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This Physician-Scientist Is Taking on Trump on Behalf of Disadvantaged Communities

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Neeta Thakur, a University of California-San Francisco professor and a doctor, is the lead plaintiff in a class-action lawsuit against the Trump administration over canceled research grants. (*University of California-San Francisco*)

SACRAMENTO — As smoke from Canadian wildfires drifted across North America, and western U.S. states girded for their annual fire siege, Neeta Thakur was well into her search for ways to offset the damage of such fumes on people’s health, especially among minority and low-income communities.

San Francisco Chronicle

(<https://www.sfchronicle.com/health/article/ucsf-health-federal-grant-20797205.php>)

This story also ran on [San Francisco Chronicle](https://www.sfchronicle.com/health/article/ucsf-health-federal-grant-20797205.php) (<https://www.sfchronicle.com/health/article/ucsf-health-federal-grant-20797205.php>). It can be [republished for free](https://www.sfchronicle.com/news/article/researcher-leads-legal-challenge-against-trump-policy-disadvantaged-people/view/republish/) ([/news/article/researcher-leads-legal-challenge-against-trump-policy-disadvantaged-people/view/republish/](https://www.sfchronicle.com/news/article/researcher-leads-legal-challenge-against-trump-policy-disadvantaged-people/view/republish/)).

For more than a decade, the University of California-San Francisco researcher relied on federal grants without incident. But Thakur, a doctor and a scientist, suddenly found herself leading the charge for public health science against President Donald Trump's political ideology.

Thakur, 45, a pulmonologist who also is medical director of the Zuckerberg San Francisco General Hospital Chest Clinic, is the lead plaintiff among six UC researchers who in June won a class-action preliminary injunction (<https://www.courthousenews.com/wp-content/uploads/2025/06/uc-order-granting-motion-for-preliminary-injunction.pdf>), against the efforts of several federal agencies to carry out Trump's executive orders seeking to eliminate research grants deemed to focus on areas of diversity, equity, and inclusion. The administration has filed a notice of appeal, and the outcome, whether or not she and her colleagues prevail, could influence both the future of academic research and the health of those she's spent her life trying to help.

"When this moment hit us, where science was really under attack and lives are at stake, it doesn't surprise me that she stepped up," said Margot Kushel, who directs the UCSF Action Research Center for Health Equity and has known Thakur for more than a decade through their work at the center and San Francisco General, the public county hospital.

"We don't think our work should be political, to be honest," Kushel said. "Saving people's lives and making sure people don't die doesn't seem to me that it should be a partisan issue."

Thakur said that after the abrupt funding cuts, she and the other researchers “felt pretty powerless and found that the class-action lawsuit was a way for us to join together and sort of take a stance.”

The suit was filed independently by the researchers and allowed them to show the harm inflicted not just on their own work “but more broadly on public health and public health research,” she said.

Thakur’s study, which received more than \$1.3 million in funding from the Environmental Protection Agency and was set to run through November, explores the impact of increased wildfire smoke on low-income communities and communities of color, populations that already experience heightened pollution and other environmental health disparities. The goal is to find ways to help residents limit their smoke exposure, Thakur said, adding that the results could help people no matter their circumstances.

Preliminary findings show that smoke can trigger breathing emergencies among children days after exposure, knowledge that could lead to better treatment, and that smoke intensity may peak during just a few hours when protection is most needed, indicating the need for more precise and timely safety messaging.

Thakur said her studies on health equity and health disparities saw growing federal support during the covid pandemic and a national focus on racism spurred by the murder of George Floyd. The EPA had solicited the grant in 2021 for her and her team to research how climate change affects underserved communities.

Trump, in one of several (<https://www.whitehouse.gov/presidential-actions/2025/01/ending-illegal-discrimination-and-restoring-merit-based-opportunity/>), executive orders blocking federal funding for DEI programs, said they “use dangerous, demeaning, and immoral race- and sex-based preferences” that he said have “prioritized how people were born instead of what they were capable of doing.”

EPA Administrator Lee Zeldin said in March (<https://www.epa.gov/newsreleases/epa-administrator-lee-zeldin-cancels-400-grants-4th-round-cuts-doge-saving-americans>) that, in cooperation with the Department of Government Efficiency (<https://doge.gov/savings>), the administration had canceled more than 400 grants topping \$2 billion “to rein in wasteful federal spending.”

The order by U.S. District Judge Rita Lin in San Francisco temporarily blocking the grant terminations covered the EPA, as well as grants by the National Endowment for the Humanities and the National Science Foundation. Lin’s ruling was not a nationwide injunction of the sort restricted by the U.S. Supreme Court in a June decision (<https://www.nytimes.com/2025/06/27/us/politics/scotus-birthright-citizenship.html>).

The Trump administration agencies affected by the order have reinstated the UC grants as the lawsuit proceeds. The government filed a motion for a temporary stay on the order pending the outcome of its appeal, but a decision had not been issued as of publication.

The EPA declined to comment on the judge's order blocking the attempted cancellation of the research funding, citing the ongoing litigation, and attorneys representing the government did not respond to requests for comment.

Thakur defends the need for research that spotlights disadvantaged communities. Her interest in health equity stems from childhood experiences. The daughter of immigrants from India, with a physician and an engineer as parents, she grew up relatively well-off in a mixed-income neighborhood in Phoenix. While she prospered, however, she had friends who couldn't afford college or became pregnant as teenagers.

"I see my research being directed towards trying to understand how where you live and what your experience impacts your health," Thakur said.

When the grants were suspended in April, the researchers were unable to finish identifying ways to help protect communities from wildfire smoke. Thakur had to dismiss a student intern and dip into discretionary funds to pay her postdoctoral fellow. At least three research papers that could have directly affected public health were in danger of going unpublished without the funding, she said.

The government reinstated her team's grants about three weeks after the judge's order, and Thakur is in the process of picking up the pieces. She's hopeful that researchers can publish two of the three studies they were working on.

Thakur said she is now cautiously optimistic after experiencing “a roller coaster of emotions.” Putting together a project and conducting the research takes years, she said, so “to have all of that end suddenly, it brought me a range of emotions one thinks about when folks are experiencing grief. There’s denial, anger.”

But the Trump administration’s actions have already sapped morale in the field. Rebecca Sugrue, Thakur’s postdoctoral fellow and an expert in health equity and climate change, is rethinking her entire career path.

“I kind of came to the realization that all the expertise I had built up were the kind of things that were being deprioritized,” Sugrue said. She said she and other postdoctoral students and more junior members of the research team had even had discussions about leaving academia: “‘Unstable’ and ‘uncertain’ were words that were used a lot.”

The lasting damage is not lost on Thakur. If the grants ultimately disappear, universities won’t have the typical programs to train students or to support academic research, she said, adding that, “I think there are concerns that the sort of divestment from science and research in these particular areas will cause generations of impact.”

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