

# THE HOUR

## 'Confusion and fear': How CT organizations have been put in limbo during Trump presidency

By [Alex Putterman](#), Staff Writer

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The Connecticut Foodshare distribution center, in Wallingford, Conn. Feb. 4, 2025.

Ned Gerard/Hearst Connecticut Media

The Beth-El Center in [Milford](#) has what seems like a fairly uncontroversial mission.

Founded in the 1980s, the organization provides meals for those without food and shelter for those without homes, while helping people across 13 towns find permanent housing so they can lead more stable lives.

Yet for a period last week, after President Donald Trump's administration issued a memo apparently freezing most types of federal grants, executive director Jenn Paradis couldn't access the federal funds that help enable the center's work.

"Tuesday felt like the first real day of the COVID-19 pandemic," Paradis said. "It felt like, 'What is happening, and is this real?'"

The Trump administration rescinded its memo the following day, after a judge blocked it from taking effect, but for Connecticut non-profits, confusion and uncertainty linger. Over the past week, Trump and those close to him have reiterated their desire to cut off funding for organizations that practice "DEI," or diversity, equity and inclusion, which the President considers "discrimination."

In some cases, Politico reported Tuesday, the administration has continued to withhold grants, in defiance of court orders. Trump's promise to block federal funding to certain groups is reported to be part of a broader effort to reshape the balance of power between the President and Congress, which has the legal authority to set appropriations.

Amid all that, non-profit organizations are left to nervously continue their work, unsure what might be next.

"There's confusion and fear," said Gian-Carl Casa, president of the Connecticut Community Nonprofit Alliance. "Non-profits, many of whom rely on federal funding, are in the dark about what's going to happen over the next few weeks."



Beth-El Center Executive Director Jennifer Paradis addresses shelter clients, staff, and invited guests during a discussion of the homelessness situation in the community and financial funding needs at the center in Milford, Conn. on Friday, December 16, 2022. Brian A. PoundsMilfor/Hearst Connecticut Media

Asked Monday what guidance he'd have for non-profits worried about losing funding over DEI efforts, Gov. Ned Lamont said they can contact the state's new Office of Diversity and Equity but otherwise should "keep

doing what you've always been doing." Casa said the Alliance has no specific advice for members in this situation and that the organization has to choose for itself whether to maintain or compromise DEI policies.

According to state budget documents, the federal government provided Connecticut more than \$10 billion during the 2024 fiscal year, funding everything from school lunches to law enforcement technology, opioid treatment to child care programs. Much of this money is administered through a web of non-profits, without whom the state's social safety net would likely collapse.

Even before this recent uncertainty at the federal level, many Connecticut non-profits said they were struggling to get by amid inflation and increased need in their communities, calling for greater state funding to sustain their efforts. Losing federal money, they say, would lead to dramatic cuts to staffing and programs.

For at least one prominent Connecticut organization, Trump-induced cuts have already arrived. The New Haven-based Integrated Refugee & Immigrant Services announced last week it would lay off more than 20 employees — about a fifth of its total staff — as a result of the Trump administration's decision to stop refugees from entering the country and end funding for those already here.

Maggie Mitchell Salem, the agency's executive director, said Tuesday that further layoffs could come soon depending what the Trump administration does next. She would describe the situation as "devastating," she said, but isn't sure even that word properly captures it.

"It's a very, very uncertain and painful time for all of us," she said.

### **'Fear and chaos'**

Jason Jakubowski, president of Connecticut Foodshare, woke up last Tuesday to a text from a colleague with some alarming news: the Trump administration appeared to be attempting to freeze most types of federal grants nationwide.

With that, Jakubowski knew he was in for a long day.

He was quickly bombarded with questions from staff members, board members and food pantries, many of which he had no clear answer for. He fielded a call from Sen. Richard Blumenthal, checking in on how the freeze might impact Foodshare, which receives some of its funding and much of its food from the federal government. For hours, no one knew exactly what the freeze meant, which grants it would affect or whether it would be allowed to take effect.

Jakubowski, like Paradis, says the scramble among non-profits reminded him of the early days of the COVID-19 pandemic, when the ground seemed to shift by the hour.

"We were all trying to share as much information as we could with each other," he said. "We all have the same questions. I think we're all just trying to get as many of as those answered as humanly possible."



Volunteer Adam Kitka inspects and sorts donated produce items at the Connecticut Foodshare distribution center, in Wallingford, Conn. Feb. 4, 2025. Ned Gerard/Hearst Connecticut Media

The situation became only slightly more clear when the Trump administration issued guidance on which programs the freeze would and wouldn't affect. Those that provided direct assistance to

Americans, a new memo said, would continue, while any grant to an organization would be frozen.

Through all this, some digital platforms through which non-profits access federal funds went offline, leading to further panic and confusion. Paradis says the Beth-El Center couldn't access its accounts for part of that day.

"Even though we were saying there's *going to be* a freeze, there was an effective freeze on Tuesday morning," she said. "People could not draw down on dollars that had already been committed to their organizations."

Casa, from the Connecticut Community Nonprofit Alliance, describes the day as "chaos."

"Nobody, whether at non-profits, at national non-profit organizations or at state agencies had any idea about what was going on," he said. "There was fear and chaos. People just didn't know what to do."

Later that afternoon, a judge temporarily suspended the Trump administration's policy, and a separate judge later blocked it as well. On Wednesday, Trump's Office of Policy and Management rescinded its original memo, though Press Secretary Karoline Leavitt said the underlying policy of rooting out "DEI" remains in place.

## **A microscope on 'DEI'**

Leavitt's comments made clear the Trump administration remains set on punishing non-profits and other organizations that implement certain diversity, equity and inclusion practices.

That commitment may be alarming for Connecticut groups worried their efforts will look to the Trump administration like "DEI" but is especially concerning for those for whom inclusion is a key priority.

For 150 years, Community Partners in Action has helped Connecticut residents transition from jail and prison back into their communities. Today, the organization operates statewide, providing housing, job training and other reentry support.

Across the top of Community Partners in Action's website, right next to a tab reading "About Us," is another called "Our DEI Journey."

Could that web page, and the policies it represents, cost the non-profit its slice of federal funding, which supports several key initiatives and about a dozen employees?

"The American people gave President Trump an overwhelming mandate on November 5, and he's trying to ensure that the tax money going out the door in this very bankrupt city actually aligns with the will and priorities of the American people," Leavitt told reporters in Washington last week.

Beth Hines, Community Partners in Action's executive director, said she doesn't intend to compromise the organization's commitment to what she calls "belonging, equity, diversity and inclusion," even if it means sacrificing federal money. To the contrary, she sent out an email assuring staff that their "BEDI" efforts weren't going anywhere.

"I believe strongly that in the work that we do, serving people impacted by a criminal justice system that was basically founded on white supremacy and racism," Hines said Monday. "It would be hypocritical for this agency to not embrace the principles of DEI."



Beth Hines, the Executive Director of Community Partners in Action, speaks during the annual Prison Arts Showcase that highlights art pieces and sculptures created by people currently incarcerated on Tuesday, June 11, 2024, at the Pond House in West Hartford. Jim Michaud / Hearst Connecticut Media

Hines said federal grants fund some of Community Partners in Action's workforce development programs, which help people leaving jail or prison build skills necessary to find work and contribute productively.

If that money went away, Hines said, not only would the agency suffer, but so would its clients and their communities.

"You're making communities safer, you're bringing people back, and you're also adding to the labor force in terms of skilled workers," she said. "There are so many benefits to rehabilitating people when they come home."

At the Beth-El Center, Paradis finds herself in a similar position. Her organization works extensively with marginalized groups and considers those efforts "the bedrock of our work" and "fundamental to who we are." She's not sure if that counts as "DEI" in the Trump administration's view.

Paradis doesn't plan to change any of the Beth-El Center's language, let alone its key priorities, but she also can't afford to lose federal funds, which make up a sizable chunk of the group's budget.

If that money were to disappear, she said, the surrounding community would pay the price.

"You want to say that we would figure it out," she said. "I just don't know how that happens."

*Staff writer Natasha Sokoloff contributed to this report.*



Alex Putterman is a reporter at CT Insider with more than five years of experience reporting on Connecticut, covering topics such as education, public health, sports, politics and more. Before CT Insider, he spent four years at The Hartford Courant, and his work has also appeared in The Atlantic, Vice and MLB.com among other publications. He can be reached at [Alex.Putterman@hearstmediact.com](mailto:Alex.Putterman@hearstmediact.com).