Congress and Bush End Fiscal Year 2008 Appropriations Stalemate

Just in time for the holidays, Congress and the President reached an agreement on H.R. 2764, the “Consolidated Appropriations Act for Fiscal Year 2008”—an agreement that had eluded them since October 1, the beginning of the fiscal year. Democrats fought to retain billions of dollars in added spending for domestic programs, but ultimately they relented and reduced their fiscal 2008 discretionary spending by nearly $23 billion to match the president's top line budget of $933 billion. Extensive compromise became necessary when Congress realized it did not have the votes to override a promised presidential veto of any omnibus bill that exceeded the president’s top line request. Previous versions of the bill that would have split the difference between the President’s request and the additional $23 billion in spending Congress wanted for domestic programs, including medical research, met fierce opposition from the White House.

In the end, the White House received Iraq war funding, while Democrats were able to reshuffle some domestic spending priorities. The omnibus bill encompasses 11 of the 12 regular spending measures for fiscal 2008, plus $70 billion in funding for the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan.

National Institutes of Health and National Center for Health Statistics

Most of the programs in the Labor-Health and Human Services (HHS) portion of the omnibus were subject to a 1.747 percent across-the-board cut to meet the President's spending limit. For the National Institutes of Health (NIH), the omnibus provides an appropriation of $29.229 billion, an increase of $329 million (1.1 percent) over FY 2007. NIH had been slated to receive $30 billion in an initial version of Labor-HHS conference report Congress passed, but the President vetoed. In the re-negotiated omnibus bill, the National Center for Health Statistics (NCHS) received $113.6 million--approximately $3 million less than the conference agreement amount, but still $3.6 million more than the President's request, and $4.6 million more than appropriated in FY 2007. The additional funding is intended to support the agency’s vital statistics data collection efforts.

The omnibus also included language implementing an important policy change at the NIH. The agency is now required to make the results of all the studies it supports available to the public. Under the provision, researchers who receive grants from NIH would have to submit a final copy of studies accepted for publication in a scientific journal. NIH would post the results of the studies in a database available to the public at no cost within 12 months after publication. NIH officials believe it will take the agency six months to fully implement the change.

Census Bureau and National Science Foundation

The omnibus agreement provided the Census Bureau with funding largely reflecting the President’s request, $1.23 billion. However, funds for the economic statistics programs and the American Community Survey Methods Panel were cut to fund other congressional priorities. One of these priorities, the Survey of Income and Program and Participation (SIPP), received $24 million. This funding is sufficient to continue SIPP; however, it is not enough to convene a new panel in January. Instead, a new panel will be started in September, resulting in a future data gap. Congress also redirected $9 million to launch the 2010 Census Partnership Program. The President had not requested any money for the Partnership Program. However, members of the House Commerce, Science, Justice Appropriations Subcommittee called the partnership
program a “vital component of the effort to obtain the most accurate decennial census count possible,” and directed that the money be spent to hire partnership specialists for activities at both the regional and national levels.

Before adjourning for the holidays, Congress and the Administration agreed to a bill temporarily extending the State Children’s Health Insurance Program through March 2009. The bill contained a provision, granting the Census Bureau an additional $10 million to fund data collection on the uninsured as part of the Current Population Survey.

The National Science Foundation (NSF) received only half of the increase it was slated to receive based on what the President had proposed and the Appropriations Committees had recommended. In the FY 2008 Commerce, Science, Justice Appropriations bills passed by the House and Senate, NSF received a 9.8 percent and 10.8 percent increase respectively. However, in the final omnibus bill, the agency received $6.065 billion, an increase of $147.8 million—only 2.4 percent over FY 2007. The Research and Related Activities account was only increased by 3.4 percent over its FY 2007 level for a total of $4.754 billion. While NSF enjoys broad bipartisan support, Congress and the Administration were unable to agree on a substantial funding boost for the agency as a result of the strict spending caps Congress had to adhere to in order to get a final omnibus bill that the President would sign.

United States Agency for International Development

The omnibus spending bill includes $461 million for U.S. international Family Planning/Reproductive Health (FP/RH) programs. This is the higher level that was contained in the Senate bill and represents an increase of $21 million above current levels and a more than 25 percent increase above the amount requested by the President. The FY 2008 State/Foreign Operations Appropriations bill approved by both the House and Senate to provide an exemption from the Global Gag Rule—enabling foreign family planning organizations otherwise ineligible for U.S. FP/RH assistance to continue to receive U.S.-donated contraceptives—was dropped by congressional negotiators in the face of an unwavering veto threat from the President. The Senate-passed amendment to fully overturn the Gag Rule also suffered the same fate.

Other News

Murdock confirmed--On December 19, the United States Senate confirmed Dr. Steve Murdock, the state demographer of Texas and a PAA member, to be the next director of the Census Bureau. Dr. Murdock replaces statistician Louis Kincannon, who resigned 13 months ago, but agreed to stay until his successor was confirmed. President Bush nominated Dr. Murdock in June.

NICHD changes name--In the final days of the session, the House passed under suspension of the rules, and the Senate, by unanimous consent, a bill (S. 2484) to rename the National Institute of Child Health and Human Development (NICHD) of the National Institutes of Health (NIH) as the "Eunice Kennedy Shriver National Institute of Child Health and Human Development." The President signed the bill into law on December 21, 2007.