

Local USAID workers are "in survival mode." NPR All things Considered, 21 Feb 2025

It was a Tuesday night, and Amy Uccello was planning her return to work as a contractor at the United States Agency for International Development, better known as USAID, where she supported programs promoting adolescent health in countries around the world. She was at the end of her maternity leave.

But then a letter arrived by email: she was terminated.

"No severance, no cause, no reason," she said. "I had three days to use medical insurance for myself and my newborn daughter."

A week later, her husband lost his job at an NGO. Both of their positions were eliminated as a result of the Trump administration's stop-work order imposing a [90-day pause](#) on foreign aid work performed by government contractors, prompting mass layoffs and furloughs. Many of those workers, like Uccello, are based in the D.C. region.

Meanwhile, workers directly employed at USAID may soon be barred from doing their jobs, after [a federal judge ruled Friday](#) that a Trump administration plan to place most staff on administrative leave could move forward. Many USAID employees expect widespread layoffs to follow.

Taken together, the stop-work order and the restructuring of USAID represent a dramatic about-face in U.S. assistance abroad, and a major contraction in an industry centered in the D.C. region. The changes in international development are one indicator of the way the Trump administration is reshaping the federal civil service, cutting thousands of jobs that have been a backbone for the D.C. economy.

WAMU spoke to eight USAID employees and contractors, about the ways their lives and their work have been upended in the chaos. For some, we are using first names only to protect them from retaliation.

A call to public service

The employees and contractors we spoke with work on projects in different parts of the world, focused on different issue areas — health of adolescent girls globally, youth education and employment, programs to prevent the spread of HIV/AIDS in Africa, deterrence initiatives to prevent radicalization in the Middle East, and promoting economic stability and peace in Papua New Guinea.

"We are people who put others first. We are worried about the children who won't get much needed food, the sick people who won't get their vaccines or be able to access a clinic," said Catherine, a contractor who is focused on supporting democracy and governance and countering violent extremism.

“My parents have many times been a bit nervous when I say where I’m jetting off to next,” she added. “We are willing to go to the most dangerous places on earth.”

Elizabeth, another contractor, was based in the Philippines and working on a conflict stabilization project in Papua New Guinea when she received the stop work order. She’d worked in Mozambique for UNICEF in the past, and had done shorter stints in Bolivia and Colombia.

The long hours, the distance from friends at home in D.C., and the challenge of acclimating to a new life with each move was worth it, she said, because she felt she was making a difference.

“I definitely felt as though I was making an impact,” she told WAMU. As a first-generation Mexican-American woman, “it felt especially significant for me to be part of this system that historically has been predominantly white and predominantly male.”

Elizabeth and several others said they believed their work helped beyond their specific missions. They say their work helped counter Chinese influence and create more stable allies and trading partners for the U.S., even potentially stopping insurgents or terrorist threats from reaching American shores.

“The work that I do and a lot of my colleagues do is to try to address those threats at the source,” said one current USAID worker who’s served the agency for more than 10 years. “You’re much less likely to want to join a terrorist organization if you have access to a good job.”

Many said they felt their work was a critical part of their identity as Americans.

“I’m a naturalized American citizen,” said Justin Prudhomme, a former USAID contractor. “When I became a citizen, I was eager to give back. And I thought it was amazing that the United States could concern itself with the well-being of so many other countries and do such amazing work.”

Prudhomme has worked for 15 years as a public affairs consultant, helping to communicate the value of the work USAID does both overseas and domestically to the American public.

“I’ve been lucky to spend a few years overseas for USAID and was able to go into communities and see the difference that food distribution makes. It’s the most obvious and easy to understand when you go to a refugee camp and you see those bags of bulgur wheat being delivered. Those are life saving.”

They are now haunted by the work they know is going undone.

“If we put U.S. foreign aid back into working order, we would save 500 children a day,” said Uccello. “That means that there are 21 babies an hour who are going to die from HIV

infection, from malnourishment, from infectious disease like malaria. That means in my daughter's two hour nap, we could have saved 42 children."

An industry 'decimated'

In the Philippines, Elizabeth spent her final day of work frantically typing up a document with all the knowledge and background on her project she could put into words in eight hours — and then turned to the task of rapidly packing up her apartment and preparing to travel back to D.C. with her cat before the U.S. government cut off relocation expenses.

She made it home, but then had a new challenge: finding a place to live. She owns a condo in Alexandria, but has been renting it out and couldn't stay there. A friend headed out of town offered her a place to stay temporarily.

"I'm definitely still in survival mode," she said, noting that her suitcases are still packed and ready to go at a moment's notice. She has no idea if she'll be able to stay in D.C.

In D.C., Liz, a 16-year USAID employee, watched as the institutional support contractors she mentored — contractor roles are often a means for younger people to gain experience in international development — lost their jobs.

"I felt really helpless," she said.

And Liz was dealing with other problems, too: USAID employees were scrambling to try to make the case to the administration that humanitarian assistance programs should be exempted from the aid freeze. Meanwhile, she was trying to recover her work laptop, which she had left at USAID headquarters the night before the Trump administration told employees to work from home and blocked access to the building. She and her colleagues are bracing for being placed on administrative leave as a prelude to large-scale 'reductions-in-force,' or layoffs.

"There's an atmosphere of fear. People are very worried about not just losing their jobs, but worried about whether having USAID on their resume is now going to be viewed negatively. Worried about doxing. Worried about their own personal safety," Liz said.

Amy Uccello, the new mother, did get into the Global Health annex, where she'd worked for years, to return her laptop and security badge. She had to be escorted by security guards — whom she'd last seen when they cooed over her newborn daughter on a visit during her maternity leave. Uccello remembers her last time in the building plainly: fellow contractors crying and hugging; piles of laptops everywhere; empty picture frames on the walls, stripped of images of the recipients of U.S. aid.

That was "psychological torture" for those remaining behind, in Uccello's mind, a signal "that what they had done meant nothing, who they had helped, who they had served, meant nothing."

“It’s evil,” she said.

[USAID Stop Work](#), a site tracking the impact of the stop work order, estimates more than 50,000 American jobs have been affected.

“The only way to describe it is as the apocalypse,” said Taylor Williamson, a furloughed contractor who worked on health systems in East Africa. “Do you decide to curl up and take off with your backpack and go do something else? Do you find a commune and try to rebuild? Those are sort of the two options from *The Walking Dead*, and that’s where we are right now. We’re in an episode of *The Walking Dead*.”

Now, Williamson and thousands of other locals are facing a new set of challenges: applying for unemployment benefits and figuring out what to do for work as their industry contracts dramatically.

“There’s no job that I’m too good for. I can stock shelves if I need to, whatever it takes to keep my family safe and fed,” said Uccello. “But I also have all of my education and 25 years of my experience in a field that’s been decimated.”

By USAID’s own estimates, the agency created more than \$1 billion [in Virginia](#) alone in annual economic activity from its contracts and grants, in addition to nearly \$1 billion [in Maryland](#) in the last fiscal year, according to documents saved from the USAID website. The USAID Stop Work group [estimates](#) that Maryland and Virginia-based organizations and businesses will lose out on more than \$7 billion each if all active USAID contracts and assistance are terminated, the worst two potential funding losses in the country. (Data was not available for D.C.)

Virginia Sen. Mark Warner, a Democrat who is the ranking member on the Senate Intelligence Committee, said he was concerned about damage to American “soft power” around the globe as well as the impact of the dismantling of the international development industry at home — particularly in light of mass layoffs across other government agencies.

“It’ll be hard to measure which part is simply AID or nonprofits, which part is CFPB [Consumer Financial Protection Bureau] employees or other employees,” he said. “But our economy is going to take a dramatic hit across the region.”

That leaves many locals with few options for work — but a continuing desire to serve.

“I think for myself and maybe for a lot of others it has really strengthened our resolve,” said Liz, the USAID employee. “We really believe in the work that we do. And we’re going to find a way to continue to serve our country and continue to serve globally as well.”

This story has been updated to correct Taylor Williamson’s affiliation and the structure of USAID Stop Work.