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NIH staff and biomedical community sound alarm about agency politicization, funding slowdown

In test of NIH director’s support of dissent, NIH staff sign Bethesda Declaration urging reversal of grant cuts and freezes

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Staff at the National Institutes of Health have issued a declaration calling on their director to depoliticize the agency and reverse spending cuts. ALISA MACHALEK/NATIONAL INSTITUTES OF HEALTH

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In an unusual act of public protest, more than 340 scientists and staff at the National Institutes of Health today released a [statement](#) charging NIH officials and their superiors with politicizing science. The employees implore their new director to reverse cuts and freezes to external grants touching on topics such as diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) that President

Donald Trump has targeted with executive orders.

Dubbed the Bethesda Declaration—NIH’s main campus sits in the Maryland suburb—the plea comes as concerns about cuts and delays to biomedical research by the Trump administration have escalated and NIH head Jayanta “Jay” Bhattacharya prepares to testify tomorrow before a Senate spending committee. The panel is reviewing a White House [budget proposal](#) that would slash the agency’s funding by about 40% for the 2026 fiscal year.

The declaration is also aimed at testing Bhattacharya’s avowed support for scientific dissent, organizers say. “We share his stated appreciation for academic freedom and want to hold him accountable to that commitment,” says Jenna Norton, program officer at the National Institute of Diabetes and Digestive and Kidney Diseases, one of about 90 agency staff who signed their names. The declaration has also been sent to key members of Congress and Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) Secretary Robert F. Kennedy Jr.

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The signatories, including 250 anonymous employees, represent staffers at all 27 NIH institutes and centers, from postdocs with in-house research labs to grants administration personnel and deputy directors of divisions. Some signatories were part of White House–imposed layoffs but technically remain employed because of court orders.

The declaration signers make up a relatively small portion of NIH’s employees, who numbered about 20,000 in January before the layoffs, early retirement offers, and other departures thinned the agency’s ranks by several thousand people. A [second letter backing the Bethesda Declaration](#) has so far been signed by 19 Nobel Prize winners and two former NIH leaders, among others. The two statements come as new data suggest NIH funding disbursements for ongoing grants ground to a halt in May, fueling fears that much of NIH’s 2025 budget will go unspent.

The declaration organizers write that they modeled their protest after the Great Barrington Declaration, a 2020 statement written by Bhattacharya and others that decried COVID-19 lockdowns and other public health restrictions. The health economist, then at Stanford University, and his two co-signers argued instead to focus on protecting only the most vulnerable groups from SARS-CoV-2. Bhattacharya has said his pandemic views were suppressed by the mainstream medical establishment and, since arriving at NIH in April, vowed to foster a culture of “dissent” at the agency.

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Adopting that language, the NIH authors of the declaration write, “We dissent to Administration policies that undermine the NIH mission, waste public resources, and harm the health of Americans and people across the globe.” Despite concerns expressed to NIH leaders, “we remain pressured to implement harmful measures.”

The letter points to NIH’s targeting of universities such as Columbia and Harvard with “indiscriminate” grant terminations, freezes in payments, and “blanket holds on awards” because Trump officials have accused the schools of antisemitism or other forms of discrimination. The declaration charges NIH with “censoring critical research” by cutting hundreds of grants on health disparities, COVID-19, the health impacts of climate change, gender research, and DEI. It also urges Bhattacharya to allow foreign collaboration “to continue without disruption,” a reference to a new policy that NIH grantees say is [shutting down clinical trials](#) and other work abroad.

In a written statement, Bhattacharya responded: “The Bethesda Declaration has some fundamental misconceptions about the policy directions the NIH has taken in recent months, including the continuing support of the NIH for international collaboration. Nevertheless, respectful dissent in science is productive. We all want the NIH to succeed.”

In their support letter, Jeremy Berg, former director of the National Institute of General Medical Sciences (NIGMS) and former editor-in-chief of *Science*, and 38 others write that they “stand with these committed professionals in support of reversing the harmful actions of this administration.” The letter writers also take issue with Kennedy’s Make America Healthy Again agenda, which argues that the nation is facing an unprecedented chronic disease crisis and NIH must focus on it. This “glamoriz[es] a mystical past” and “ignor[es] important progress” in diseases such as heart disease and childhood cancer, they write.

Stanford chemist and Nobel laureate Carolyn Bertozzi says she signed on to support the Bethesda Declaration because “this represents the voices of the highly trained Americans at NIH who want to serve their country and steward the biomedical enterprise.”

NIH’s slow spending also continues to concern many U.S. researchers. Like several media organizations, including *Science*, Berg has been tracking NIH spending since the Trump administration began in January, comparing it with agency disbursements over the same period in past years. NIH spending is now down 33% compared with the same period in 2024, according to his [latest review](#) of grants data through 8 June in the agency’s NIH Reporter database. One “jaw-dropping” new result, Berg says, is that renewals of ongoing grants, which make up the bulk of NIH annual spending, appear to have plummeted to almost zero in May. It is possible that this reflects some delay in updating NIH Reporter, he notes.

But a halt in ongoing awards is consistent with concerns from NIH’s program officers that grants are increasingly being delayed for reviews or a second look by HHS overseers or the White House’s Department of Government Efficiency task force to make sure they don’t involve an evolving list of verboten topics. These reviews cover projects that passed peer review during former President Joe Biden’s administration. The layoffs of grants management staff are also slowing grantmaking.

In a 29 May meeting with 15 science societies and other biomedical research groups, Bhattacharya said NIH expects to accelerate spending soon and use up its full budget by the end of the fiscal year on 30 September. The groups, including the Association of American Medical Colleges and AAAS, which publishes *Science*, wrote Bhattacharya in a letter last week that “we appreciate your commitment that NIH will fully obligate all FY25 funds by the end of the fiscal year.”

One way NIH is trying to do that is by funding all years of a multiyear grant, NIH staff and budget documents released last week say. But many research groups remain worried that the agency will still have billions unspent and that sum will be returned to the U.S. Department of the Treasury, with the lower spending level used to justify Trump’s proposal to slash NIH’s budget for next year. The spending slowdown is expected to be raised by Democrats and some Republicans at tomorrow’s hearing before the Senate Appropriations subcommittee that oversees NIH’s budget.

Update, 9 June, 3:45 p.m.: This story has been updated with a comment from Bhattacharya.

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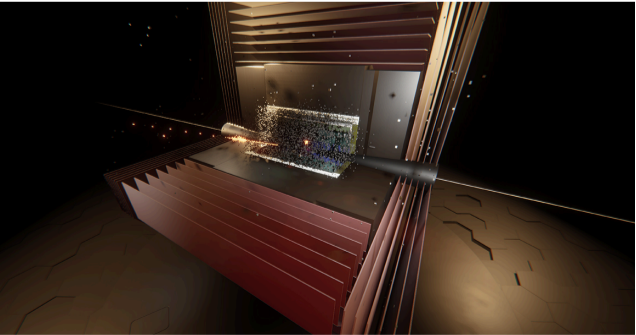


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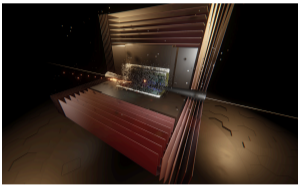
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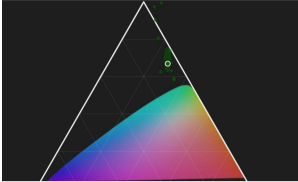
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