

Appropriations – What to Know and Why It Matters

Background

Every year, Congress must pass a series of laws that fund the discretionary fundingⁱ for various government agencies and programs that serve a wide range of purposes ranging from defense spending to early childhood education. This process is known as the “Appropriations process.” While it seems straightforward, the process has become complicated over the last few years.

In a typical year, the House and Senate pass separate Appropriations bills that cover every agency of the government and the programs that agencies administer. Then, they find a way to combine the bills and send them to the President for signature. This process must be completed by the end of the day on September 30 of each year.ⁱⁱ

In recent years, Congress has not been able to finish that work on time, and has passed “Continuing Resolutions” (known as a “CR”) to avert government shutdowns. Each CR is different, and can cover a few agencies or all government agencies, and can cover any time period from a day to a year, and can fund the government at current levels, or can enact funding changes. Under a CR, agencies and the programs they support can only access the amount of money in the Continuing Resolution – not the full amount of money for that year. This creates instability and confusion for programs and makes it difficult to plan.

For the current fiscal year, (FY 25) that ends on September 1, 2025, Congress has not allocated funding for the full year; rather, legislators have passed two Continuing Resolutions, each covering a few months. The first expired on December 20; the next will expire on March 14. At that time, Congress can either pass full Appropriations for the government or create another short- or longer-term CR.

At the same time, Congress must begin work on the Appropriations process for the next Fiscal Year (FY 26) which begins on October 1, 2025.

Why It Matters

The programs funded in Appropriations bills cover many of the most important programs that support young children and their families, including the Child Care and Development Block Grant (CCDBG, \$8.75 billion), Head Start, (\$12.27 billion) Preschool Development Grants (\$315 million), Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA, approximately \$15 billion), Child Care Access Means Parents in Schools (CCAMPIS, \$75 million), Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA,

2025 Public Policy Forum

which includes \$18.4 billion in Title I funding for schools), Higher Education Act \$24.6 billion), and more.ⁱⁱⁱ Without stable and reliable funding for these programs, millions of children and their families will lose access to services.

The current year (FY 25) Appropriations will provide the baseline for discussions for the next year (FY 26) Appropriations. To have a useful discussion of funding needs in FY 26, advocates need a clear understanding of whether programs have been continued, funded at the same level as the prior year, increased, or cut.

ⁱ Discretionary funding must be appropriated each year. Mandatory and entitlement funding is enshrined in law and does not have to be addressed each year.

ⁱⁱ At the federal level, the Fiscal Year (FY) runs from October 1 to September 30.

ⁱⁱⁱ Current funding levels for key early learning programs: <https://www.ffyf.org/resources/2024/08/funding-for-key-early-learning-programs-fy2025/>