News

Students at a school in Kandi, Benin, line up for meals.

Students at a school in Kandi, Benin, are pictured in a file photo lining up as parent volunteers prepare and serve meals for students under a Catholic Relief Services' program called Food for Education, funded by the U.S. Department of Agriculture and run in partnership with local organizations. (OSV News/Catholic Relief Services/Michael Stulman)



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Funding for humanitarian aid is again on the federal government’s chopping block, lobbing another blow at groups like Catholic Relief Services that heavily rely on public money for programs focused on settling refugees and humanitarian aid.

The House voted early Friday (July 18) voted to pass the Senate version of a package to claw back $9 billion — about $8 billion for international aid and about $1 billion for public broadcasting — that had been appropriated earlier this year.

The House had earlier voted to approve a similar package at the urging of President Donald Trump, and the Senate early Thursday narrowly passed an amended version, which lowered the amount of funding being cut by around $400 million.

The House vote now sends the clawback bill to Trump’s desk.

"What we're seeing is that our country is stepping back kind of preemptively from doing good work that the administration and the Congress agreed to just three months ago," Bill O'Keefe, executive vice president at CRS, said ahead of the Senate's vote earlier in the week. O'Keefe called the actions "hamstringing the future."

The federal funding was appropriated a few months ago in large part for the current fiscal year, and a large portion of it is supposed to go toward migration and refugee help, international peacekeeping efforts and foreign economic support.

House Speaker Mike Johnson (R-La.), said in a post on X early Friday that the $9 billion the chamber voted to claw back is "unnecessary and wasteful spending" and called the $8 billion in aid funding "outrageous expenses overseas."

"President Trump and House Republicans promised fiscal responsibility and government efficiency. Today, we're once again delivering on that promise," he said in his post.

"This isn't the end, it's the beginning," he added, noting the current Congress looks "forward to passing additional rescissions bills," referring to legislation that claws back already-appropriated funding.

Bill O'Keefe

Bill O'Keefe is executive vice president for mission, mobilization and advocacy for Catholic Relief Services. (CNS/Catholic Relief Services/Philip Laubner)

Sen. Tim Kaine, a Virginia Democrat, spoke July 16 on the Senate floor about the importance of funding work to resettle refugees in the U.S., specifically noting efforts by his own Catholic church in Richmond to help Congolese refugees.

Kaine, a Catholic, on July 17 unsuccessfully introduced an amendment aimed to strip out the cuts to faith-based groups like CRS.

"These are legal immigrants to the U.S.," Kaine said in an interview. "What grabs my heart is, hey, if they're here legally, we would want them to be successful, not make it harder for them."

The about-face on the appropriated funds marks a radical change by Republicans to eliminate aid funding and surrender congressional authority over the power of the purse. That differs from earlier this year when the Trump administration unilaterally dismantled the U.S. Agency for International Development, a major player in U.S. humanitarian work. CRS was the top recipient of USAID funding.

While the money in question hasn't officially been allocated to specific aid organizations, such as CRS, this kind of funding often ends up going to those groups, which then carry out the relevant work on the ground.

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The House earlier in the week passed the legislation package that would claw back about $9.4 billion in funding. The Senate then passed a version that protected relief geared toward health issues like HIV and AIDs, tuberculosis and malaria. It also cut language that would have clawed back $400 million for global health programs, lowering the total cuts to about $9 billion.

Kaine, a member of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, said some of the clawbacks — formally known as rescissions — approved by Congress are rubber-stamping cuts already made by the administration, some of which are being challenged in court.

"I think some of this rescission package is essentially the administration trying to get Congress to say yes to the cuts that they've already made," Kaine said. "Some of the cuts may be new cuts. Some of the cuts are congressional affirmation that what the White House did, which is locked up in litigation, is OK."

The White House did not respond to a request for comment.

This $9 billion package is significantly more than has been clawed back in recent decades, according to the Bipartisan Policy Center, which looked at trends from 1974, when the executive branch was given this power, through 2018.

While the package across both chambers passed largely along party lines, there were a few Senate Republicans who voted against the legislation, like Lisa Murkowski of Alaska and Susan Collins of Maine.

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Murkowski, in a floor speech July 16, underscored Congress' job as the appropriators of federal money, saying lawmakers need to do more "when it comes to our own authorities, our constitutional authorities, when it comes to the power of the purse."

A member of the Senate Appropriations Committee and a Catholic, Murkowski criticized the package to claw back funds, saying it's not clear what specific programs would face cuts.

"I think that we are entitled to have that level of detail when these funds that we have authorized, that we have appropriated to, are now being clawed back," she said, ahead of the vote. "I don't think that that is too much to ask."

Republican Sen. Eric Schmitt of Missouri, who proposed the amended version of the legislation that would retain funding for humanitarian work related to AIDs and other health issues and lowered the proposed clawback amount to about $9 billion, called amendments put forward by Democrats "ridiculous." He said the Senate was "going to pass this bill to make sure that we honor our pledge to save taxpayer dollars, $9 billion of wasteful spending."

The legislative package clawing back the funding mostly targets funding for the State Department, USAID and related entities, but also includes about $1 billion in cuts in funding already appropriated for the Corporation for Public Broadcasting, which funds NPR and PBS.

*This story has been updated to clarify that CRS does not work with refugees at Sen. Tim Kaine's church.

*Editor's note: This story has been updated to include the House of Representatives' vote.*