

Thank You for Your Service to the American Public: A Perspective from a Fired Federal Worker

CARRIE PRICE

ABSTRACT

From its outset, the Trump administration has haphazardly decimated federal agencies and institutions, creating chaos, fear, and confusion among federal employees. Securing a federal job is no small feat. It requires time, effort, skill, luck, and the investment of others. It carries the expectation of political neutrality no matter who occupies the White House. The National Institutes of Health (NIH) (and its employees) has been one of the institutions targeted by the Trump administration. The NIH, a pillar of scientific advancement, impacts the lives of all Americans through its research funding, initiatives, and programs.

As a recently hired biomedical librarian, I dedicated my work to supporting the mission of the NIH, but I experienced firsthand the Trump administration's bullying and vilification of federal workers. I was ultimately fired, but my commitment to advocating for change has grown stronger. I believe librarians have a role to play in a brighter future.

As of February 20, 2025, just one month after the US presidential inauguration, the Trump administration fired or otherwise eliminated tens of thousands of federal employees from a wide range of departments and agencies (Hsu 2025; Reinstein 2025). Around seventy-five thousand employees may have accepted a deferred resignation offer (Reinstein 2025; US Office of Personnel Management 2025), while the remainder have been removed from their positions through emails arriving after-hours starting in late January (Reid et al. 2025). On February 26, 2025, the Trump administration released yet another communication that promised to initiate even more large-scale reductions in the federal workforce in the coming months (Megerian 2025).

Anyone who has ever applied to the federal workforce knows that it is not an easy task. It is even harder to get one of those jobs. An applicant's resume must adhere to a very specific format and provide copious amounts of detail on past work. If referred to the hiring manager, interviewed, and selected, the process to start the job can take months due to background checks, reference checks, and paperwork. Once a candidate accepts the final job offer and agrees to a start date, the onboarding process adds more time while the employee completes required trainings and gets to know the organization. During onboarding trainings, all new feds are taught about the Hatch Act, a law passed in 1939, which restricts employees from

engaging in political activities "on behalf of or in concert with a partisan political group or candidate" (US Office of Special Counsel 2024). This includes soliciting donations for candidates, sharing invitations to campaign fundraisers, and even liking or sharing messages from political candidates on social media (US Office of Special Counsel 2024). It is emphasized that there will be repercussions for an employee's failure to comply. Political neutrality is expected of federal employees, both at and outside of work.

Within the web of government agencies stands the National Institutes of Health (NIH), part of the US Department of Health and Human Services (HHS). The NIH began as a one-room lab in 1887 (National Institutes of Health). Today, it encompasses over twenty-seven institutes and centers with staff working in chronic and infectious diseases, precision medicine, cancer immunotherapy, rare diseases, health technologies, and more (National Institutes of Health). It also funds research across the country. In fiscal year 2024, the NIH awarded over eighty-three thousand research grants totaling over \$35 billion in funding (National Institutes of Health RePORT). Nearly 83 percent of that funding is awarded to researchers in higher education and research institutions in every state of the US (National Institutes of Health). The NIH supports science at every level and provides career development opportunities for scientists through its intramural and extramural funding (National Institutes of Health Grants & Funding).

At the heart of NIH's main campus in Bethesda, Maryland, stands the Clinical Center, known as the "House of Hope." The Clinical Center is "the nation's largest hospital devoted entirely to clinical research" (National Institutes of Health Clinical Center). Every patient who walks through its doors is a participant in a research study, entrusting the outcomes of their own lives to the advancement of medical knowledge and the development of new treatments (National Institutes of Health). For the patients and their families, the Clinical Center represents perhaps their last and only hope and is sometimes the sole place in the world where they can receive the care they need (National Institutes of Health 2018).

Tucked in a small corner of the sprawling three-million-square-foot Clinical Center is the NIH Library (National Institutes of Health). To clarify a common misconception, the NIH Library and the National Library of Medicine (NLM) are two distinct entities—the NIH Library serves the scientific community of the twenty-seven institutes and centers of the NIH, while the NLM serves the public through training, outreach, and platforms like MedlinePlus and PubMed. The NIH Library staff of initially nearly fifty are multidisciplinary, collaborative, highly skilled, and, more than anything, a cohesive team working to support and advance the scientific research that the NIH supports.

Much like that research, the contributions of the library can sometimes be nebulous, ambiguous, indirect, and not immediately impactful. Other types of library support are more tangible and more quantifiable. How many downloads, books, journals, classes, and PDFs were delivered? How many people were at the library, attended the class, were on the website, or used a particular service? Customers—that's what the NIH Library staff typically call them, not patrons, users, or clients—came in and out of the library to use the 3D printers to print models of a cell or an organ, to get reference help, to read and research, or to use a study carrel. Incidentally, there were more virtual customers from any number of the NIH research facilities spread across the US who, at any given time, were using the website or communicating with their library points of contact. In 2023, there were over five million journal article or book chapter downloads and half a million website visits to the NIH Library's online presence (National Institutes of Health Library 2024).

In early 2024, I applied for a biomedical librarian position on USAJOBS. As a medical librarian of a dozen years, it seemed like an ideal way for me to use my passion for research to have a real impact on people's lives. It was also an appropriate and exciting next step in my career. Seven months later, I joined the staff at the NIH Library. My first day was August 26, 2024, and I was thrilled. It was a Monday. I hesitate to call any job a dream job, but this one truly was. I was a member of the Bibliometrics, Evidence Synthesis, and User Engagement Teams. I collaborated with these teams to serve customers in these main areas, in addition to being a point-of-contact liaison for a handful of institutes, among them the National Cancer Institute (NCI), the National Institute of Nursing Research (NINR), the National Institute of Neurological Disorders and Stroke (NINDS), the National Institute of General Medical Sciences (NIGMS), the National Institute of Mental Health (NIMH), and others.

In January, I began to formally colead the Evidence Synthesis Team with a colleague. Six librarians, myself included, with methodological expertise and extensive training supported researchers in all stages of their systematic and scoping review projects, from refining the research question to guiding the literature searches and the writing of the publication. Librarians often saw the projects through to completion as coauthors. Systematic and scoping reviews are considered important in health care because, by the nature of systematically collating, aggregating, and synthesizing broad swaths of evidence without bias, the conclusions and analyses made can help support patient care, policy, and decision-making. These published reviews are considered a high level of evidence and have the potential to drive medical progress and improve patient outcomes (Higgins et al. 2024; Aromataris et al. 2024). Evidence synthesis projects require a multidisciplinary team and usually take over a year to fully complete (Borah et al. 2017). Research continues to suggest that librarians are necessary members of that team and that reviews with a librarian coauthor are correlated with a lower risk of bias and significantly higher quality search strategies and reporting (Aamodt et al. 2019; Pawliuk et al. 2024; Meert et al. 2016; Rethlefsen et al. 2015; Schellinger et al. 2021; Whitney et al. 2024). I certainly felt that way, as many clinical experts needed assistance navigating unwieldy biomedical databases and documenting reproducible search methods. In my bibliometrics work, I used multiple proprietary and nonproprietary resources and visualization tools to create deliverables, giving customers an overview of the impact of their research in their field. I offered bibliometrics support and training and created detailed reports and presentations for customers and departments.

The NIH Library also maintained a significant training program covering a wide variety of topics, from artificial intelligence to data analysis, literature searching, software, and more. In 2023, library staff offered nearly 270 classes with over 16,000 attendees, and that number has only grown (National Institutes of Health Library 2024). I had the chance to develop and offer an interactive class called Biosketch: Telling Your Research Story, where I walked attendees through the Biosketch, a specific document that is utilized by NIH grant applicants, grant recipients, and for internal project reporting (National Institutes of Health Library). It was a popular and well-received class.

Aside from bibliometrics and evidence synthesis, NIH Library staff supported printing (both 3D and paper), bioinformatics, data, document delivery, editing, literature searches, communications, protocols, publications, and language translations (National Institutes of Health Library). For one week every September, the NIH Library participated in the NIH Research Festival. I spent a couple of hours with my colleagues at our photo booth, where enthusiastic researchers visited the library to have their pictures taken against virtual backgrounds of *Yersinia pestis* or cancer cells (NIH Intramural Research Program).

Management at the NIH Library invested in the talented workforce by supporting learning opportunities and professional development to advance career growth. My manager had nominated me for a Management Seminar Series, a seven-month training program set to begin on February 20. I was also enrolled in a weeklong March course on visualizing science with a software called VOSviewer to support my work in bibliometrics. These opportunities came at a cost, reflecting the library's commitment to fostering my career progression and skill set.

Because I was new, I was on a probationary period of one year. Most employees who are new to the government or who find themselves in new roles are on a period of probation before gaining full civil service job protections (Hsu 2025; USAJOBS). Beginning in late January, very shortly after the inauguration, almost every employee in every federal agency began receiving after-hours emails from a newly created email account in the Office of Personnel Management (OPM). These emails' subjects were "Government Wide Email Address System – Test" and "Government Wide Email Address System – Second Test," asking recipients to reply "yes." Because of their atypical presentation, many people reported them as spam (King 2025). One email, the "Fork in the Road," offered employees a deferred resignation. A follow-up to the "Fork" encouraged federal employees to "find a job in the private sector as soon as you would like to do so. The way to greater American prosperity is encouraging people to move from lower productivity jobs in the public sector to higher productivity jobs in the private sector" (Office of Personnel Management 2025). Other emails came from administrators within the HHS, mandating a return to fully in-person work and also demanding that we notify management of anyone disguising their roles in diversity, equity, or inclusion initiatives "through coded or imprecise language" (Rowell 2025). There "will be no adverse consequences for timely reporting this information [sic]. However, failure to report this information within 10 days may result in adverse consequences" (Rowell 2025). Not only did these relentless emails begin to sow discontent, but the tone was insulting, condescending, and so unlike government communications that it made colleagues question who was writing them. It is now known that many of those emails came from the Musk youth (Elliott 2025).

In federal employment, there are what are known as bargaining unit positions, where the job is or can be represented by a labor union (USAJOBS). My position was bargaining unit eligible, which meant that I could join a union if I wished. On January 28, 2025, I joined Local 2419 of the American Federation of Government Employees (AFGE). I had never been part of a union before, but the general climate and mood within the NIH made me fear for my job. I thought the union might be able to help.

On the evening of Saturday, February 15, 2025, I received an email with the subject "Read this email immediately" (National Institutes of Health Office of Human Resources). The body of the email read, "Hello, Please read the two (2) attachments to this email immediately. Thank you for your service to the American public" (National Institutes of Health Office of Human Resources). In one of the attachments, on official letterhead from the HHS Office of the Secretary, signed by Jeffery Anoka, Acting Chief Human Capital Officer, were the words that every federal probationary employee received:

"Unfortunately, the Agency finds that you are not fit for continued employment because your ability, knowledge and skills do not fit the Agency's current needs, and your performance has not been

adequate to justify further employment at the Agency" (National Institutes of Health Office of Human Resources).

And with that email, I was fired. Twenty-four hours later, I was locked out of my workstation. My own performance appraisal, completed by my manager just a couple of weeks before, evaluating my first four months on the job, praised my work and gave me a number rating of four, which means that I "achieved more than expected results" (Department of Health and Human Services). In my appraisal, my manager wrote, "[Carrie has] already made significant contributions to the success of the NIH Library in her first months working here. She has established herself as a reliable and collaborative co-worker that colleagues recognize for her expertise and seek out for advice on their own projects" (Department of Health and Human Services). I was one of eight people fired that weekend, including my manager. That's around 15 percent of the NIH Library staff. With our termination, entire service teams disappeared. Entire skill sets are gone. No one within the library was able to stop the layoffs.

On President's Day 2025, just two days after I was removed from my job, I attended a peaceful protest in Baltimore, Maryland, at City Hall. It was part of the 50501 movement (50501). At 46 years old, it was my first protest. I went because I was angry, angrier than before. I was struck by the words of one of the protesters, who said he would rather be at home, on his couch, watching television, but he was compelled to attend the protest instead. On that extremely cold and blustery winter day, I felt the same. My sign, made at the last minute in red, white, and blue capital letters, read "FIRE ELON INSTEAD." I am going to keep it handy.

Ten days after I was fired, I attended a job fair at Howard County Community College's Academic Commons. It was a job fair held specifically for federal workers (Payne 2025). One woman standing in line next to me for headshots recounted how she had given up an established career in research to take a job at the National Institute on Drug Abuse (NIDA) in September. She was fired on the same day as me. A federal employee with ten years of service at the Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) was dismissed over the President's Day weekend due to his recent transition to a new role and the associated probationary period. In addition to being surreal, the job fair felt tragic. It was attended by more than a thousand dazed, confused, hurting, and probably angry people (Payne 2025).

At the time of my termination, I had already completed half a dozen systematic or scoping review searches. One was about serious blood transfusion reactions, and the other was on the state of evidence for a particular gene duplication that causes developmental abnormalities and learning disabilities. I had five more reviews waiting in my queue. I will not be able to attend the Management Seminar Series or the science visualization course. Besides continuing to offer my Biosketch class, I was in the midst of developing classes and videos to support the work of the Evidence Synthesis Team. My bibliometrics work came to a halt, with a dozen customer requests waiting in the wings. A former bibliometrics customer from NIGMS wrote on my LinkedIn page, "Carrie had just started consulting with us on a major evaluation of a long-standing national program our institute supports. She did a phenomenal job with a pilot analysis that we will be using for all the projects in the program. [The] NIH has lost a talented librarian" (Zarcone 2025).

Friends and family ask me if I would take my job back if it were offered. The job that I was hired for does not exist anymore. It ceased to exist at noon on January 20, 2025. The new HHS Secretary, Robert F. Kennedy Jr., is moving quickly to advance his anti-science and anti-evidence agenda while also drastically cutting funding for research, Medicaid, and

Medicare and ending public input on any agency affairs (Cueto 2025; BBC Verify Team 2024; Jaffe 2025). The funding cuts are going to have repercussions that ripple far beyond the NIH campus in Bethesda. All of higher education will be affected (Knott 2025; Haney 2025).

The work my colleagues and I had the privilege of doing for the American people was not the waste, fraud, and abuse that the Trump administration refers to so often. The government is a service provider. It is not a for-profit business. It most certainly isn't Twitter. The work of the NIH Library staff, supporting the researchers within the NIH by providing reference, access, printing, editing, publishing, reproducible and unbiased literature searches, instruction, training, impact analytics, and more, directly impacted the NIH's mission to "seek fundamental knowledge about the nature and behavior of living systems and [to apply] that knowledge to enhance health, lengthen life, and reduce illness and disability" for our nation (National Institutes of Health).

Now, I, along with tens of thousands of others, am left to pick up the shattered pieces of my career. We are a spectacle in an atrocity exhibition. I am a librarian with no library. I am a researcher with no research. I have often spouted the line that we are not defined by our job titles. The unique skills that we have acquired to do our jobs, when we have one, are the same skills that will allow us to drive change in our professional networks, families, and communities. We are the last line of defense against this reprehensible administration's censorship, propaganda, disinformation, and anti-intellectualism campaigns. We get to play a vital role in what lies ahead. The future that we build together will be shaped by the power of our collective actions.

In the meantime, let me know if you're hiring.

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Author

Carrie Price began her career in medical librarianship in 2012 at the Welch Medical Library of Johns Hopkins University and Medicine. She is a skilled information specialist and expert searcher committed to enhancing the foundations and reporting of research. With expertise in evidence synthesis methods and health research, she has supported students, scientific staff, and healthcare professionals alike throughout the research lifecycle. In addition to her role as a Biomedical Librarian at the National Institutes of Health, Carrie was also the Research Impact & Health Professions Librarian at the Albert S. Cook Library of Towson University.