



White House faces GOP skepticism of latest COVID-19 spending request

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Even as his administration urges the public to begin moving on from COVID-19, President Joe Biden is requesting additional money to combat it.

The White House is asking Congress for an additional \$22.5 billion to respond to the coronavirus just one week ahead of the March 11 deadline for Congress to pass a comprehensive government funding bill. Republicans, who were opposing new COVID-19 funding a year ago, are likely to buck the proposal.

"The days are over when attaching the word 'COVID-19' to any budget request opened the floodgates of heaven," said Doug Badger, a senior fellow at the conservative Heritage Foundation. "The administration should learn to budget and spend responsibly. It's not their money, after all."

Congress, dating back to President Donald Trump's administration, has already allocated roughly \$5.8 trillion for COVID-19 relief. Republicans in recent months have turned their efforts toward seeking spreadsheets and details for those previously approved dollars, showing little patience for new budget proposals. All opposed the \$1.9 trillion American Rescue Plan last March.

Acting Office of Management and Budget Director Shalanda Young said the new spending will pay for testing, vaccines, treatments, and research and development while advancing Biden's pledge to get "more shots in arms around the world." Under the headline "Meeting Urgent Needs," Young also wrote that even more money will be needed down the line.

"Now, nearly all of these funds have been used," she said. "We are therefore urging Congress to promptly provide \$22.5 billion to cover immediate needs."

But Republicans are more worried about already approved dollars, raising concerns about the money that was diverted to the southern border crisis and to the lab in Wuhan, China, before the pandemic began.

"President Biden continues to play with American taxpayers' dollars like it's Monopoly money," said House Committee on Oversight and Reform ranking member James Comer. "Last year, Democrats passed and President Biden signed into law a \$2 trillion bill for so-called COVID relief, but only 9 percent actually went to combating the virus. ... Biden is requesting more pandemic relief funds when he has consistently wasted, abused, and mismanaged Americans' hard-earned money."

Republicans on the committee have written that funds from the American Rescue Plan went to build bike trails, high school weight rooms, apartment buildings, and golf courses.

On Wednesday, Utah's Mitt Romney led 35 GOP senators in a letter to Biden arguing the need for more money is not clear and saying the nearly \$6 trillion approved so far represents the greatest expenditure of public funds on one effort in U.S. history. The letter states that a full accounting of the \$6 trillion is needed before considering anything more. House Minority Leader Kevin McCarthy has also written to Biden seeking accountability for previous COVID-19 relief.

The president mentioned the need for more virus funding during his State of the Union address, saying new stockpiles of tests, masks, and pills will prepare the United States for future variants.

Democrats have been signaling the ask since mid-January, when Maryland Rep. Steny Hoyer said party leaders anticipated "substantial sums to be requested" by the White House to battle COVID-19.

According to the Committee for a Responsible Federal Budget, about \$800 billion of what Congress has already allocated remains unspent. While Democrats are looking forward and seeking cash to fight the virus going forward, some conservatives argue their mindset is stuck in the past.

"The Biden administration is still kind of caught in March 2020," said Cato Institute senior fellow Jeff Singer. "It should be obvious to everyone now that we've entered a new phase of the pandemic."