

The White House's wildly inaccurate claims about USAID spending

Eleven out of 12 claims about the agency's work are misleading, wrong or lack context.

February 7, 2025

White House press secretary Karoline Leavitt speaks to reporters about USAID at the White House. (Carolyn Kaster/AP)

Analysis by [Glenn Kessler](#)

As the Trump administration this week dismantled the U.S. Agency for International Development, the primary vehicle for U.S. foreign aid, the White House issued a statement justifying its actions. Titled "At USAID, Waste and Abuse Runs Deep," the [news release](#) claimed USAID "has been unaccountable to taxpayers as it funnels massive sums of money to the ridiculous — and, in many cases, malicious — pet projects of entrenched bureaucrats, with next-to-no oversight."

The news release then listed 12 examples, plucked from the websites of right-wing media. But the numbers cited — as low as \$32,000 — hardly justify the claim that these are "massive sums" of money. In fact, they are so low that some of the funds appear to have been awarded at the ambassador level, without Washington involvement. At least one dated from the first Trump administration, and some were actually State Department grants, not USAID.

Whether they are "ridiculous" might be in the eye of the beholder. White House press secretary Karoline Leavitt held up the sheet before reporters on Monday and declared, "I don't know about you, but as an American taxpayer I don't want my dollars going toward this crap."

In fiscal year 2023, USAID was appropriated about \$25 billion by Congress, according to [ForeignAssistance.gov](#). (The website in recent

days has been changed to combine USAID spending with foreign aid distributed by the State Department, so the combined total is nearly \$39 billion.) The White House identified only about \$12 million in grants — one of which was \$6 million — though one allegation vaguely claimed “hundreds of millions of dollars.” Upon inspection, that turned out to be from 2005 to 2008.

As a reader service, we examined these line items, as they have spread across social media. By eliminating USAID’s website, the administration made harder to ascertain the details of some of these programs. But we determined that, as framed by the White House, only one claim — out of 12 — was accurate. After we highlighted key errors in the statement to the White House, we received a statement from spokeswoman Anna Kelly: “This waste of taxpayer dollars underscores why the president paused foreign aid on day one to ensure it aligns with American interests.”

The Facts

[According to surveys](#), many Americans have a misguided view of how much money the United States devotes to foreign aid. Polls consistently reveal that Americans believe that it is about 25 percent of the federal budget — and that [a majority believe](#) it should be more like 10 percent. In reality, foreign aid is less than 1 percent of the budget.

On top of that, other countries are more generous with foreign aid. By raw dollars, the United States gives more foreign aid than any other country. But when measured as a percentage of a country’s economy, the United States is far behind nations such as Britain, Norway, Sweden, Germany and the Netherlands. The United Nations has set a target of contributing 0.7 percent of gross national income in development aid; the United States clocks in with less than 0.2 percent, near the bottom

of the list of major democracies, according to [a 2020 report](#) by the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development.

Much of the time, this aid does not actually leave U.S. shores. Then, if it does, it generally goes to nongovernmental organizations, not host governments. The exception might be direct cash transfers as a reward for counterterrorism operations to countries that support the United States, such as Turkey and Jordan, or Egypt and Israel for signing the Camp David Accords, [according to the Congressional Research Service](#) (CRS). Very little since the 1970s has been spent on direct construction of roads, irrigation systems, electric power facilities or similar projects, CRS said.

About two-thirds of U.S. foreign assistance funds in fiscal year 2018 were obligated to U.S.-based entities, CRS said. For instance, [food aid must be purchased in the United States](#) and by law must be shipped on U.S. carriers. With the exception of some aid given to Israel, all military aid must be used to purchase U.S. military equipment and training — meaning foreign military aid in reality is [a jobs program in the United States](#).

Here’s a line-by-line examination of the White House list, in the order presented.

“\$1.5 million to ‘advance diversity equity and inclusion in Serbia’s workplaces and business communities’”

This is mostly accurate. USAID [provided](#) \$1.5 million to a group called Grupa Izadji, which focuses on creating opportunities for young LGBTQ people. Aleksa Savić, executive director of Grupa Izadji, said in an email that the goal “was to raise the perception among employers and the broader Serbian public that the economic engagement of all individuals, including LGBTQI+ persons, yields positive effects for the economy and

creates better conditions for economic growth and development.” Under the terms of the three-year grant, USAID delivers money after certain milestones have been met. The organization has received \$1.14 million and on Jan. 24 “submitted additional milestones valued at \$755,000, for which we are awaiting payment from USAID,” he said. [For many years](#), USAID has tried to improve civil society in Serbia as interest groups could advocate with the government on reforms. LGBTQ people faced discrimination, so one area of focus was ensuring acceptance of Belgrade Pride, an annual parade that previously was canceled after threats of violence. The 2024 parade was peaceful, and the government is discussing legislation on same-sex partnerships.

“\$70,000 for production of a ‘DEI musical’ in Ireland”

This is wrong. This was a [State Department grant](#), not USAID. In 2022, the U.S. ambassador [hosted](#) an event featuring Grammy-winning folk duo Francesco Turrisi and Rhiannon Giddens, along with other Irish and American musicians.

“\$2.5 million for electric vehicles for Vietnam”

This is wrong. This was for more than electric vehicles. USAID launched [a \\$2.5 million fund](#) that provided awards up to \$100,000 to organizations with promising new products, business models, or financing models in Danang or Ho Chi Minh cities. The fund was part of a [larger effort](#) to bring green energy to a country that is one of the world’s fastest-growing per capita greenhouse gas emitters. China has a head start on green energy, but the United States has sought to keep Vietnam out of China’s orbit, so the program was intended to boost the U.S. brand in green energy.

“\$47,000 for a ‘transgender opera’ in Colombia”

This is wrong. USAID did not fund this. The White House appears to be referring to a [\\$25,000 State Department grant](#) to Universidad De Los Andes in Bogotá to stage an opera, “As One,” composed by Laura Kaminsky, an American. The rest of the money came from other sources, according to Juana Monsalve, the lead actress in the Colombian performances. “This is a well-known opera in the U.S., highly acclaimed by audiences,” [Monsalve told a radio show in Spanish](#). “The last thing I expected was to hear those statements from the White House.”

“\$32,000 for a ‘transgender comic book’ in Peru”

This is wrong. USAID did not fund this, and it was not specifically transgender. Instead, [the grant says](#) the State Department provided \$32,000, under the guise of public diplomacy, to Peru’s Education Department “to cover expenses to produce a tailored-made comic, featured an LGBTQ+ hero to address social and mental health issues.”

“\$2 million for sex changes and ‘LGBT activism’ in Guatemala”

This is misleading, as it suggests USAID arranged for sex changes. The three-year [grant](#) to [Asociación Lambda](#), a Guatemala LGBTQ+ organization, was to “strengthen trans-led organizations to deliver gender-affirming health care, advocate for improved quality and access to services, and provide economic empowerment opportunities.” The World Health Organization [defines](#) gender-affirming health care as “any single or combination of a number of social, psychological, behavioral or medical (including hormonal treatment or surgery) interventions designed to support and affirm an individual’s gender identity.” About \$350,000 of the grant has been delivered. Officials at Asociación Lambda could not be reached, but a former senior USAID official who worked on LGBTQ+ programs for the agency said, “I regularly went to the Hill and communicated on the record to note that for USAID,

gender-affirming care does not include surgeries, hormone replacement therapies or any other medical interventions.”

“\$6 million to fund tourism in Egypt”

This is wrong. This initiative was launched in the first Trump administration to “increase educational opportunities and strengthen the livelihoods of the people of North Sinai,” [according to the citation provided by the White House](#). The money would “provide access to transportation for rural communities and economic livelihood programming for families.” There is no mention of funding tourism.

“Hundreds of thousands of dollars for a nonprofit linked to designated terrorist organizations — even AFTER an inspector general launched an investigation”

This is dubious. Allegations of links to Pakistani terror groups have never been proved and have been [denied](#) as “baseless and defamatory” by the organization, known as Helping Hand for Relief and Development. Some GOP members of Congress for years have claimed the group has terrorism links, and the Washington Examiner [reported](#) last year that the USAID inspector general began an investigation. The State Department, in [a brochure](#) on American Muslims published during the first Trump administration, said Helping Hand was “lauded for its ability to deliver effective aid.”

“Millions to EcoHealth Alliance — which was involved in research at the Wuhan lab”

This lacks context. Before the pandemic, up until 2019, USAID provided \$1.1 million to [EcoHealth Alliance](#), an environmental health nonprofit, via a subagreement on virus research. USAID initially awarded a grant to the University of California at Davis to improve monitoring of zoonotic viruses with pandemic potential in African and Asian countries. UC-

Davis then hired EcoHealth, which in turn contracted with Wuhan University and the Wuhan Institute of Virology, to collect biological samples from roughly 1,500 individuals in the Yunnan province with exposure to bats, other wildlife and domestic animals, [according to the Government Accountability Office](#). The origin of the covid virus has still not been determined. In 2022, USAID awarded EcoHealth \$4.7 million for a conservation project to improve farming practices in southwest Liberia — completely unrelated to virus research.

“Hundreds of thousands of meals that went to al-Qaeda-affiliated fighters in Syria”

This is highly misleading. As [the article](#) cited by the White House makes clear, investigators, including the USAID inspector general, discovered that the head of a nongovernmental organization diverted \$9 million intended for Syrian civilians to combatant groups. He was charged in a 12-count indictment unsealed in November. “USAID OIG works tirelessly to ensure that U.S.-funded humanitarian assistance does not fall into the hands of terrorist organizations,” said Jason Donnelly, special agent for the inspector general, in [a news release](#). “We will continue to work with the Department of Justice and law enforcement partners to hold accountable those who compromise USAID programs for vulnerable populations around the world.” Yet the White House is now blaming the agency for fraud that it exposed.

“Funding to print ‘personalized’ contraceptives birth control devices in developing countries”

This is misleading. USAID gave [a grant](#) to the University of Texas at Austin to develop personalized 3D-printed nonhormonal intrauterine devices (IUDs). The grant was part of a program managed by Eastern Virginia Medical School at Old Dominion University and USAID to

improve reproductive health by researching low-cost, safe and noninvasive HIV prevention methods as well as contraceptives.

“Hundreds of millions of dollars to fund ‘irrigation canals, farming equipment, and even fertilizer used to support the unprecedented poppy cultivation and heroin production in Afghanistan,’ benefiting the Taliban”

This is false. USAID never intended to support opium poppy cultivation or the Taliban, and in fact the United States sought to stem it. The White House cites a right-wing news site’s account of [a 2018 report](#) by the Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction (SIGAR) — whom President [Donald Trump](#) recently fired — that found that USAID efforts to fund alternative development projects during the George W. Bush administration (2005 to 2008) had failed. The Taliban before 2001 had successfully banned poppy cultivation, but the U.S. invasion led to a power vacuum that was exploited by poppy growers. USAID was the lead U.S. agency for implementing alternative development projects, modeled after a more successful effort in Colombia, but the report documented how conflicts among agencies and with allies hampered the effort. It’s a stretch to now, years later, accuse USAID of helping the Taliban.

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