

A BUMPY RETURN

Their NIH Grants Are Back. But Nothing Is Back to Normal.

By [Stephanie M. Lee](#) July 30, 2025



JOHN W. TOMAC FOR THE CHRONICLE

When the National Institutes of Health terminated six of Katie M. Edwards's grants this year, she decided to join a lawsuit against the government. Doing so, she knew, could bring negative attention to her efforts to prevent violence among LGBTQ+ and Indigenous youth. But as the Trump administration carries out a sweeping attack on

scientific research it considers unfavorable, “I had to do it for my staff, for our life-saving work, for broader justice and public-health research,” said Edwards, a social-work professor at the University of Michigan at Ann Arbor.

Last month, a federal judge in Boston sided with the plaintiffs and ordered the NIH to restore about 900 grants. Now money is coming back in the latest wave of [federal-funding reinstatements](#). Edwards and more than a dozen other scientists told *The Chronicle* that they are grateful and thrilled. But they’re overwhelmed, too.

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After being forced to halt research midstream, lay off staff, and alter career plans, researchers say picking up where they left off is complicated — scientifically, financially, and logistically. A month after the ruling, some had confirmation that their payments had resumed, and others were anxiously waiting for clarity. Still others were discovering that they wouldn't actually get any money at all.

Louisa A. Stark, a professor of human genetics at the University of Utah, said she was looking forward to rescheduling sessions for her program, which trains middle- and high-school teachers on how to teach biotechnology concepts. “I’m ecstatic,” she said. “I think that this is just incredible that the grant has been reinstated.”

But she, like others, said she was now operating under a new assumption: that the Trump administration will find a way to yank back the funding once again. “I do not trust 100 percent,” she added, “that there won’t be another termination.”

\$0 Reinstatements

By one estimate, [at least \\$1.8 billion in NIH funding](#) was cut this spring. The number of terminations to date may exceed 3,000, according to [Grant Witness](#), a volunteer-run database that combines crowdsourced and government data. The NIH declared that some of these grants did not align with the agency's priorities because their purported connection to topics like gender, diversity, and vaccine hesitancy made them "unscientific" or based on "amorphous equity objectives." But on June 16, Judge William G. Young of the U.S. District Court for Massachusetts [declared such cancellations](#) to be "void and illegal."

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"I am hesitant to draw this conclusion — but I have an unflinching obligation to draw it — that this represents racial discrimination, and discrimination against America's LGBTQ community," said Young, an appointee of President Ronald Reagan. He ruled in favor of a lawsuit filed by organizations that included the American Public Health Association, the American Civil Liberties Union, and the United Auto Workers union, as well as individual researchers. A second lawsuit was brought by 16 Democrat-led states.

"It was the first time in months I had finally felt like I could really breathe," Edwards said, recalling how she'd sobbed with relief and hope while streaming the ruling. Joshua Barocas, an associate professor of medicine and epidemiology at the University of Colorado Anschutz Medical Campus, cried, too. "In science, we've been living in this limbo period for the past five, six months," he said. "I feel very lucky to have a second lease on this grant's life." Anita H. Corbett, a senior associate dean for research at Emory University, couldn't wait to tell her students that their funding was returning. "Being able

to be engaged in the lawsuit — even when, I have to be honest, I really had very little hope that we would get the outcome that we’ve gotten — was empowering,” she said.

The aftermath has been more complicated for people like Tara McKay, an associate professor of medicine, health, and society at Vanderbilt University. On February 28, the NIH canceled a grant of hers it had funded since 2019, for a study about older LGBTQ+ adults in the South, their social ties, and their cognitive functioning. Then, a few weeks after the ruling, the NIH told McKay that it would be restored, she said.

But her joy evaporated when the agency also told her that there was no actual money to recover. To be precise, her July 2 notice says that she is owed “\$0.” The NIH’s reasoning: Her budget for the fiscal year had ended a few days prior, on June 30.

McKay believes she is owed the four months’ worth of funds she was never given to spend. During those months, she worked on her own dime to tell participants that the study was ending, wrap up subcontracts, and upload data to a public depository. But Vanderbilt’s grant administrators have told her they don’t want to bill the government for that time, she said, because she was supposed to have stopped all work on the study.

“The ruling had good intentions and information behind it,” McKay said, “but it’s clear that the implementation has struggled a bit.”

Edwards said that she, too, received a \$0 grant restoration. Annelise Mennicke, an associate professor of social work at the University of North Carolina at Charlotte, said that her reinstatement notice doesn’t extend her funding for the three and a half months during which her grant was void. An added challenge to resolving the situation, she said, is that the NIH employee identified as the grant’s administrator no longer works there. The agency has gone through [mass layoffs](#).

During a Monday proceeding in *APHA v. NIH*, a plaintiffs’ attorney told the judge that at least 50 grants had not been recovered. “We are continuing to work to ensure that NIH fully complies with the District Court’s order and that every terminated grant within the scope of the court’s order is reinstated,” said Olga Akselrod, a senior counsel in the racial-

justice program at the ACLU. An NIH spokesperson said the agency “has been working to reinstate grants to comply with the court’s order.”

‘People Can’t Plan’

Now that their funding is back — or ostensibly on its way back — scientists are trying to re-recruit participants and staff, resume data collection, and recapture lost momentum.

Edwards, for instance, is piecing back together a randomized controlled trial that lost federal funding partway through. At the time, she and her colleagues moved participants from the control group into the treatment group. Doing so was the ethical move when it looked like the trial had no future, the researchers decided, because the control group would have eventually received the treatment anyway at the very end. It was “not methodologically sound,” Edwards said — but she believes she can now get back to carrying out the study as planned.

There are external variables to contend with, too. After the ruling, a spokesperson for the Department of Health and Human Services [told reporters](#) that the agency “stands by its decision to end funding for research that prioritized ideological agendas over scientific rigor and meaningful outcomes for the American people” and “is exploring all legal options, including filing an appeal and moving to stay the order.” And in an internal memo days later, the department’s legal counsel laid out various paths that its agencies could take to terminate grants going forward. In one scenario, the memo stated, awards could be ended “for non-alignment with agency priorities” after October 1, when new government-wide regulations from the Office of Management and Budget take effect. The legal risk would be “low to medium,” according to the June 25 guidance, which was first reported by [Stat](#) and later obtained by *The Chronicle*.

But terminations could reoccur even sooner than the fall. On July 24th, the Department of Justice asked the Supreme Court for [an emergency stay](#) that would allow the NIH to recancel the newly reinstated grants. So far, the court has granted almost all such requests by the Trump administration. Akselrod, the ACLU attorney, said that a stay “would only

further exacerbate the chaos and harm that NIH has caused to public health through its illegal actions.”



assistant professor of biology at Pennsylvania State University. “If anything, it’s the very beginning of a Pyrrhic victory.” Vazquez studies the genes of long-living bat species, which have seemingly evolved in ways that lower their odds of cancer. He hopes to prevent it in humans, too. His work is funded through an NIH program for early-career researchers from underrepresented backgrounds, which the government axed this year.

Originally, Vazquez had wanted to collect more than 200 bats — ideally from uranium-rich areas, where they are likely to have developed a resistance to cancer — and sequence their genomes. But because his grant may have a limited shelf life, he’s thinking of analyzing the fewer than 100 he already has, even though they don’t necessarily hail from the most scientifically interesting regions. “This could disappear at any point in time,” Vazquez said of his funding. “So I’m going to use it for short-term things that I know I can use it for, for more immediate questions.”

As the clock ticks, Jennifer A. Surtees, a biochemist at the University at Buffalo, said she feels “a certain urgency to get certain things that are maybe more expensive done now,” such as genome sequencing. And Rachel M. Brewster, a professor of biological sciences at the University of Maryland–Baltimore County, is also planning to splurge when she gets her grant back. “You think I’d be ecstatic. Not at all,” she said. “I’m still unable to plan anything.”

Funded by an NIH program for scientists involved with diversity-related initiatives, Brewster uses genetically modified zebrafish to study how organisms adjust to low levels of oxygen. She wants to pay outside labs to develop those specimens now to ensure they arrive in the future, when her grant has possibly disappeared again. “I am going to outsource as much as I possibly can,” she said — and stock up on gear, too. “Since I’m forced to spend the funds in a record amount of time, and I can’t use them for [students’]

salary, I'll probably end up with a bunch of equipment that is luxury for me," she said. "But whatever."

Wyatte C. Hall, an assistant professor of public-health sciences at the University of Rochester, is struggling to reassure the organizations that have partnered with him on a study about Deaf children and their families. After he lost full or partial funding for more than a half-dozen workers, "their questions are, how do we know this isn't going to happen again?" Hall, who is Deaf, said through an interpreter.

The chaos makes Mennicke, the UNC-Charlotte researcher, hesitant to staff up. "There's going to have to be some very real conversations with the students we hire about the tenuousness of this," said Mennicke, who studies ways to help LGBTQ+ survivors of sexual violence. Although Vazquez had wanted to hire a full team right away at Penn State, now "I have to say, Listen, I can promise you a year of funding, maybe two years of funding," he said. Even so, he's being flooded by applicants more experienced than he was when he was on the job market. The timing of his job was driven by the NIH's turmoil, too: He moved up his start date by a year when he anticipated, correctly, that his postdoctoral funding would be cut short. He feels like he boarded "the last lifeboat off the Titanic."

"When you don't have steady state funding, people can't plan for the future," Vazquez said. "If people can't plan for a future, then no one has a future."

At Colorado State University, a group of undergraduate researchers were plunged into "a dire financial situation" in April when their NIH-funded program was eliminated, said Gregg Dean, an associate dean for research at the university's biomedical college. The decision appeared to be because the program is for "underrepresented students," Dean said, who noted that there is no racial or ethnic requirement and that rural residents, first-generation college attendees, and low-income students have participated. In late July, the students were elated to have the funding back — but the possibility of a Supreme Court intervention looms.

“Will NIH pull back the funding again?” Dean wrote in an email. “Nobody knows, but we all fear the worst.”

New Fine Print

In yet another complication, grants are not necessarily being restored under their original terms. Several scientists said their funding notices require compliance with the gender-equity law Title IX — “including the requirements set forth in Presidential Executive Order 14168 titled Defending Women From Gender Ideology Extremism and Restoring Biological Truth to the Federal Government,” which states that there are two sexes, male and female, and that terms like “man” and “woman” are inextricably tied to biological sex. This fine print has [been showing up in NIH award letters since April](#), *The Chronicle* has reported.

The pressure to say yes can be tremendous. “I’m accepting this grant because I had worked very hard to get it originally, and I want that second year of funding so I can continue and finish my training and go on and do strong work as a queer minority scientist,” said Dominique Ramirez, a biochemistry graduate student at the University of Colorado at Boulder. “Me accepting the terms and conditions is not me approving or thinking that this executive order is okay, because I don’t believe that at all.”

Mara Decker, an associate professor of epidemiology and biostatistics at the University of California at San Francisco, accepted the terms even though she wasn’t sure if they conflicted with state laws. She said that her team is trying to strike a “balancing act” when describing their research. “Before, where we would have said, ‘All youth, including this group, this group, this group, deserve respect,’ now we are saying, ‘All youth deserve respect,’” she said.

Given the Trump administration’s attack on anything it perceives as related to diversity, Wagner Dantas, an assistant professor of human physiology at the University of Oregon, recently changed his lab’s website. “I used to have a very clear statement for DEI, which I just removed, unfortunately,” he said. “Because I do have family, I do have two kids ... I gotta think about a big picture.”

David H. Petering, professor emeritus of chemistry and biochemistry at the University of Wisconsin at Milwaukee, said his institution is deciding whether to take back his grant because of its new requirement about the anti-trans executive order. The term has also appeared in two grants that Edwards, the University of Michigan professor, is working on but not leading. One recipient institution has accepted, while the other is trying to get the phrasing scrubbed, she said.

Her fellow scientists, she warned, should think carefully about conceding.

“I hear this word ‘pivot’ coming from researchers: ‘I’m going to pivot my research, I’m going to write a grant and focus on LGB and take out the T,’” Edwards said. “That alarms me. I think we can’t bend the knee to this administration and these harmful executive orders. I think that we, as scientists, have an ethical obligation and duty to fight back.”

We welcome your thoughts and questions about this article. Please [email the editors](#) or [submit a letter](#) for publication.

Correction (Aug. 5, 2025, 1:35 p.m.): A previous version of this article stated that more than 900 grants were set to be restored. The correct figure is approximately 900.

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