted under the Trump administration and the so-called Department of Government Efficiency, or DOGE).

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In July, Congress voted to save funding for PEPFAR, a program that until recent years enjoyed bipartisan support and has saved over 26 million lives since its launch in 2003 by Republican President George W. Bush. Funds for the program had been on the chopping block as part of President Trump's recission package—the White House's proposal to cancel $9 billion in funds already approved by Congress. While lawmakers ended up approving most of the cuts on Trump's wish list (including funding for public media such as NPR and PBS), they salvaged some funds for PEPFAR.

In fact, Congress has set aside $6 billion this fiscal year for PEPFAR, according to the New York Times. However, despite the fact that the Constitution grants Congress the "power of the purse"—that is, lawmakers set the federal budget—Russell Vought, who heads OMB, has decided not to release the full amount and has distributed only $2.9 billion.

A prominent figure in the Trump administration, Vought is known for his extreme conservative and Christian nationalist views as well as being an architect of Project 2025, the controversial blueprint to remake—some would say dismantle—the federal government and American culture at large. For example, Project 2025 proposes, as the BBC lays it out, abolishing the Department of Education; gutting the federal budget; placing remaining federal agencies, such as the FBI, under the control of the president; ending access to the abortion pill mifepristone; banning pornography; and halting the promotion of diversity, equity and inclusion (DEI)—which includes many programs focused on HIV, sexual health, women, and LGBTQ, Black and Latino communities.



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A post shared by FriendsofUSAID (@friendsofusaid)

No wonder that HIV activists chose Vought's office as a place to protest. As the event organizers explained on Instagram:

> "We're rallying to fight a very evil man (Russell Vought) who's illegally trying to end a program that has saved 26 million people from HIV/AIDS (that's roughly the entire population of Australia). It's called PEPFAR.
>
> "But Project 2025 author—now senior U.S. Government official—Russell Vought is trying to revive the deadly HIV/AIDS epidemic from the '80s. And if we let him withhold billions of our tax dollars from PEPFAR, there's no telling what he'll try to illegally defund next…"

A Health GAP press release on the staged protest further elaborated the reasons behind the action:

> "Activists are demanding an end to unlawful obstruction of approximately $3.1 billion in already Congressionally appropriated PEPFAR funding by Trump's head of the Office of Management and Budget (OMB), Russell Vought. These funds are urgently needed for lifesaving HIV prevention and treatment. Clinics across sub Saharan Africa are reporting PEFPAR is now telling them to slash their budgets, despite Congress fully funding the global AIDS program. Revelations that Vought was singlehandedly defying the will of Congress were recently reported in The New York Times (see: "Trump Budget Office Is Withholding H.I.V. Funds That Congress Appropriated").
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> "Activists are calling for full restoration of PEPFAR, immediate disbursement of appropriated PEPFAR funds, and rejection of deadly political interference in global and domestic HIV programs. Vought's obstruction comes amidst growing attacks by Trump's Cabinet on public health, most recently as the White House attempts to oust CDC Director Susan Monarez over her commitment to upholding evidence-based science, prompting four top CDC officials to resign in a rare display of joint public protest. CDC is a major PEPFAR implementer, responsible for one-third of the program budget. Activists are demanding Trump, Vought and Congress:

- Fully restore PEPFAR programming and direct PEPFAR countries to budge and plan a funding levels consistent with Congressional appropriations;

- Immediately release already-appropriated PEPFAR funds currently being withheld;

- Reaffirm a commitment to science-based, stigma-free health policy, globally and domestically."

The AIDS activists' action occurred just days before the 29th U.S. Conference on HIV/AIDS (USCHA) takes place September 4 to 7 in Washington, DC. It's the nation's largest gathering of the HIV community, advocates, caregivers and providers.

In related news, see "Watch Bodies and Coffins Pile Up in Protest Against Cuts to HIV and Health Services" and "HIV Activists March in NYC to Protest 'Death by 1,000 Musk Cuts."

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