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Trump warns Democrats of 'irreversible' actions in government shutdown

By Richard Cowan, David Morgan, Nolan D. McCaskill and Andy Sullivan

Tue, September 30, 2025 at 3:34 PM PDT · 4 min read



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U.S. President Donald Trump sits the Oval Office to sign an executive order on AI and pediatric cancer research, at the White House, Washington, D.C., U.S., September 30, 2025. REUTERS/Nathan Howard

By Richard Cowan, David Morgan, Nolan D. McCaskill and Andy Sullivan

WASHINGTON (Reuters) -U.S. President Donald Trump warned congressional Democrats on Tuesday that his administration would take "irreversible" actions, including mass firings of federal workers, if they allow government funding to expire at midnight.

"We can do things during the shutdown that are irreversible, that are bad for them and irreversible by them, like cutting vast numbers of people out, cutting things that they like, cutting programs that they like," Trump told reporters from the White House Oval Office.

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Trump's threat to target programs favored by Democrats in event of a government shutdown rang alarm bells as lawmakers girded for a last-minute attempt to extend funding past midnight (0400 GMT Wednesday), when the fiscal year ends.

A Democratic proposal that would extend health benefits for millions of Americans failed 47-53 in the Senate.

Up next was a Republican-backed bill that would extend government funding without the healthcare fix, which also was expected to fail. That would all but ensure the U.S. enters its 15th government shutdown since 1981.

Federal agencies issued detailed plans that would close offices conducting scientific research, customer service, and other activities and send tens of thousands of workers home. Military troops, border guards and others doing work deemed "essential" would stay on the job, but would not get paid until Congress resolves the standoff.

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In memos to soon-to-be-furloughed employees, several agencies including the Justice Department and the Social Security Administration blamed Democrats for the impending shutdown, violating long-standing norms that aim to shield government workers from partisan pressure.

Budget-related showdowns have become a routine feature in Washington as the nation's politics have grown increasingly dysfunctional, though they are often resolved at the last minute. The government last shut down for 35 days in 2018 and 2019, during Trump's first term, due to a dispute over immigration. That cost the U.S. economy \$3 billion, or 0.02% of GDP, according to the nonpartisan Congressional Budget Office.

TRILLION-DOLLAR FIGHT

At issue now is \$1.7 trillion that funds agency operations, which amounts to roughly one-quarter of the government's total \$7 trillion budget. Much of the remainder goes to health and retirement programs and interest payments on the growing \$37.5 trillion debt.

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Airlines warned that a shutdown could slow flights, while the Labor Department said it would not issue its monthly unemployment report, a closely watched barometer of economic health. The Small Business Administration said it would stop issuing loans, while the Environmental Protection Agency said it would suspend some pollution-cleanup efforts.

Coverage for telehealth visits and at-home "acute hospital care" through the Medicare health program are also due to expire at midnight, according to Jonathan Burks, a health specialist at the Bipartisan Policy Center.

Public housing subsidies could shrivel and childcare providers working with the Head Start program would see payments disrupted if the shutdown drags on, Bipartisan Policy Center experts said.

Trump's threat to fire more federal workers or entirely eliminate some programs could deepen the chaos. Since returning to office in January, he has refused to spend billions of dollars authorized by Congress and reduced federal payrolls by roughly 300,000 people.

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"He wants to take extra steps to punish the people of this country if there's a shutdown," Democratic Senator Chris Van Hollen of Maryland said.

Two labor unions representing federal employees filed a lawsuit to block agencies from enacting mass layoffs.

Trump's actions have prompted some Democrats to question why they should vote for any spending legislation at all.

Though Republicans control both chambers of Congress, they need at least seven Democratic votes to pass legislation out of the Senate.

Democrats are under pressure from their frustrated supporters to score a rare victory ahead of the 2026 midterm elections that will determine control of Congress for the final two years of Trump's term.

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Democrats insist that any spending bill must also make permanent Affordable Care Act subsidies that are due to expire at the end of the year. Without a fix, healthcare costs for 24 million Americans will rise sharply, with a disproportionate impact in Republican-controlled states like Florida and Texas that have refused to enact other aspects of the law that provide coverage to low-income people. Democrats have also sought to ensure that Trump will not be able to undo those changes if they are signed into law.

Republicans say they are open to a fix, but accuse Democrats of holding the budget hostage to their demands.

Democrats said they believed they were making headway with Trump after a White House meeting on Monday. But hours later, the president posted a deepfake video showing manipulated images of Democratic leaders that drew on stereotyped images of Mexicans.

"The next time you have something to say about me, don't cop out through a racist and fake AI video. When I'm back in the Oval Office, say it to my face," House Democratic Leader Hakeem Jeffries told reporters.

(Reporting by Richard Cowan, Courtney Rozen, David Morgan, Nandita Bose, Andy Sullivan and Bo Erickson in Washington; Additional reporting by Susan Heavey, Doina Chiacu, Nolan McCaskill and Trevor Hunnicutt; Writing by Andy Sullivan; Editing by Scott Malone and Alistair Bell)

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