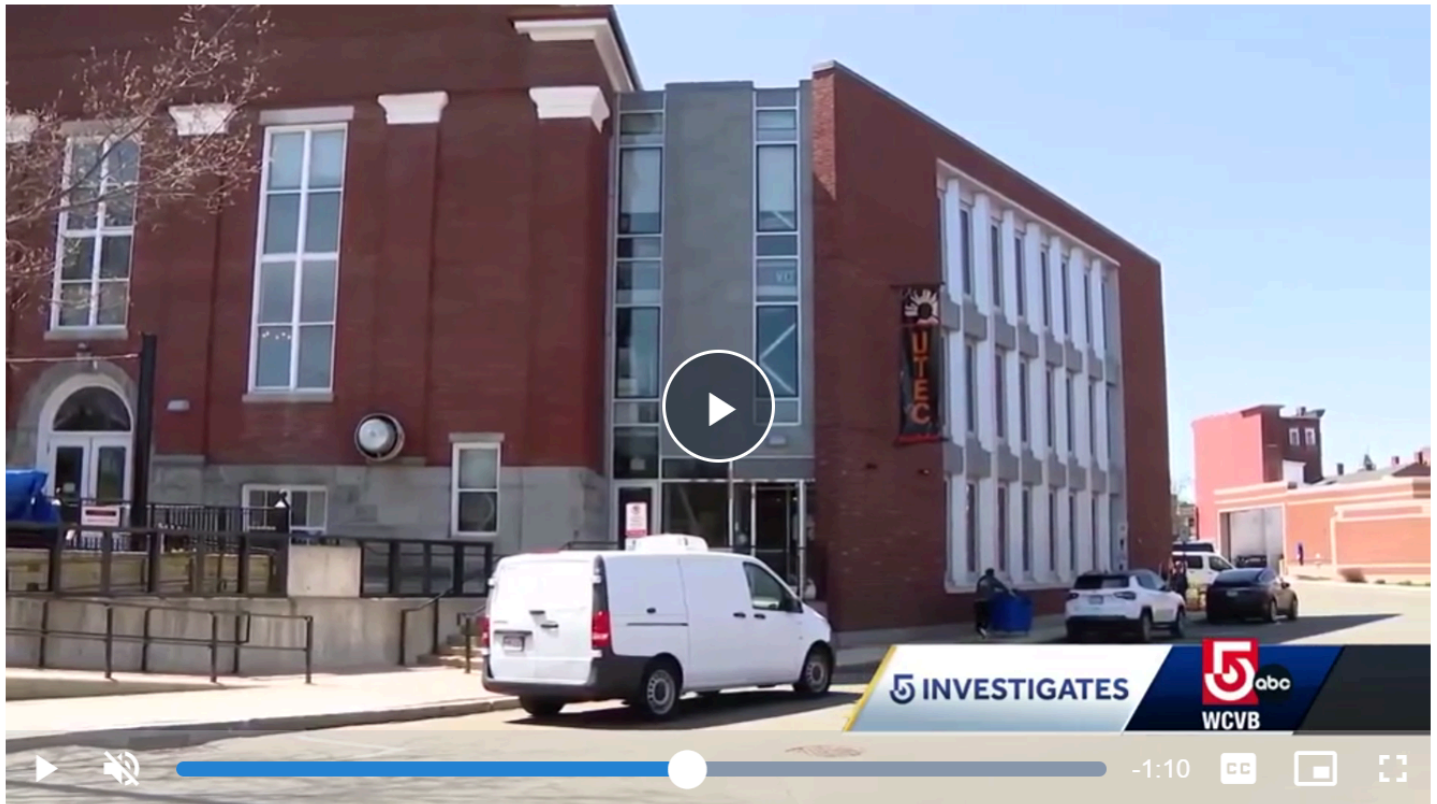


Justice Department axes hundreds of grants that help crime victims and fight opioid abuse



By Hannah Rabinowitz and Danny Freeman, CNN

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The Justice Department terminated hundreds of grants this week, effectively slashing the budgets for organizations across the country that assist crime victims and fight both gun violence and opioid abuse.

The cancellations, which claimed that the more than 350 already-distributed grants “no longer effectuates the program goals or agency priorities,” sent shockwaves through grantee organizations.

“I was flabbergasted,” said Renee Williams, who leads the nonpartisan National Center for the Victims of Crime. Her organization has operated a hotline for 10 years through a DOJ grant and connects victims of heinous crimes to specialists who help them navigate everything from legal assistance to state bureaucracies.

That grant was cut Tuesday evening.

“I genuinely believed that this administration had victims in the forefront of their mind,” Williams told CNN. “But to get that email to see that they were cutting out victims, and that this hotline — which we know is a lifesaving resource to so many people — was no longer a priority was just stunning.”

It is not unusual for new administrations to review applications for federal grants or award grants based on their political preferences. But it is highly unusual for grants to be clawed back once the money is allocated and is being used, former DOJ officials told CNN.

And though the cuts represent a relatively small portion of the grants administered by the department, experts worry that the funding cuts will fatally impact organizations whose projects are already underway.

“People who have been hurt by crime are just going to be hurt again when they try to get help,” said Kristina Rose, the former director of Joe Biden's Justice Department's Office for Victims of Crime, which oversees billions of dollars in grant funding. “Everyone eventually will feel the impact of this.”

The cuts were first reported by The Washington Post.

“This Department of Justice is focused on prosecuting criminals, getting illegal drugs off of the streets, and protecting American institutions from toxic DEI and sanctuary city policies,” a Justice Department spokesperson said in response to CNN's questions about the cuts. “Discretionary funds that are no longer aligned with the administration's priorities are subject to review and reallocation.”

Canceled grants go to the heart of victim support.

Among programs whose grants were canceled are organizations that work to protect and help individuals who were the victims of a crime.

Those groups — many of which have received bipartisan support in the past — say that without their funding, the victims they support could be left without legal help, safe housing, medical and trauma support, or even funeral expenses to bury a loved one who had been murdered.

Copies of several grant termination letters shared with CNN say the DOJ has “changed its priorities,” and want these federal grants to be “more directly supporting certain law enforcement operations, combatting violent crime, protecting American children, and supporting American victims of trafficking and sexual assault, and better coordinating law enforcement efforts at all levels of government.”

But many grant recipients believe this action will do the opposite by pulling the rug out from programs that have been working in communities across the country.

One program at risk of immediate shutdown is a group that sends advocates to the bedside of someone in the hospital who has been injured from a gunshot or other type of assault. The advocates can help them navigate how to report the crime if they choose and can help the victims find services to assist in their recovery.

Another DOJ grant that funded trauma recovery centers in Iowa was also canceled, as were grants that put kennels in domestic violence shelters so that victims could bring their pets with them when they fled. The Justice Department restored at least some of the shelter pet programs Wednesday evening, a source told CNN.

When news of the cuts first surfaced Tuesday, dozens of grantees gathered on a videoconference to discuss their options, including whether to take legal action.

Many of the organizations found that they had already been cut off from the financial systems from which they could access their grant money, one official said. Others tried to contact their grant managers at the Justice Department.

“I want to believe and I want to hope it’s a mistake, and that mistake will be rectified,” said Williams.

Reform and oversight efforts also cut

The terminated grants also touch local government groups whose efforts are focused on research, statistics and efforts to reform things like policing and the juvenile justice system.

“Instead of helping to keep our residents safe, the Trump Administration is once again cruelly clawing back critical public safety funding for our state,” wrote Democratic New Jersey Attorney General Matthew Platkin in a statement.

“Cutting critical initiatives to fight hate crimes, to prevent violence in our communities, and to combat opioid abuse is as reckless as it is dangerous,” Platkin continued.

In Kansas City, Missouri, officials in City Hall learned Wednesday that a grant that funded counseling and treatment programs through their mental health court had been terminated.

“It takes away a tool that we have to give people treatment and then break the cycle of recidivism that we see on nuisance offenses,” Democratic Kansas City Mayor Quinton Lucas told CNN.

Lucas argued that judges cannot jail people with mental health issues for an extended amount of time for nuisance crimes, and that without treatment, those offenders will be back on the street without help and resources.

“I think it’s going to lead to vastly inferior outcomes for people in Kansas City who want to be safe,” said Lucas.