Trump Froze Out Project 2025 in His Campaign. Now Its Blueprint Is His Health Care Playbook.

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February 26, 2025 By Stephanie Armour and KFF Health News

Few voters likely expected President Donald Trump in the first weeks of his administration to slash billions of dollars from the nation's premier federal cancer research agency.

But funding cuts to the National Institutes of Health were presaged in Project 2025's "Mandate for Leadership," a conservative plan for governing that Trump said he knew nothing about during his campaign. Now, his administration has embraced it.

The 922-page playbook compiled by the Heritage Foundation, a conservative research group in Washington, says "the NIH monopoly on directing research should be broken" and calls for capping payments to universities and their hospitals to "help reduce federal taxpayer subsidization of leftist agendas."

Universities, now slated to face sweeping cuts in agency grants that cover these overhead costs, say the policy will destroy ongoing and future biomedical science. A federal judge temporarily halted the cuts to medical research on February 10 after they drew legal challenges from medical institutions and 22 states.

Project 2025 as Prologue

The rapid-fire adoption of many of Project 2025's objectives indicates that Trump acolytes — many of its contributors were veterans of his first term, and some have joined his second administration — have for years quietly laid the groundwork to disrupt the national health system. That runs counter to Trump's insistence on the campaign trail, after Democrats made Project 2025 a potent attack line, that he was ignorant of the document.

"I have no idea what Project 2025 is," Trump said October 31 at a rally in Albuquerque, New Mexico, one of many times he disclaimed any knowledge of the plan. "I've never read it, and I never will."

But because his administration is hewing to the Heritage Foundation-compiled playbook so closely, opposition groups and some state Democratic leaders say they're able to act swiftly to counter Trump's moves in court.

They're now preparing for Trump to act on Project 2025 recommendations for some of the nation's largest and most important health programs, including Medicaid and Medicare, and for federal health agencies.

"There has been a lot of planning on the litigation side to challenge the executive orders and other early actions from a lot of different organizations," said Noah Bookbinder, president of Citizens for Responsibility and Ethics in Washington, a watchdog group. "Project 2025 allowed for some preparation."

The plan, for example, calls for state flexibility to impose premiums for some beneficiaries, work requirements, and lifetime caps or time limits on Medicaid coverage for some enrollees in the program for low-income and disabled Americans, which could lead to a surge in the number of uninsured after the Biden administration vastly expanded the program's coverage.

"These proposals don't directly alter eligibility for Medicaid or the benefits provided, but the ultimate effect would be fewer people with health coverage," said Larry Levitt, executive vice president for health policy at KFF, a health information nonprofit that includes KFF Health News. "When you erect barriers to people enrolling in Medicaid, like premiums or documenting work status, you end up rationing coverage by complexity and ability to pay."

Congressional Republicans are contemplating a budget plan that could result in hundreds of billions of dollars being trimmed from Medicaid over 10 years.

Project 2025 called for expanding access to health plans that don't comply with the Affordable Care Act's strongest consumer protections. That may lead to more choice and lower monthly premiums for buyers, but unwitting consumers may face potentially massive out-of-pocket costs for care the plans won't cover.

And Project 2025 called for halting Medicaid funding to Planned Parenthood affiliates. The organization, an important health care provider for women across the country, gets roughly $700 million annually from Medicaid and other government programs, based on its 2022-2023 report. Abortion made up about 4% of services the organization provided to patients, the report says.

The administration's steps to scrub words such as "equity" from federal documents, erase transgender identifiers, and curtail international medical aid — all part of the Project 2025 wish list — have already had sweeping ramifications, hobbling access to health care and eviscerating international programs that aim to prevent disease and improve maternal health outcomes.

Under a memorandum issued in January, for example, Trump reinstated and expanded a ban on federal funds to global organizations that provide legal information on abortions.

Studies have found that the ban, known as the “global gag rule” or “Mexico City Policy,” has stripped millions of dollars away from foreign aid groups that didn’t abide by it. It’s also had a chilling effect: In Zambia, one group removed information in brochures on contraception, and in Turkey, some providers stopped talking with patients about menstrual regulation as a form of family planning.

Project 2025 called on the next president to reinstate the gag rule, saying it “should be drafted broadly to apply to all foreign assistance.”

Trump also signed an executive order rolling back transgender rights by banning federal funds for transition-related care for people under age 19. An order he signed also directed the federal government to recognize only two sexes, male and female, and use the term “sex” instead of “gender.”

The Project 2025 document calls for deleting the term “gender identity” from federal rules, regulations, and grants and for unwinding policies and procedures that its authors say are used to advance a “radical redefinition of sex.” In addition, it states that Department of Health and Human Services programs should “protect children’s minds and bodies.”

“Radical actors inside and outside government are promoting harmful identity politics that replaces biological sex with subjective notions of ‘gender identity,’” the Project 2025 road map reads.

Limited health insurance	"Expand choices for small businesses and workers, both in and out of the exchanges, by codifying an expansion of association health plans, short-term health plans, and health reimbursement arrangements;" increase access to health savings accounts (Page 470).	No action to date.
Medicaid	The federal government should clarify that states can adopt work requirements for nondisabled recipients and broaden "the application of targeted premiums and cost sharing to higher-income enrollees" (Page 468). The document also calls for targeted time limits or lifetime caps on benefits; flexibility to "eliminate obsolete mandatory and optional benefit requirements"; and a "blended match rate, block grants, aggregate caps, or per capita caps" (pages 466 and 468).	Though Trump has not taken executive action on Medicaid, he did endorse the House Republican budget document that could result in deep cuts to the program.
Medicare	Enroll people in Medicare Advantage, the commercially run alternative to the traditional program, by default at age 65, and end many Biden policies, including negotiation with drugmakers to lower prices for medicines (Page 465).	Trump has not taken executive action on Medicare and has pledged to protect it.
Medication abortion	"Abortion pills pose the single greatest threat to unborn children in a post-*Roe* world" (Page 457).	Robert F. Kennedy Jr., secretary of Health and Human Services, said at his first confirmation hearing that Trump had asked him to study the safety of mifepristone, a commonly used abortion medication.
Obamacare premiums	"To make health insurance coverage more affordable for those who are without government subsidies, CMS should develop a plan to separate the non-subsidized insurance market from the subsidized market, giving the non-subsidized market regulatory relief from the costly ACA regulatory mandates" (pages 469-470).	No action to date.
WHO	"The manifest failure and corruption of the World Health Organization (WHO) during the COVID-19 pandemic is an example of the danger that international organizations pose to U.S. citizens and interests" (Page 191).	Trump issued an executive order to withdraw the U.S. from the WHO, saying the organization mishandled the covid-19 pandemic.

Source: KFF Health News reporting as of of Feb. 19, 2025

Data Disappears

As a result of Trump's order on gender identity, health researchers say, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention took down online information about transgender health and removed data on LGBTQ+ health. A federal judge on February 11 ordered that much of the information be restored; the administration complied but added notices to some webpages labeling them "extremely inaccurate" and claiming they don't "reflect biological reality."

The CDC also delayed the release of information and findings on bird flu in the agency's Morbidity and Mortality Weekly Report. Federal workers have said they were told to retract papers that contain words such as "nonbinary" or "transgender." And some hospitals suspended gender-affirming care such as hormone therapy and puberty blockers for youths.

Advocacy groups say the orders discriminate and pose barriers to medically necessary care, and transgender children and their families have filed a number of court challenges.

Lawyers, advocates, and researchers say implementation of many of Project 2025's health policy goals poses a threat.

"The playbook presents an antiscience, antidata, and antimedicine agenda," according to a piece last year by Boston University researchers in JAMA.

The Project 2025 blueprint sets out goals to curb access to medication abortion, restructure public health agencies, and weaken protections against sex-based discrimination. It would have seniors

enroll by default in Medicare Advantage plans run by commercial insurers, in essence privatizing the health program for older Americans. And it calls for eliminating coverage requirements for Affordable Care Act plans that people buy without federal subsidies, which, insurance experts say, risks leaving people underinsured.

“It’s the agenda of the Trump administration,” said Robert Weissman, a co-president of Public Citizen, a progressive consumer rights advocacy group. “It’s to minimize access to care under the guise of strict work requirements in Medicaid, privatizing Medicare, and rolling back consumer protections and subsidies in the Affordable Care Act.”

The White House didn’t respond to a message seeking comment. Conservatives have said implementation of the project’s proposals would curb waste and fraud in federal health programs and free health systems from the clutches of a radical “woke” agenda.

“Americans are tired of their government being used against them,” Paul Dans, a lawyer and former director of Project 2025, said last year in a statement. “The administrative state is, at best, completely out of touch with the American people and, at worst, is weaponized against them.”

Dans did not return messages seeking comment for this article.

The Heritage Foundation has sought to separate itself and Project 2025 from Trump’s executive orders and other initiatives on health.

“This isn’t about our recommendations in Project 2025 – something we’ve been doing for more than 40 years. This is about President Trump delivering on his promises to make America safer, stronger, and better than ever before, and he and his team deserve the credit,” Ellen Keenan, a spokesperson for Heritage, said in a statement.

Versions of the document have been produced roughly every four years since the 1980s and have influenced other GOP presidents. Former President Ronald Reagan adopted about two-thirds of the recommendations from an earlier Heritage guide, the group says.

In some instances, the Trump administration hasn’t just followed Project 2025’s proposals but has gone beyond them.

The document called on the next president to scale back and “deradicalize” the U.S. Agency for International Development, an independent federal agency that provides foreign aid and assistance, including for many international health programs. The administration hasn’t just scaled back USAID. Trump adviser Elon Musk bragged on his social media platform, X, that his “Department of Government Efficiency” fed the agency “into the wood chipper,” physically closing its offices and putting nearly all its staff on administrative leave while ending funding for its programs and disseminating misinformation about them.

But the administration risks waning public support if it adopts the project’s goals to upend U.S. health care and health policy. Almost 60% of voters said they felt negatively about Project 2025 in

a September poll by NBC News.

“Project 2025 was never a thought exercise; it was always a blueprint,” said Ally Boguhn, a spokesperson for Reproductive Freedom for All, an abortion rights group. “We’re only a few weeks into his presidency, and it’s setting the groundwork for even more.”

We’d like to speak with current and former personnel from the Department of Health and Human Services or its component agencies who believe the public should understand the impact of what’s happening within the federal health bureaucracy. Please message KFF Health News on Signal at (415) 519-8778 or get in touch here.

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