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Simone Campbell tells Paul Ryan to fund aid programs

Joshua J. McElwee | Jul. 31, 2013 NCR Today

Failure of the U.S. Congress to pass funding for nutritional aid programs for those facing poverty is "wrong morally," a key Catholic sister told the House's Budget Committee Wednesday.

Social Service Sr. Simone Campbell, head of the Catholic lobbying group NETWORK, was one of four panelists who testified before the committee during a session dedicated to "The War on Poverty: A Progress Report."

Campbell, who was also the leader of the recent 15-state, 40-city "Nuns on the Bus" tour, was testifying before Republican Rep. Paul Ryan from Wisconsin, a Catholic and former vice presidential candidate who heads the committee and has been criticized for his support of proposed federal budgets that significantly cut federal assistance programs.

The testimony was available for live viewing online.

"For my entire life as a religious sister, I have worked with those who struggle economically," said Campbell.

?I do this work from faith," she continued, quoting recent remarks from Pope Francis that "the measure of the greatness of a society is found in the way it treats those most in need.?

Campbell and three others were testifying before the committee about three weeks after the full House had failed to pass funding for nutritional aid programs, including the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), formerly known as food stamps.

While funding for SNAP has traditionally been included with appropriations for the agricultural industry, known collectively as the Farm Bill, the House passed the Farm Bill July 11 without funding for SNAP. It is estimated that that SNAP funding assisted 3.9 million Americans in 2011.

In her testimony Wednesday, Campbell recalled meeting with American across the country on the "Nuns on the Bus" tour who had benefited from federal assistance programs, calling them "my friends, my people.?

One parent in Milwaukee, she said, told her that ?it was OK for him as a parent to eat just once a day, but it wasn?t right for growing kids.? .

Another woman in Iowa, said Campbell, told her of running away from home to escape abuse at age 16 and only being able to care for herself because of help she was provided by a transitional house run by Catholic sisters.

?This progress was because of federal programs that helped fund the shelter ... as well as the love and care," said Campbell. "Love and care were not enough. It required significant funding.?

?From my perspective, cutting SNAP is wrong morally and is not in keeping with the actual facts about the

program," Campbell continued. ?We are not suffering from a scarcity of resource. We suffer from a lack of will.?

Also testifying at Wednesday's hearing were Eloise Anderson, the secretary of Wisconsin's Department of Children and Families; Jon Baron, president of the non-partisan Coalition for Evidence-Based Policy; and Douglas Besharov, a professor at the University of Maryland's School of Public Policy.

Several U.S. bishops have also urged Congress to protect SNAP funding.

Just before the Farm Bill was passed, Stockton, Calif., Bishop Stephen Blaire, chairman of the U.S. bishops' committee on domestic justice and human development, wrote to Congress asking representatives to preserve nutritional aid funding.

"The House must prevent cuts and harmful structural changes to nutrition programs ... that will harm hungry children, poor families, vulnerable seniors and workers who are underemployed or unable to find employment," Blaire wrote [1] in his July 10 letter.

"How the House addresses these concerns has profound human and moral consequences," he continued. "Adequate and nutritious food is a basic need and a fundamental human right that is integral to protecting the life and dignity of the human person."

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