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Trump Delivers Massive Blow to Youth Justice Programs

BY NELL BERNSTEIN



Formerly incarcerated California Justice Leaders members and Impact Justice staff gather in March. Photo by Daniel

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programs and initiatives currently underway. Recipients were instructed to cease work immediately.

“Many of these providers are not going to continue to operate their programs,” said Liz Ryan, head of juvenile justice during the Biden administration, who has worked in the field for decades. “Some of them will have to lay off staff, and some of them may not survive these cuts. We’re going to lose all of that vital expertise and experience that could be put towards helping young people grow and thrive.”

Cuts to federal funding have become a thunderous backdrop to life in the U.S. since President Donald Trump took office for a second time in January. Mainstays — from major medical research to Meals on Wheels for seniors — have fallen victim to cuts and freezes that Democratic legislators say total \$430 billion to date.

“I’VE NEVER SEEN ANYTHING LIKE THIS IN THE ENTIRE TIME I’VE WORKED IN THIS FIELD. ... I’VE NEVER SEEN A WHOLE GROUP OF EXISTING AWARDEES HAVE THEIR FUNDS TERMINATED.”

— LIZ RYAN, FORMER JUVENILE JUSTICE OFFICIAL

The Imprint obtained a list of all grants cancelled by agencies that fall under the Department of Justice. Of those, more than 60 grants directly affected children, teens and young adults, totaling \$167,712,894. The canceled grants cover training and technical support to re-entry programs, youth violence prevention efforts, community-based alternatives, interventions for nonviolent offenders, juvenile indigent defense and more.

“I’ve never seen anything like this in the entire time I’ve worked in this field,” Ryan said of the combined cuts, made midway through a grant cycle. “I’ve never seen a whole group of existing

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In fact, the majority of the rescinded grants advance those very priorities. Several provided direct support to law enforcement and correctional agencies. The Council of Juvenile Justice Administrators, for instance, lost funding to train directors and superintendents in best practices for running locked institutions.

Other organizations lost funding to train and support groups implementing the 1974 Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention Act. The National Partnership for Juvenile Services lost a grant supporting efforts to keep “status offenders” — young people who have done nothing more than run away or skip school — from being locked up.

What’s more, while the federal government’s missive specified that the cancellation applied only to “unobligated balances,” it instructed grantees to cease work as of April 22 — the day prior. Those who sought reimbursement for expenses already incurred found their access to the grant portal blocked, leaving some groups hundreds of thousands of dollars in the red.

‘We’re not closing our doors,’ groups vow

The termination of grants to youth justice organizations constitutes just one part of a larger wave of cuts by the Department of Justice that affect everything from mental health support for police officers to interventions that stem opioid-related deaths. [According to Reuters](#), a total of \$811 million in justice-related grants were eliminated last week. Some youth justice organizations have lost most or all of their budgets.

The National Council of Juvenile and Family Court Judges, which houses the oldest juvenile justice [research group](#) in the nation, had \$15 million in grants terminated. According to their most recent tax filings, the council’s 2023 revenue was just over [\\$12 million](#). The Gault Center, which trains and supports youth defenders, lost a grant of more than \$800,000, or roughly half of the group’s budget.

“We’re not closing our doors,” said Senior Youth Policy Strategist Amy Borrer, “but it does put our work at risk.”

The National Prison Rape Elimination Act Resource Center — which provides training and resources required under a [2002 federal mandate](#) protecting incarcerated people from sexual

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Impact Justice Vice President and Senior Project Advisor Michela Bowman. She's concerned about young people who are especially vulnerable to sexual abuse inside locked facilities: LGBTQ+ youth and those with physical or cognitive disabilities.



Michela Bowman

“When the systems aren’t in place, when you don’t have functioning reporting mechanisms, when you don’t have support systems on the outside of institutions, when you don’t have the ability to conduct meaningful investigations, people begin to assume that they can get away with abuse,” she said. “Inevitably, people become less safe.”

Another blow hit staff at Impact Justice on Sunday night, when they received notice that federal funding would be cut for their California Justice Leaders Program, which employs formerly incarcerated people as mentors and coaches for youth. That fallout stemmed from larger cuts to the AmeriCorps program.

‘A glimmer of hope’

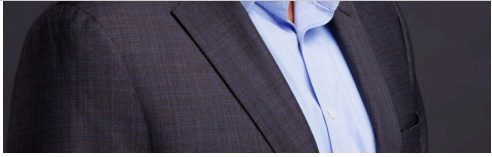
While the wholesale cancellation of grants in progress came as a shock, few at the affected organizations expected their work to emerge unscathed from the Trump administration’s broader purge of federal funding. Many began preparing as soon as Trump was re-elected by paring back budgets and leaving positions unfilled when staff members left.

Eyeing the assault on public spending Trump doggedly pursued earlier this year, David Muhammad, executive director of the National Institute for Criminal Justice Reform, acted early on. He paid out \$1.5 million in grants to five youth-serving, community-based organizations ahead of the scheduled three-year plan to spend down the money in order to get the urgently needed work started.

The Oakland-based Youth Alive! — which lost \$2 million in funding to support gunshot victims, mediate conflicts and interrupt deadly cycles of retaliation — is asking supporters to contact California Gov. Gavin Newsom and encourage the state to “double down on its commitment for effective and proven strategies that serve victims, reduce shootings, and create safer communities,” Executive Director Joe Griffin wrote in an email blast.

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David Muhammad

Muhammad, whose organization lost four grants totalling more than \$3 million. He pointed to his group's work with law enforcement and corrections aimed at reducing violent crime. "If they actually review the appeals, they would learn that this work is not in conflict with their priorities."

Similar resolve can be found at other organizations, despite the ongoing scramble to find ways to continue their work with gutted budgets.

"This is not the end," wrote Jeannette Pai-Espinosa in a statement disseminated by Justice and Joy, which provides training and technical assistance to programs that support girls and gender-expansive young people in 18 states and the District of Columbia. "We are committed to finding replacement funding to continue this important work to ensure that the courage, brilliance, and determination of girls and gender-expansive young people is recognized and nurtured."

Litigation is another possibility. Grant awards constitute a contract between a federal agency and a grantee, stated Ryan, the former federal justice official. Canceling even a single grant after it has been awarded, she said, is highly unusual — an action that would generally only be taken after a finding that a grantee had engaged in financial malfeasance or misused grant funds.

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What's more, many legal scholars argue, funds appropriated by Congress cannot unilaterally be terminated by the administration without violating the separation of powers.

How organizations will move forward from these cuts, and even whether some will survive, depends in great part on the administration's next moves. The cancellation of \$170 million in grant funds could be "just the opening salvo" of what Ryan anticipates will be a flood of further cuts to youth-serving groups.

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