

In federal budget battle, social programs pay the price

Michael Sean Winters | Feb. 28, 2011



Children from the Goddard Riverside Head Start program visit the Butterfly Conservatory at the American Museum of Natural History in New York in October. (Newscom/ZUMA Press)

WASHINGTON -- The battle over the budget culminates in Washington this week: Congress must pass a continuing resolution, funding the government through the rest of the current fiscal year, by Friday to avoid a government shutdown.

Responding to the demands of new tea party-backed members of Congress and concerns among independent voters about the growing federal deficit, the White House and congressional Republicans proposed steep cuts in the federal budget, many of which will affect programs that aid the poor and vulnerable.

Many Catholics have warned that the budget is being balanced on the backs of the poor and the U.S. bishops' conference has urged Congress to maintain funding for programs that aid the poor.

In a letter to members of Congress released last month, Bishop Stephen Blaire of Stockton, Calif., chairman of the bishops' Committee on Domestic Justice and Human Development, called on Congress specifically to spare cuts to community health centers, job re-training and affordable housing programs, as well as aid to migrants. "We remind Congress that the poor and vulnerable have a priority claim on our limited, although still substantive, financial resources," Blaire wrote.

The Republican-controlled House Appropriations Committee introduced a continuing resolution with \$31 billion in cuts. But, after protests from new members, the House enacted \$61 billion in cuts on a party-line vote of 235-189 Feb. 19. The bill would cancel Head Start for 218,000 poor children, reduce the maximum Pell Grant for needy college students from \$5,500 to \$4,750, and shutter 3,000 job-training career centers.

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Overall, the plan cuts 14 percent in non-security spending in the current fiscal year, according to a study by the nonpartisan Center on Budget and Policy Priorities, but because the fiscal year began in October 2010, the cuts amount to a 24 percent reduction in spending on domestic programs for the rest of the year.

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The GOP proposal contains no new taxes nor any significant cuts in the Pentagon budget.

The House-passed continuing resolution would strip \$10 billion from foreign aid and the State Department, decimating many programs that aid the poor abroad. Programs to combat the spread of malaria in poor African countries, as well as development assistance to secure clean drinking water and basic education, would be slashed.

The John Carr from the U.S. bishops' conference told the Catholic Social Ministry Gathering, which met in Washington the same week as the floor debate on the continuing resolution, that cutting funding to anti-malaria programs "is not pro-life."

Catholics concerned about social justice have found little solace from the Democrats. Although many congressional Democrats are vowing to fight the GOP-proposed cuts, which Sen. Harry Reid, D-Nev., described as "draconian," President Obama unveiled his budget proposal for fiscal year 2012, a \$3.7 trillion plan that cut some programs that aid the poor, increased spending for education and infrastructure, and called for higher taxes on the wealthiest Americans.

Among the programs cut were efforts to repair environmental damage to the Great Lakes, some farming subsidies, and a \$172 million reduction in the budget for new housing for the elderly and those with disabilities.

Obama also proposed cutting the community development block grant program almost in half. The block grants help fund local initiatives to help the poor. "These are the kinds of programs President Obama worked with when he was a community organizer, so this cut is not easy for him," said Jacob Lew, director of the Office of Management and Budget.

In a move supported by the U.S. bishops, the House voted to eliminate funding for Planned Parenthood. The GOP, however, also cut funding aid to pregnant women and children, measures opposed by the bishops and many pro-life Catholic leaders.

Stephen Schneck, director of The Catholic University of America's Institute for Policy Research & Catholic Studies in Washington, told NCR, "Last week, Catholics in Washington heard a prophetic call from Cardinal [Peter] Turkson [president of the Vatican's Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace who spoke at the social ministry gathering] urging Catholics to advocate for policies that promote human dignity and that take as their measure the plight of the poor. This week, the House of Representatives, led by a Catholic speaker, proposes devastating cuts that would deny any helping hand to the middle class and the poor."

Republican House Speaker John Boehner of Ohio is Catholic.

Schneck also noted that many cuts would have a dismal effect on the abortion rate. "If you slash support for WIC [the Women, Infants and Children nutrition program], for health clinics for the poor, for subsidized prenatal and nutrition care, for Head Start, and child care assistance, what do you think that will do to the abortion rate? Congress is losing its moral compass. I pray the Senate will listen to Turkson and not the tea party."

For stories related to the budget debate, see *NCR*'s coverage of the recent Catholic Social Ministry Gathering in Washington. The gathering, which brought together over 300 social ministry leaders, is an annual affair co-sponsored by more than a dozen national Catholic organizations engaged in social ministry, including several offices of the bishops' conference:

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- [Carr: Cutting social programs has moral costs](#)[4]
- [Vatican's justice and peace head meets with U.S. social action leaders](#) [5]
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