



# What The Government Shutdown Means For People With Disabilities

by Michelle Diamant | October 1, 2025

While many services will continue, Congress' failure to fund the government could have big implications for people with disabilities who depend on a wide array of federal programs.

Democrats and Republicans in Congress were unable to reach an agreement on spending by the start of the government's new fiscal year on Wednesday, triggering a shutdown. As a result, many federal workers are off the job while agencies maintain only services deemed essential.

Social Security and Supplemental Security Income benefits will be paid during the shutdown, according to the Social Security Administration. And the U.S. Department of Education indicated that Individuals with Disabilities Education Act funding will be disbursed to states on schedule at the start of October.

Similarly, advocates expect that Medicaid funding for home and community-based services will continue to flow.

Many other federal functions, however, will be put on hold. The Education Department's Office for Civil Rights, which has already faced significant pressure this year, will halt its investigations and advocates said that the Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services is unlikely to approve state plan amendments and waivers, for example. Meanwhile, with hundreds of thousands of workers furloughed, getting assistance from the federal government will likely be a tall order.

“Programs like Medicaid, Medicare and Social Security will continue to be funded because they are mandatory programs. But the vast majority of disability programs, including all of those funded by the Administration for Community Living, are discretionary programs that would be impacted by a shutdown,” said Alison Barkoff, a professor at George Washington University who led the Department of Health and Human Services’ Administration for Community Living under the Biden administration.

During the last shutdown, which extended from December 2018 to January 2019, the effects were widespread. There were disability providers that were unable to hire new direct support workers because they couldn’t access the E-Verify system, some rental assistance contracts for people with disabilities were not renewed and furloughed parents of children with disabilities struggled to pay for therapies.

Beyond those concerns, advocates noted that the current situation will add pressure at agencies that are stretched thin after the Trump administration substantially cut back the federal workforce earlier this year.

And, things could get worse. In a memo last week, the White House budget office directed federal agencies to consider a “reduction in force” for employees working at programs that are “not consistent with the president’s priorities” in the event of a shutdown.

“The president’s threat to fire additional federal workers if there is a shutdown only increases the insecurity faced by people with disabilities who rely on these staff to administer the annual appropriations for disability programs such as the state councils on developmental disabilities,” said Jill Jacobs, executive director of the National Association of Councils on Developmental Disabilities. “People with developmental disabilities and their families rely on predictable funding to live, work and thrive in their communities. Both sides need to agree to uphold their constitutional responsibilities to maintain a strong government for all people.”

Despite assurances from the Education Department, Phyllis Wolfram, executive director of the Council of Administrators of Special Education, said she’s “extremely concerned” about what a shutdown will mean for special education funding.

“With a significant number of furloughs from the Department of Education during a shutdown, the question remains if staff will be available to release these funds to states in a timely manner,” Wolfram said. “Federal funds are critical to assuring that children and youth with disabilities receive a free appropriate education, as mandated by the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act. Any actions by Congress and the administration that impede this process are unacceptable.”

Ultimately, the impact on disability programs could depend on how long the shutdown lasts, advocates said.

In the case of federally-mandated protection and advocacy agencies — which exist in each state to provide free legal and advocacy services to individuals with disabilities — funds are routinely carried over from one fiscal year to the next to account for a possible delay in funding, according to David Card at the National Disability Rights Network, an umbrella organization for so-called P&As across the country. But, he notes that “at some point carryover

funds will run out and without new funding, P&As would have to stop taking clients and providing needed advocacy.”

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