

House Foreign Affairs Committee Shadow Hearing (March 25, 2025)
Personal Statement - Amy Uccello

I want to thank the Democratic members of the House Foreign Affairs Committee for the opportunity to speak on the devastating cuts this administration has made to the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) and the irreparable harm it brings to Americans and millions of people around the world. I am humbled to share my family's story and to represent thousands of my colleagues struggling during these stressful times.

On January 28th I was fired from my job at USAID's Bureau of Global Health while on maternity leave. Earlier that day I had been uncharacteristically locked out of my emails and files. I was given no cause for my termination, no severance, and three days of health insurance for myself and my newborn daughter. After years of dedicated service, and a recent promotion for exceptional performance, I was told this was my last day of pay. I was instructed to immediately return my equipment, security badge, and collect my belongings, though I would need to be escorted by security as my access was immediately restricted. The next day was horrific. Four hundred staff were cleaning out their desks; photos illustrating our work around the world had been ripped from the walls; staff not yet terminated with whom we had worked side-by-side for years were whispering or absent as they had been told not to show any emotion, to talk about the situation, and in some cases, to avoid interacting with us altogether; security guards who had greeted us daily for years were aghast. After a near 9-year career with USAID, I was tossed out in a matter of minutes. Since I had no warning that I would be fired, I lost years of my work- my intellectual contributions to the agency and the USG, including technical briefs authored, presentations crafted, reports to Congress, policy documents and photos from years of in-country work around the world. Since USAID's websites and our implementing partners' websites have been deleted, I may never regain access to all of the work that I did- that I developed to support USAID and the USG. It felt as though my entire 25-year career had disappeared overnight. This was psychological warfare and I believe that it was purposeful.

Two weeks later, my husband was furloughed from his job. The nonprofit organization that he worked for implementing USAID activities was no longer getting paid. The USAID programs that he was working on, including safeguarding the Rohingya diaspora from China's coercion, protecting Burmese human rights defenders from the junta, peacebuilding in Ethiopia, strengthening civil society organizations in Sudan so that they can help victims of conflict, and building local health systems in Ukraine were all either frozen or abruptly terminated. These programs not only helped the most vulnerable suffering in conflict zones, they also advanced US national security by mitigating the worst spillover of instability abroad. In a matter of two weeks, we went from career professionals, thrilled to move into the exciting chapter of new parenthood, to applying for WIC, SNAP, ACA, and Medicaid benefits and faced with the ever present anxiety that we might be unable to guarantee for our newborn daughter a roof over her head, formula in her belly, and the ability to visit a doctor when needed.

Countless families suffering needlessly with long ranging impact

Tragically, our story is not unique. As we lay awake each night, we are mindful of the hundreds of thousands of other families suffering needlessly. Take our family's story and multiply it by 100, then multiply that number by 100 more families. The latest figures [estimate](#) that around the

world, 155,774 people have lost their jobs due to USAID cuts. This includes more than 15,500 American jobs lost. Working in international development is often a whole family commitment. Married couples commonly share similar passions and are equally committed to foreign aid. Foreign service officers make homes for their spouses and children in multiple rotating locations around the world, contributing to local communities and spreading American goodwill. Thousands of American parents are now without income, some without homes, and children are being pulled from schools. Some have experienced tragic health risks and/or dangerous evacuations as countries begin to devolve in the midst of the abrupt stop of USAID's work. We are not faceless bureaucrats, but real people with a network of family and friends that count on us. No one could have prepared for this and we are quickly burning through our resources.

These unconstitutional cuts have ripple effects that impact thousands more. I come from a long line of family in public service. My mother was a nurse for 50 years and my father is a veteran. In 2021 they lost their Florida home due to Hurricane Ian. FEMA failed them and as a result, they came to live with us for nearly two years. My mother has Parkinson's disease, and they struggle on a fixed income to rebuild everything that they have lost. They rely heavily on Medicare, Social Security, and Veterans Affairs benefits, which are now also at risk. My husband and I supported them with food delivery, in-home medical care, and rehabilitation when my mother had a dangerous fall. This is a safety net that we can no longer offer. In short, thousands of Americans and US businesses count on USAID indirectly as part of our network.

USAID cuts have hurt Americans across 46 states plus Washington, DC, whether employees of the federal government or institutional partners, cuts to universities and research institutions, to American farmers and business owners, and more. The costs to the American public tally at [\\$28.9 billion to US-based organizations](#) now at risk if these cuts are permanent. This hurts our economy, the safety and security of our country, and reputation and standing in the world.

Impacts on mothers and children around the world

I have dedicated my career to improving the health of women around the world, and particularly adolescent girls. As a development professional, my job is to not only represent the values of the American people around the world, but to simultaneously voice the needs and concerns of foreign aid recipients back here at home. We are not so dissimilar, and I would like to illustrate the impact of these egregious cuts from a mother's perspective. My husband and I struggled to conceive for nearly 10 years. In that time, I experienced a devastating late term miscarriage, an ectopic pregnancy, and years of failed pregnancy attempts. I recall the labor scare we had and the frightening moment our baby girl was rushed to the neonatal intensive care unit due to dramatic weight loss. Now, I lay awake at night thinking of the millions of women and children who will not survive similar encounters with medical facilities that were kept going by USAID shuttered. How many women will die worldwide from hemorrhage, sepsis or eclampsia? Life-saving programs impacting women and children are being slashed across the board: 88% of all maternal and child health and 94% of reproductive health programs have been terminated.

Voluntary family planning (FP) helps women and girls avoid unintended pregnancy, a driver of maternal and child mortality as a result of pregnancy/birth complications and poor birth spacing.

Voluntary FP is more than a health intervention; it is a key component of development. Sixty years of bipartisan support for reproductive health has ensured millions of women and girls had a voice in whether and when to build their families. In the last five years, 35,000 unintended pregnancies have been averted due to voluntary FP, preventing 87,000 maternal deaths, 700,000 child deaths, 13,000 unsafe abortions, and reducing mother-to-child HIV transmission. It is the one foreign assistance program that helps countries improve health outcomes, strengthen gender equity, improve family economics and supports economic growth by stabilizing population trends. Yet in the 90 day pause, [the Guttmacher Institute](#) estimates 11.7 million women and girls will be denied access to contraceptive care resulting in 4.2 million unintended pregnancies leading to 8,340 maternal deaths in just one year. It is unlikely that any FP programming will continue, unless Congress insists on USAID's approved FP budget.

[Research](#) shows that USAID funding for maternal and child health has also saved the lives of nearly three million children under age five and at least one million women of reproductive age. Funding over time makes a significant difference. Studies have shown that sustained funding results in 500 fewer deaths of children under 5 per day and up to 1.3 million deaths prevented among women of reproductive age over a four year period. Without these programs women will be forced to give birth without medicines, midwives or equipment, putting their lives and their babies' lives in jeopardy. Shipments of life-saving medical supplies will be disrupted despite the fact that many of these activities are mandated in law by Congress. I think of the pregnant mother wracked with worry that she no longer has a safe labor facility to deliver her child. The HIV+ mother who knows that without the ART medications she will unnecessarily pass the disease to her newborn child with deep uncertainty about their collective fate. Over 1,650,000 people could die within a year without American foreign aid for HIV prevention and treatment.

Infectious disease also knows no borders. Without the safety net that USAID provides to keep diseases in check, illnesses will make America less safe. As we rushed to get our baby a measles vaccine learning that the disease had reached the Washington, DC area, I think of the mothers frantically waving mosquitoes away from their bassinets now that they no longer have access to insecticide treated bednets or malaria medications. [Estimates](#) indicate more than 290,000 people could die within a year without malaria prevention and without access to vaccines, 500,000 children could die in that same year, with 200,000 potential new cases of paralytic polio due to canceling funding that could have eradicated the disease. In that same year over 310,000 people could die without tuberculosis prevention. The drastic cuts to USAID's TB program will result in global outbreaks and increased transmission here at home, costing taxpayers millions of dollars. Kansas has its largest TB outbreak in decades. As I feed my daughter and wonder how long our WIC benefits will last, I think about the thousands of mothers listening to their children scream in hunger and watching them waste away from malnutrition, while food from the American people rots in ports undelivered. In the same year, more than 550,000 people could die from lack of food aid, many of those children. Mothers are well aware

of these health risks, even if they do not know the numbers. But we do, we know the numbers, and we have an obligation to them and to our country to act now.¹

I think about my girl's future as she grows up and the thousands of adolescent girls that I have supported over the years. Girls face disproportionate health outcomes including higher rates of unintended pregnancy, gender-based violence, child marriage, and more. The leading cause of death among adolescent girls is from pregnancy and birth complications. Reproductive health allows girls to finish schooling, obtain skilled employment, and thrive. Adolescent girls and young women (AGYW) are fourteen times more likely to be infected with HIV. Current waivers exclude the DREAMS (Determined, Resilient, Empowered, AIDS-free, Mentored, and Safe) initiative despite having reduced new HIV diagnoses among AGYWs by 25 percent or more. Without DREAMS, 80,000 AGYWs could become infected by HIV this year.

Programming cuts proposed in the "leaked memo" will further harm women. [Cuts in sectors](#) such as disaster readiness (69%), emerging threats (87%), water and sanitation (87%), human rights (88%), agriculture (88%), good governance (96%), basic education (97%), civil society (99%), infrastructure (100%) and private sector readiness (100%) will have a disproportionate impact on women and children. In disaster areas, girls are the most likely to be trafficked, to be raped, or forced into transactional sex to pay for food and medicine. Water and sanitation efforts are critical to prevent diarrheal diseases suffered by children and support menstrual health allowing girls to attend school. Most girls will not finish primary school without basic education support and women are more likely to be excluded from profitable agriculture or have their voices heard in civil society or government. For women and girls, all USAID work is lifesaving.

Eradicating Poverty – All work is lifesaving

International development is a discipline that takes years of study and experience to implement. The suggestions to shift all foreign aid to humanitarian assistance rolls the industry back 50 years. USAID is not only tasked to provide emergency services, but to eradicate poverty with the understanding that a more prosperous world is good for U.S. interests. This means identifying the root causes of poverty. To not only feed the hungry but prevent famine. To not only provide ART medicines but prevent the spread of HIV. To not only offer disaster relief but prepare countries with strong systems to better prepare for political, environmental, and economic upheaval. Why? Humanitarian assistance is costly! The U.S. will return to the same locations time and again, costing more and saving fewer lives. When countries are healthy, educated, and employed with stable economies and governments, they can graduate from foreign aid. Several countries have graduated and some are now donors, such as South Korea.

Ending poverty is not a simple task. USAID's work is rooted in decades of empirical and scientific evidence. For sixty years USAID has learned what works to avoid spending on impractical approaches. Each program has rigorous monitoring and evaluation oversight. Research tracks efficacy, cost effectiveness, and impact to help local governments adopt those

¹ Cuts to foreign aid have terminated the [President's Malaria Initiative](#), which protected 53 million people with bed nets, diagnostics and treatments. They have [ended all work on tuberculosis](#) and they have [halted funding from the U.S. President's Emergency Plan for AIDS Relief \(PEPFAR\)](#), the [HIV program](#) serving 20 million people worldwide.

programs that are successful, allowing USAID to phase out. However, USAID does not remain stagnant. As societies change over time, USAID prioritizes innovative solutions. For example, as technology grew around the world, digital health was born. As economies improved, partnerships with the private sector advanced. As new pandemics took shape, we developed new emergency preparedness expertise. USAID uses proven techniques to adapt to new problems and new environments and continues to learn along the way.

Finally, as I fight for the future of foreign aid and teach my daughter that the United States can be a global leader, protecting our country while helping those most in need, I think of the hundreds of thousands of engaged actors in the countries where we work - stalwart advocates and equal partners in our combined goal to eradicate poverty. I have visited medical facilities that require a physical climb up a rocky terrain where vehicles cannot reach to meet community health workers who do this on a daily basis to serve their community. I have witnessed religious leaders preach to their congregation about the importance and safety of family planning to keep mothers and children alive and build healthy sustainable communities. I have driven hours on the worst roads imaginable with partners at the end of every month to ensure health products reach the last mile. I have trained hundreds of government representatives, NGO staff, parents and youth on health messaging only to see these messages multiplied across policy, program, and interpersonal efforts. From the community-based organizations to the adolescent DREAMS ambassadors; from the foreign service nationals to the newly trained health providers; from the brave religious leaders to the dedicated midwives; and on and on. We have never been able to deliver foreign aid without their valuable contributions, partnerships, and dedication.

I am horrified that we are inviting back the images of the most extreme cases of starvation and pain to elicit empathy. International development has evolved to instead [highlight the power and contribution of in-country actors](#) who make development work. With the return of the USAID website we could share more positive stories.

Betraying our colleagues and allies around the world

It is equally important to recognize the contributions of our colleagues around the world. In my career, I have seen how foreign aid has helped to build alliances. Over 5,000 foreign service nationals (FSNs) have served in more than 100 U.S. embassy missions around the world. These local hires have dedicated years of their career to champion and serve the United States Government. Andrew Natsios called them the “backbone of the Agency.” A [recent article by Annie Beauneu](#) called FSNs “the strategists who design, manage and oversee America’s most successful foreign assistance programs.” They have been our essential partners and most fervent allies. They help us to partner with foreign governments and facilitate programming in communities. “They operate in authoritarian regimes, fragile democracies, and conflict zones where their very affiliation with the United States places them—and their families—at risk.” However, thousands are facing potential unemployment and even more staff working for non-governmental and faith-based organizations, medical facilities, and schools that implement foreign aid are already out of work. In these economically volatile states there are limited jobs. Some may be blacklisted, unemployable or even targeted for their work with the United States.

As Beaneu writes, “We claim to be a nation that values loyalty, service, and partnership. We will send a message to the world that those who serve the United States cannot count on the United States to stand by them. And that message will not be forgotten.” These staff also often support a network of family members who will be quickly thrown into extreme poverty. Abruptly ending foreign aid harms families and communities around the world.

I have witnessed love for America among colleagues and clients who widely believe that Americans have two overriding qualities: generosity and business acumen. Foreign aid is a representation of both. USAID was established to advance our national interests and represent our humanity. As USAID works to improve lives around the world, the United States builds soft power. When we feed the hungry, cure the sick, improve education, introduce job training, and help economies and governments thrive, we build alliances that can last generations. Conversely, imagine that same ally is suddenly tossed aside by a government that they have trusted. They soon begin to see their community suffer. Suddenly they start losing loved ones. Their infant niece dies from malnutrition, their neighbor’s business is forced to close, their best friend dies without HIV medications, their pastor succumbs to tuberculosis, an entire village is wiped out by Ebola. This is a harm to U.S. interests that can also last for years to come.

Urgent call to act NOW

The plans proposed do not ensure America’s international development programming remains effective, efficient, and evidence-based. It deprives Congress of their constitutional authority to decide whether, when, and how to administer appropriated funding for foreign aid. USAID has had decades of bipartisan support and most funding has been earmarked to address priorities identified by Congress and the American people that they represent. The cuts suggested represent the ideology of ONE think tank with one set of priorities, which does not represent the values of the American people. A new survey shows that, “an overwhelming majority of 89% of Americans say the US should spend at least one percent of the federal budget on foreign aid – the current amount the US spends on aid. This includes 84% of Republicans and 94% of Democrats.” Americans – your constituents – across all ideological lines widely support foreign aid. Congress has directed foreign aid for years with bipartisan support and the world encourages and matches U.S. foreign aid efforts.

I believe that USAID is a test case for future cuts and illegal acts by the executive branch. The playbook has already been used with other agencies. If we fall, we all fall together. Stopping unconstitutional acts can save USAID and other agencies. The judicial branch is bravely ruling against these acts and the legislative branch has a critical window to capture this momentum, to save USAID, end suffering, and keep our country safe and secure. The time to act is now.

Summary

I have dedicated 25 years of my life to international development and nearly 9 years to USAID. I have been wildly passionate about helping women and girls, their families, and communities stay healthy. I have worked alongside some of the most dedicated people I have ever met. It is not merely a job for any of us but a mission, a calling, a purpose to our careers and our lives. No

call was too late at night or too early in the morning, no destination too dangerous to visit, no hour beyond 40 to support our colleagues was too precious to sacrifice. People have willingly given their time, comfort, and personal safety to help those in need - the voiceless, the young, the vulnerable safe. What is happening is a personal, American, and global injustice. Even after being fired and humiliated by horrible lies, many of my colleagues and I continue working to save foreign assistance and USAID. This is our calling and our public service is far from over.