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# AACI Commentary

## A Light at the End of the Tunnel: Congress Shows Promising Signs of Support Amid Unprecedented Challenges

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### Commentary Overview

- In a time of unprecedented challenges facing cancer research funding, there are encouraging signs that Congress recognizes the critical importance of sustained investment in the fight against cancer.
- Senators on both sides of the aisle are pushing back against budget cuts and policies that would further shrink funding for cancer research.
- The cancer center community must use this momentum to our advantage to ensure that legislators are aware of how proposed changes threaten the future of cancer research.

**In a time of unprecedented challenges facing cancer research funding, there are encouraging signs that Congress recognizes the critical importance of sustained investment in the fight against cancer. We are beginning to see legislators on both sides of the aisle speak out against proposed budget cuts and policy changes that pose real threats to the future of cancer research in the United States.**

Last month, U.S. **Senator Katie Britt (R-AL)** and 13 other Senate Republicans—including our home state senators, **Mitch McConnell (R-KY)** and **Jerry Moran (R-KS)**—submitted [a letter](#) to the director of the White House Office of Management and Budget. In the letter, the senators highlighted concerns about the slow disbursement rate of Fiscal Year (FY) 2025 funds appropriated for the National Institutes of Health (NIH) and noted that suspending these funds would threaten thousands of jobs, limit access to improved medical treatments, and jeopardize American leadership in biomedical science.

Building on this momentum, Sen. **Shelley Moore Capito (R-WV)**, chair of the Senate Labor, Health and Human Services, and Education (LHHS) appropriations subcommittee, and Sen. **Tammy Baldwin (D-WI)**, ranking member, collaborated on **a bill** including \$48.7 billion for the NIH – a \$400 million boost compared to FY25. The bill would provide \$7.374 billion for the NCI, an increase of \$150 million. It was approved on July 31 by a vote of 26-to-3.

In Kentucky, we have been fortunate to enjoy strong bipartisan support for cancer research, prevention, and screening from both our state legislature and governor, as well as our national representatives and senators. State and federal officials have witnessed firsthand the positive impact that sustained investment has had in beginning to address Kentucky's high cancer incidence and mortality rates.

The House appropriations LHHS markup is planned for September 4. House Republican appropriators are expected to maintain **current-year funding levels** for the FY26 NIH budget, but we cannot take their support for granted.

## Decades of Progress at Risk

This legislative momentum comes at a critical moment. Since the passage of the National Cancer Act in 1971, progress against cancer has accelerated at an extraordinary pace. Having worked in the oncology field for over 30 years, we both know firsthand that many of the scientific discoveries that have shaped our understanding of how to prevent, detect, and treat cancer were made possible through the federal government's investments in the NIH and National Cancer Institute (NCI).

Substantial and steady funding increases to the NIH and NCI have driven breakthroughs in early detection, precision medicine, and immunotherapies that have led to a **34 percent decline in cancer mortality** over the past 30 years. In the last decade alone, we've witnessed the development of cures for cancers that we never expected to see in our lifetimes. As a result of this progress, more than 18 million people living in the United States today are **cancer survivors**.

While survival rates have improved, cancer incidence is on the rise. More than **2 million Americans will be diagnosed with cancer** in 2025 alone. Kentucky has one of the highest cancer rates in the country, ranking first in new cases and deaths, while in Kansas, patients in rural areas have higher mortality rates than their urban counterparts in colorectal, melanoma, esophagus, lung, and bladder cancers.

These patients deserve the chance to join the growing ranks of cancer survivors across the U.S., but major shifts in the federal funding landscape are jeopardizing future cancer treatments and cures for millions of Americans.

## Shrinking Paylines, Diminished Morale

Last month the NCI announced that **paylines for R01 grants could drop to the 4th percentile**, shrinking the number of competing awards funded by NCI in a given year to 1 in 25. Such a precipitous drop would have been unthinkable just a few years ago. During his tenure as NCI director, Norman E. Sharpless, MD, declared a goal of raising the payline—which then hovered between the 8th and 11th percentile—to 15 percent by 2025. Not only does the new payline fall short of that goal – it represents a historic low for the institute. Upfront, multiyear payments to grant recipients would further constrain limited resources. We are hopeful that a **bipartisan manager's amendment** to the Senate LHHS appropriations bill will reverse this plan.

The new payline policy would be yet another devastating blow to cancer research funding in a year beset with challenges, including a proposed **15-percent cap on indirect costs** and significant changes to grant review, oversight, and payment processes. If passed, the president's **Fiscal Year 2026 budget proposal** would slash funding for the NIH by 40.4 percent, and for the NCI by 37.2 percent. Pressure to align scientific priorities with those of the current administration would also hinder promising cancer research, such as the **application of mRNA technologies** to cancer treatment.

These sweeping changes could have disastrous consequences for cancer centers, the patients we serve, and the future oncology workforce. A 40-percent cut to essential NIH and NCI funding would force us to scale back on community outreach, screening efforts, and clinical trials at our cancer centers, ultimately affecting the quality of patient care and reversing decades of

progress.

Cancer researchers are propelled by a mission to enable people with cancer to live longer, healthier lives. Yet as funding prospects grow dimmer, we are seeing morale diminish among students, postdocs, and early-career researchers. If we continue on this trajectory, we risk losing an entire generation—or more—of researchers, at our cancer centers and throughout the country.

Indeed, a nationwide brain drain is already underway. According to a [March 2025 Nature poll](#), many American scientists are moving overseas to conduct their research without constraints. More than 1,200 scientists—over 75 percent of poll respondents—indicated that they were considering leaving the U.S., with Europe and Canada among the top choices for relocation. Other countries, such as China, are ready to step in to replace the U.S. as a world leader in biomedical research.

We know that the collective knowledge of the U.S. biomedical research community is irreplaceable, and to ensure continued innovation our country must maintain and expand its investments in cancer research.

### Celebrating Our Wins and Sustaining Momentum

Fortunately, the cancer center community has been making progress through advocacy, outreach, and direct conversations with legislators. The recent bipartisan support in the Senate demonstrates that our efforts are resonating with lawmakers who understand the stakes. To sustain these efforts, we must celebrate our wins and acknowledge the members of Congress who have joined us in this fight.

Now, more than ever, we must demand bold, decisive action from our legislators. We are calling on our fellow cancer center leaders to urge members of Congress to ensure continued, robust funding for the NIH and NCI.

Contact Your  
Legislators

### Our Mission

The Association of American Cancer Institutes (AACI) represents over 100 premier academic and freestanding cancer centers in the United States and Canada. AACI is accelerating progress against cancer by enhancing the impact of academic cancer centers and promoting cancer health equity.

### About AACI Commentary

To promote the work of its members, AACI publishes *Commentary*, a monthly editorial series focusing on major issues of common interest to North American cancer centers, authored by cancer center leaders and subject matter experts.

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