Following this week’s passage of tax cuts legislation, Congress is headed home for a holiday break, rushing to pass yet another continuing resolution (CR) to keep the government open for another short-term period while they continue to negotiate a larger budget deal.

The current continuing resolution (CR) expires tomorrow at midnight. To avoid a government shutdown, Congress needs to either finalize the FY 2018 funding levels for all discretionary programs or extend the CR until they can do so. As they did earlier this month when the last CR expired, they’ve opted to give themselves more time. This afternoon the House passed a CR through January 19 and n4a expects the Senate to pass it swiftly, averting a shutdown just days before Christmas.

Many of the unrelated but “must do” bills have been left off this CR to ensure its passage. These include a health insurance market stabilization package, an immigration deal for the “Dreamers,” and health care extenders such as MIPPA funding for low-income outreach and enrollment. Typically, year-end must-pass legislation becomes a “Christmas tree,” with other unrelated provisions added to the main bill. This year, however, tax cuts consumed all the air and time in the past few weeks, leaving Congress willing to do just the minimum and leave for the holidays.

While better than a shutdown, the fact that Congress hasn’t yet agreed on overall spending means that this latest CR further delays the passage of final appropriations levels for FY 2018, which started on October 1.

Given what Democrats and most Republicans want is to raise the discretionary spending caps in current law, the current budget negotiations focus on what that amendment to the Budget Control Act of 2011 (BCA) looks like. In other words, as has been done every two years since the BCA took effect, Congress will override the law to give appropriators more funding to distribute.

After that deal is struck, hopefully by January 19, we expect there will be yet
another CR, to provide Congress with at least another 3-4 weeks to then finalize specific funding levels once it’s clear how much they can spend. Only then, in late February, would Congress finalize specific funding levels and close out their FY 2018 budgeting cycle.

n4a continues to urge Congress to strike a bipartisan budget deal to raise the arbitrary BCA caps, alleviating—at least to some degree—the continued erosion of critical domestic discretionary programs like the Older Americans Act.

And as our December 4 Alert detailed, advocacy is still needed to secure the Older Americans Act Title III B Supportive Services increase called for in the House spending bill (a $14 million boost) and the continued funding for SHIP in the Senate version (vs. the House’s elimination of the program), so please continue pressing your lawmakers in both chambers as soon as the holidays are over! We can’t let up our advocacy until the ink is dry on those final appropriations levels!