

‘Unrecognizable and highly toxic’: NIH staffers speak out ahead of Senate hearing on budget cuts

More than 300 staffers signed a letter to the NIH director urging him to stop politically motivated cuts and delays to research grants.

By [Anna Kuchment](#) Globe Staff, Updated June 9, 2025, 11:08 a.m.



Jay Bhattacharya, director of the National Institutes of Health, speaks during an event in the Roosevelt Room at the White House, Monday, May 12, 2025, in Washington. MARK SCHIEFELBEIN/ASSOCIATED PRESS

As a student at Framingham High School, Nina Friedman loved biology and psychology. A few years later, she landed a [dream position at the National Institutes of Health](#) in Bethesda, where she studies how adult brains adapt and learn, with implications for treating cognitive decline.

Since January, however, her coveted position has been tarnished by [changes under the Trump administration](#), she said. First, she watched as colleagues [lost their jobs](#) and were temporarily barred from traveling and speaking with the public. Then, during what ordinarily would have been a routine job renewal process, the head of her lab was put on administrative leave for weeks, leaving her and her colleagues in limbo.

“We all met on Zoom and were like, ‘What do we do? Do we still have a lab? Do we have jobs?’” said Friedman, who is earning her PhD in neuroscience at the University of Maryland and spoke to the Globe in her personal capacity and as a member of UAW 2750,

a union that represents NIH fellows. "That really impacted my ability to do productive work."

The uncertainty over her future and the future of US scientific research led her and 341 other NIH workers to [send a letter](#) to NIH Director Dr. Jay Bhattacharya Monday morning urging him to stop politicizing research and to restore grants that were cut or delayed for what they believed to be ideological reasons.

"[W]e dissent to Administration policies that undermine the NIH mission, waste public resources, and harm the health of Americans and people across the globe," said the letter, which was addressed to Bhattacharya, Robert F. Kennedy, Jr., Secretary of the Department of Health and Human Services, which houses NIH, and members of Congress who oversee the NIH.

In a statement, an HHS spokesperson said the agency is actively working to remove ideological influence from the scientific process. "NIH funding decisions must be based on the merit of provable and testable hypotheses, not ideological narratives. When projects have failed to meet these standards, they have been discontinued so we can redirect resources to rigorous, impactful science," according to the statement.

The letter from NIH workers was timed to Bhattacharya's Tuesday morning testimony before the Senate Committee on Appropriations, which will take up the President's Fiscal Year 2026 budget request for the NIH. The request calls for a major restructuring of the agency, including a roughly 40 percent cut to the NIH budget.

"This restructuring will create efficiencies within NIH that will allow the agency to focus on true science and coordinate research to make the best use of federal funds," according to a recently released summary of President Trump's [budget request](#).

Since Jan. 20, the NIH has terminated more than \$3.7 billion in grants across all US states and DC, according to [a tracker](#) compiled by Scott Delaney, an epidemiologist at the [Harvard T.H. Chan School of Public Health](#), and Noam Ross of [rOpenSci](#), a statistical analysis firm for the sciences. Massachusetts, which in the past has received more NIH funding per capita than any other state, lost \$1.3 billion as of June 3.

Some of the grants were cut because they allegedly violated Trump executive orders barring funding for research related to diversity, equity, and inclusion and [LGBTQ health](#). Some were cut because of a mandate to stop funding research related to the COVID-19 pandemic. Others were cancelled for reasons that are unclear.

In the statement from NIH, a spokesperson said, "We are reviewing each case of termination to ensure appropriateness, and we've already reinstated some individuals. Still, as NIH priorities evolve, so must our staffing model to ensure alignment with our central mission and being good stewards of taxpayer dollars."

But the workers behind the letter said grants are being terminated based on political preferences and without input from scientific staff or Congress, which amounts to censorship of critical research.

"My workplace has become unrecognizable and highly toxic," said one NIH program officer who requested anonymity for fear of retaliation from the Trump administration.

After months of telling herself that things would get better and to hunker down and mitigate harms from the inside, the NIH program officer said she's had enough.

"I feel like I've reached my personal limit for the duck and cover approach," she said. "I just don't think we're able to effectively uphold the science anymore."

Multiple times a week, she and other program officers are asked by the grants office to review grants that have been flagged to make sure they're in compliance with Trump executive orders and new "agency priorities," she said.

"I get a list of grants and they ask, 'Should we terminate this? Is it DEI or related to gender identity or vaccine hesitancy?' If I say 'No, it's not,' they come back, 'Well, why did it get flagged, then?' It seems like they're not even taking our scientific assessment at face value."

Around a quarter of the two dozen active grants she shepherds have been flagged, terminated, or ordered to be revised, she said.

"I have grants that are meritorious but can't be funded because they had the word 'vaccine' in them, or it is from Northwestern or another university we can't give money to," she said.

A job she once enjoyed has become soul crushing, she said.

"I can find another job, but I don't have another soul," she said. "If I don't speak up, I can't live with myself. I just can't."

The NIH workers modeled their letter, which they call the "Bethesda Declaration," on Bhattacharya's "[Great Barrington Declaration](#)," a controversial statement he authored with two other experts in the fall of 2020 opposing pandemic-era lockdowns and arguing that there was no scientific consensus for school closures and other stringent measures. Bhattacharya was a Stanford University professor at the time.

"Academic freedom is a core scientific principle, and we deeply appreciate your public commitment to it," they wrote. The letter continued, "We hope you will welcome this dissent."

In a statement Monday morning, Bhattacharya said, "The Bethesda Declaration has some fundamental misconceptions about the policy directions the NIH has taken in recent months ... Nevertheless, respectful dissent in science is productive. We all want the NIH to succeed."

Ninety-two workers signed their names to the letter and the rest signed anonymously. Employees from all 27 NIH institutes and centers gave their support to the declaration. Most who signed are intimately involved with evaluating and overseeing extramural research grants, according to the Associated Press.

The signatories speak for "countless others at NIH who share our concerns but who—due to a culture of fear and suppression created by this Administration—chose not to sign their names for fear of retaliation," according to the letter.

In parallel to the Bethesda Declaration, the group Stand Up for Science Monday morning circulated [a petition](#) of support for the NIH letter. Nineteen Nobel Laureates, including [Victor Ambros of the University of Massachusetts Chan Medical School](#) in Worcester, had signed on as of Monday morning.

Friedman said she and her colleagues are fearful of losing their jobs for speaking out but decided the risk was worthwhile.

"I'm terrified, but I really want to have a career in medical research, and I think if no one does anything, we won't have much medical research in this country," she said. "If I get a PhD and then there's nothing else for me to do with this knowledge that I've acquired, then what's the point?"

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