

Covid response may have to be scaled back amid congressional inaction, White House says

With \$15.6 billion in coronavirus aid stripped from deal to fund government, Democrats scramble to find money for effort

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The United States is poised to run out of tests, treatments and vaccines to fight the [coronavirus](#) after a \$15.6 billion funding plan collapsed in Congress on Wednesday, alarming health-care advocates and raising concerns about the fate of President Biden's broader covid response plan.

"Testing capacity ... will decline this month. In April, free testing and treatments for tens of millions of Americans without health insurance will end. In May, America's supply of monoclonal antibodies will run out," White House press secretary Jen Psaki said during a briefing on Thursday.

With coronavirus aid stripped from a deal to fund the government, Democrats this week were left scrambling, unsure as to how they would advance a tranche of spending they see as critical. The House set in motion a plan to vote next week on a new bill that would provide \$15 billion for testing, treatment and vaccines. But the proposal appeared likely to falter in the Senate, where Republicans have demanded that lawmakers redirect existing stimulus funds, or find some other way to pay for it.

Taking to the Senate floor on Thursday, Majority Leader Charles E. Schumer (D-N.Y.) did not offer a plan forward — though he emphasized the need for swift action to ensure that the country is "prepared."

"We will keep working on covid relief," he said. "It is very much needed."

While U.S. coronavirus cases have fallen to their lowest levels since July 2021, more than 9,000 Americans per week continue to die of covid-19, according to The Washington Post's virus tracker. The White House — which formally asked for about \$22.5 billion to address public health needs earlier this month — also has warned that new variants could emerge and cause havoc again, a message echoed by advocates.

Democrats and Republicans ultimately settled on \$15 billion in an emergency package they attached to a must-pass proposal to fund the government and avert a shutdown. But that funding, which included \$5 billion for global vaccinations and response, was abruptly dropped on Wednesday over a dispute about how to pay for it. House Democrats balked at a GOP-driven plan to repurpose some money that had been pledged to states, which they said would leave governors and legislators struggling to backfill their budgets.

Without new funding, administration officials say that key parts of the U.S. covid response will need to be scaled back or halted.

“We are currently assessing the impact that a continued lack of funds will have on all elements of our pandemic response, including where programs may need to abruptly end, or be pared back and what gaps this will leave in our ability to provide protections,” said a White House official who spoke on the condition of anonymity because of the sensitivity of the budget negotiations.

Biden officials have said they plan to buy 20 million doses of Pfizer's antiviral pills, a highly effective treatment touted as a game-changer when it was authorized late last year because it enables people at high risk of severe covid to take pills at home to avoid getting worse — but the administration is still reviewing whether it will have the funds to do so. Meanwhile, U.S. officials are expecting to exhaust their supply of antivirals by September, and they warn that other countries will soon place orders for those treatments that could push the United States further toward the back of the line.

Officials also said they must begin placing orders in coming weeks to acquire a possible fourth shot of vaccine for adults in the fall and possible booster shots for children older than 5, should federal officials determine those necessary.

Therapeutics and vaccination are the keys to bringing the virus under control, according to a senior Biden official who spoke on the condition of anonymity to describe internal estimates. “We've had tremendous success. To stop now makes no sense.”

The White House also lacks funding to make advance purchase commitments for more tests, raising the possibility of scrambles to find them and delays in turning around results — again — if a new outbreak sweeps the country.

Meanwhile, the administration has launched a global vaccination campaign, focused initially on increasing shots in 11 sub-Saharan African countries. But officials warned that funding will be exhausted within months and they need additional support to expand the plan to other countries. Hill Democrats have repeatedly called for at least \$17 billion for the global response.

“We feel it was irresponsible for Congress to pull the \$5 billion for global covid-19 response. It’s a tiny, tiny fraction of the U.S. budget and of that omnibus package, that it’s penny-wise and monumentally pound-foolish,” Ritu Sharma, a vice president at CARE, a global humanitarian organization, told reporters on Thursday. “Our economy is going to suffer so much more than \$5 billion in damage if we have another variant that causes shutdowns ... [and cost] thousands of more lives.”

The collapse of the covid funding plan on Wednesday sparked frustration inside the administration and elsewhere. Some Democratic aides on the Hill questioned why the White House had not pursued the funds more aggressively earlier in the year, rather than formally submitting a request last week.

The problem loomed large as House Democrats gathered in Philadelphia on Thursday for a retreat that began late as a result of the standoff over coronavirus aid. Speaking Thursday morning, Rep. Pramila Jayapal (D-Wash.) lamented the failure to coalesce around pandemic assistance, saying she and other lawmakers only learned about the plan to fund the covid response with money pledged to the states when the bill was unveiled early Wednesday.

“The opportunity for us to know what is in a bill, and prepare for things we either want to push back on or defend is the best way to do things, I think, in a close majority situation,” she said. “At the same time, let’s really be clear that it was the Republicans who didn’t want to fund anything related to covid.”

Although Biden officials in early January had privately concluded that they needed as much as \$80 billion in additional covid aid for vaccines, therapeutics and other supplies, they did not indicate that the need was urgent.

“In terms of money, we have the money that we need to fight omicron,” White House coronavirus coordinator Jeff Zients said at a Jan. 12 news briefing. “And if we do need ... more funding, at some point, we will request that money.”

But by early February, top administration aides told lawmakers that key coronavirus funds were dwindling. They felt the U.S. government could manage the omicron wave but worried that it might not be prepared for a new variant, after a flurry of spending to respond to the case surge.

Soon after, the administration outlined about \$30 billion in covid aid needs during briefings with top lawmakers. The formal request from the Office of Management and Budget arrived in early March, calling for \$22.5 billion in emergency spending, with acting OMB director Shalanda Young adding that she “anticipate[d] that additional funding will be needed to support the COVID-19 response.”

Outside experts said the White House had failed to lay the groundwork for why lawmakers needed to commit additional funds.

“I don’t think enough spadework was done on why there was a need for everyone to make the compromises they needed to get this across the finish line,” said Rodney Whitlock, vice president at McDermott+Consulting and a former Senate Republican aide. “This popped up late. The justifications were not widely socialized. And it blew up in their faces.”

Democrats united in attributing much of the blame to Republicans, who had demanded in letters that they redirect existing stimulus money to pay for the new request. GOP lawmakers did not require the same for aid set aside for Ukraine, which was part of the same funding package.

“Before we would consider supporting an additional \$30 billion for COVID-19 relief, Congress must receive a full accounting of how the government has already spent the first \$6 trillion,” Sen. Mitt Romney (R-Utah) and 35 colleagues wrote to Biden last week.

Seeking a solution, Democratic leaders opted to tap a \$350 billion fund included in the American Rescue Plan enacted last year, which gave city, county and state officials vast flexibility to use the money as they saw fit. But the plan essentially backfired, angering rank-and-file Democrats and state officials, who warned that the approach would claw back money that some were already using for pandemic response.

Govs. Asa Hutchinson of Arkansas and Phil Murphy of New Jersey, who lead the National Governors Association, wrote in a letter to congressional leaders that any attempt to rescind the money “would jeopardize our shared goals of mitigating, responding to and fostering a transformational recovery from this unprecedented national pandemic.”

Laurie McGinley and Rachel Roubein contributed to this report.

Coronavirus: What you need to read

The latest: Against omicron, vaccine protection was much weaker, CDC data shows. See the latest coronavirus numbers.

Vaccines: Coronavirus vaccine for young children further delayed as FDA reverses course. Vaccination during pregnancy may provide infants protection.

At-home tests: Medicare to offer free at-home tests from pharmacies, starting in early spring. Here’s how to use at-home covid tests, where to find them and how they differ from PCR tests.

Mask guidance: CDC still recommends masking in indoor spaces with N95s, which are more effective than cloth masks.