

The Disability Coalition

Disability Rights Awareness Days

Pre-legislative-session forum

January 10, 2026

What's going on in Washington?

The Trump Administration and
People with Disabilities

Ellen Pinnes

EPinnes@msn.com

Program and Policy Changes

- Opposition to DEI(A) – including disability
 - Executive orders January 20 & 21, 2025 : bar DEI and DEIA efforts in government operations and federally-funded programs, direct all government agencies to act against DEI in the private sector; explicitly add “accessibility”
 - Pressuring private businesses, universities and others to end DEIA efforts
 - Barring/discouraging use of certain words – including “disability”, “accessibility”
- Ending accessibility features:
 - Discontinued ASL interpretation at White House press briefings (ordered reinstated by court) and on WH YouTube channel
 - Removed WH webpage on accessibility; removed ADA guidances
 - Font change at State Department
- Proposed cuts to Protection & Advocacy programs (like Disability Rights NM) providing advocacy for people with disabilities
- Proposed elimination of all funding for University Centers of Excellence in Developmental Disabilities Education, Research & Services (UCEDDs), like UNM Center for Development & Disability

Attitudes toward disability:

- Mocking reporter with physical disability
- Unapologetic use of the R word

Trump Defends Calling Tim Walz ‘Seriously Retarded’: ‘I Think There’s Something Wrong With Him’

 **Harmeet K. Dhillon**  @HarmeetKDhillon

This hat is an hour behind schedule
thanks to influencer retard.



Education

- Lack of enforcement due to staff layoffs in Office of Civil Rights
- Cuts to grants, including for teacher training on disability/ableism and studies of effective special ed practices
- Promoting vouchers (diverting public funds to private schools), undermining public education
- Withdrew grant funding for program serving deaf-blind kids; partially reinstated in face of outcry
 - Program goal to address inequities, racism, bias and marginalization of disability groups; rejected as “in conflict with agency policy and priorities”

Employment

- Withdrawal of Biden-era rule to end 14(c) subminimum wage
- Eliminating wage/overtime protections for direct care workers

Air travel

- Biden-era regulations imposes more obligations on airlines to protect wheelchairs during handling and stowage and to improve treatment of travelers who use wheelchairs
- Was to go into effect 1/2025; enforcement repeatedly suspended (now until 12/31/2026)
- DOT re-evaluating and may modify/withdraw the new regs

Social Security

- Terminated SOAR program that helps people with mental illness who are homeless or at risk of homelessness to qualify for SSI and SSDI (and thereby health coverage)
- Proposed rule change: current rules reduce benefits for recipients who get “in-kind” benefits such as housing/meals but exempt low-income households receiving public assistance such as SNAP. Change would bring them within the rule, leading to loss of SSI benefits
- Proposed changes to criteria for determining disability in SSDI program that will make it harder to qualify – tightening rules for older people, assuming more types of jobs available to people with physical impairments

Department of Energy – proposal to eliminate Sec. 504 requirements for accessibility of the built environment

- Stalking horse for government-wide effort?

Department of Justice – ended use of disparate impact in discrimination cases, making it harder to prove discrimination in disability and other cases (EO 14281, 4/23/2025)

Behavioral health

- Pushing for involuntary mental health treatment and more institutional care instead of home- and community-based services (HCBS)
 - Kennedy proposal to place people with BH issues in labor camps (“wellness farms”)
- HR 1 Medicaid cuts: Medicaid is major provider of BH services
- Substance Abuse & Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA)
 - Staff (originally ~900) cut by hundreds of people
 - Funding cuts → termination of grants → harder for states to provide services for people not covered by Medicaid
- Ordered closure of specialized service for LGBTQ+ callers to 988 BH support line

Homelessness

- Proposals to overhaul homelessness policy
 - Involuntary mental health treatment for homeless people with MH conditions
 - Cut funding for permanent housing/services
 - Eliminate Housing First policy (which offers housing without first mandating mental health/substance use treatment) – risks displacing at least 170,000 people ifrom permanent supportive housing
 - Time limit on housing subsidies and vouchers, making long-term assistance harder

Autism—

- Has gotten a lot of attention from DHHS Secretary Kennedy
 - Stigmatizing statements
 - Claims that vaccines cause autism, contrary to evidence
- Proposal for national registry of people with autism – dropped after outcry
- Promised study finding cause of autism by September 2025
 - Led by a vaccine denier who practiced medicine without a license
 - Target date later deferred to March 2026
- Meanwhile, terminated funding for scientific studies on autism
 - Stripped funding from more than 50 autism-related studies

Government restructuring/ downsizing

Significant staffing reductions across agencies, through layoffs/firings and resignations/retirements

- Includes reductions at agencies especially important to people with disabilities, such as Administration for Community Living, Centers for Medicare & Medicaid Services (CMS), Substance Abuse & Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA), Department of Education, Social Security Administration
- Staff reductions in civil rights offices that enforce civil rights laws that protect the rights of people with disabilities – including at Department of Education, Department of Justice, Social Security Administration, Department of Labor, and Department of Homeland Security

Cuts to disability programs in president's FY 2026 budget proposal

- \$49M cut for Education Department Office of Civil Rights
- \$193M cut for Department of Justice Civil Rights Division
- \$670M cut for CMS (explicitly in response to DEIA executive orders)
- \$4.5B in cuts to education programs, which could mean significant reduction to IDEA funding
- Cut funding for Protection & Advocacy program (like Disability Rights NM) that advocate for people with disabilities
- Elimination of University Centers of Excellence in Developmental Disabilities

Department of Education

- Intention to “dismantle” entire department
 - Technically requires act of Congress; can be done in fact by moving divisions, firing staff, defunding
 - Special education to go to Health & Human Services – but hasn’t happened yet
 - Vocational rehab has been moved to Department of Labor
 - Staff layoffs in special ed office (OSERS)
 - Office of Civil Rights (OCR): responsible for oversight/enforcement.
 - Most staff laid off early 2025; overturned by court; kept on paid administrative leave most of 2025; called back to handle backlog of discrimination claims
 - Without OCR, schools not being held accountable for their obligations to students with disabilities

Department of Justice

- Reduction in lawyers handling disability discrimination cases, through firings, layoffs, resignations/retirements → significant reduction in cases pursued.

Department of Health & Human Services

- Plans announced in March: Cut staff from 82,000 FTE to 62,000 (almost a quarter)
- Administration for Community Living (ACL) – funds P&A agencies, independent living services, and disability research to promote community living pursuant to *Olmstead* decision
 - Nearly half of ACL staff laid off in early 2025
 - ACL to be split among other DHHS agencies that are not disability-focused – Administration for Children & Families (ACF), Assistant Secretary for Planning & Evaluation (ASPE), and CMS. In turn, ASPE to be combined into Office of Strategy.
- SAMHSA also to be folded into other parts of DHHS

Social Security Administration

- Staff cuts (largest in agency's history); deterioration in customer service
- Office closures, making it harder to transact business with the agency
- Rules requiring in-person interaction

Veterans Affairs

- Staff layoffs in FY 2025 – 30,000
- Recent announcement: elimination of 35,000 more health care personnel positions

2025 budget reconciliation bill (HR 1, OBBBA)

Signed into law 7/4/2025. Does many things – these are selected provisions.

Medicaid - Changes that apply to the “adult expansion” population:

- Work reporting (“community engagement”) requirements
 - At least 80 hours/month paid work, community service, education
 - Exemptions include medically frail, pregnant, caregiver for child under 14, Native Americans
 - Most adult enrollees already work or would qualify for exemption, but many will lose coverage anyway due to paperwork snafus and other problems
- Copays – up to \$35/per item or service, mandatory but amount up to state
 - For enrollees with incomes between 100% and 138% FPL
 - Capped at 5% of household income
 - Native Americans exempt
- More frequent recertification of eligibility (every six months instead of 12 months)
- Retroactive coverage reduced from three months prior to date of application to one month for expansion enrollees (and two months for others)
- Nearly \$1 trillion cut from Medicaid over 10 years

Medicaid - Changes that apply more broadly:

- Eliminates coverage for some lawfully present immigrants
- Reduces federal match rate for immigrants receiving emergency services (shifting more of the cost to the state)
- Limits states' ability to finance their share of cost through provider taxes
- Caps pay rates for some services at 100% of Medicare in expansion states, 110% in non-expansion states
- Suspends (for 10 years) rules issued during the Biden Administration that streamlined and reduced barriers to enrollment
- A positive opportunity: offers a new form of 1915(c) home- and community-based services waiver available to people whose needs don't meet the institutional level of care

CAVEAT: Future cuts to disability services likely as states face budget pressures from HR 1

- Cuts to HCBS especially likely because these are optional services in Medicaid

Nursing facility staffing requirements – HR 1 also suspended (for 10 years) enforcement of Biden-era rules setting minimum staffing requirements (rule subsequently formally repealed)

Affordable Care Act health insurance marketplaces

- Failed to extend enhanced financial help
- Changes that make it harder to enroll in and maintain coverage
- Impact: higher premiums, loss of coverage

Projected health coverage losses (Medicaid and Marketplaces): 15 million people

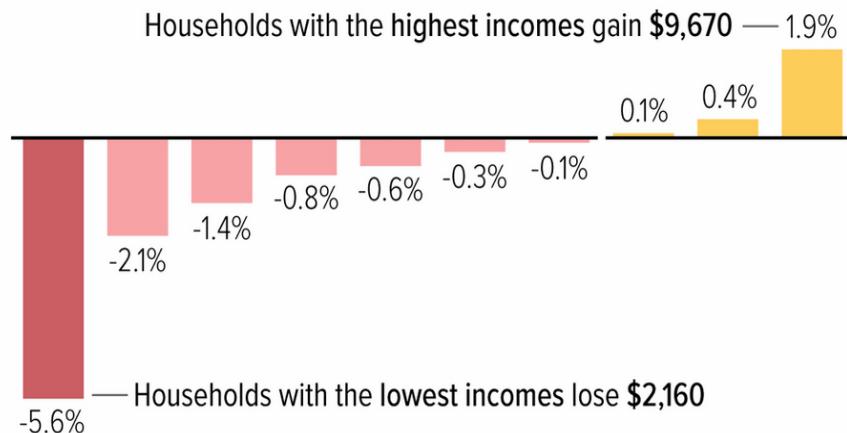
SNAP (Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program – “food stamps”)

- Expanded work requirements
 - Extended to people aged 55-64
 - Exemption for parents only if child/children under 14 (was 18)
 - Previously exempt groups now subject to requirement: homeless, veterans, former foster youth
- Shifting costs to states
 - States to pay 75% of administrative cost (historically 50-50 split with feds)
 - States to pay share of cost of benefits
 - Sliding scale depending on error rate
 - Since inception of food stamp program, federal government has covered full cost of benefits
 - Largest cut in the history of the food stamp program
- Eliminates eligibility for some immigrants: refugees, asylees, survivors of domestic violence, victims of sex/labor trafficking
- Restricts adjustments to Thrifty Food Plan, resulting in SNAP benefit cuts over time

A word on who pays and who benefits under HR 1:

Harmful Republican Megabill and Trump Tariffs Would Leave the Bottom 70% of Households Worse Off

Average annual change in household resources as a percentage of current law income after transfers and taxes by decile, 2026 to 2034



Note: Change in household resources includes changes to SNAP, Medicaid, student loans, and tax relative to current law. Tariff policies include all new tariffs announced by the Trump Administration as of November 17, 2025.

Source: Budget Lab at Yale, "Combined Distributional Effects of the One Big Beautiful Bill Act and of Tariffs."

CENTER ON BUDGET AND POLICY PRIORITIES | CBPP.ORG

Republican Megabill Takes Away Health Care, Food Assistance to Pay for Tax Cuts for Wealthy

Cuts to SNAP: \$187 billion

Cuts to Medicaid and ACA Marketplaces
\$1.1 trillion

Tax cuts for households with incomes over \$500,000
\$1.4 trillion

Note: ACA = Affordable Care Act. All estimates through 2034. Reflects Public Law 119-21.

Source: Tax cuts from CBPP calculations using JCT tables JCX-35-25 and JCX-37-25. JCT numbers are adjusted to incorporate the impact of the estate tax cut using TPC tables T25-0042 and T22-0101. SNAP and health coverage numbers from CBO "Estimated Budgetary Effects of Public Law 119-21...Relative to CBO's January 2025 Baseline" (July 21, 2025).

CENTER ON BUDGET AND POLICY PRIORITIES | CBPP.ORG