



Congress Cuts Programs That Help Low-Income Americans

By David R. Jones
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Congress has been on a budget cutting binge since it convened in January. The federal budget that was adopted last month cut \$38 billion in spending. As usual with government budget cuts, it was the poor who took most of the hits. In New York City, this overwhelmingly means low-income Latino and African American families.

Among the cuts is \$72 million in funding for the Corporation for National & Community Service. One of its programs is the Community Service Society's Retired & Senior Volunteer Program (RSVP). Begun in 1966, RSVP places some 7,500 trained volunteers age 55 and older in about 600 agencies throughout New York City, including schools, nursing homes, libraries, hospitals, soup kitchens, and museums. RSVP is the largest program of its kind in the nation and has become a model for national and international RSVP programs.

RSVP volunteers assist New Yorkers in gaining basic money management skills, mentor children of incarcerated parents and at-risk youth, reduce the rate of recidivism by assisting the formerly incarcerated in removing barriers to gainful employment, assist at soup kitchens and food pantries providing meals and food packages to the poor, and deliver meals and provide companionship to the homebound. They teach children and newly arrived immigrants to read, and ensure that hospital patients receive their benefits.

The program is tremendously cost-effective. The yearly cost in federal funding to field one RSVP volunteer is \$162. While the federal cost per volunteer hour is \$0.93, the value of the volunteers' hours, calculated at the minimum wage, exceeds \$7.2 million.

The success of this program demonstrates beyond doubt the value of services of older volunteers. These are people who make a difference in the lives of others every day. Now the program that enlists, trains, and sustains them is threatened by potentially crippling budget cuts.

There are more cuts in other programs that aid low-income families. The Women, Infants and Children's Nutrition Program got cut by \$345 million, a reduction of almost 5 percent below the last fiscal year. Community Health Centers were cut by \$600 million, a 27.27 percent funding reduction from last year. The Workforce Investment Job Training Grants were reduced by \$182 million, over 6 percent. The Community Development Block Grants were cut by \$950 million, more than 21 percent below fiscal year 2010.

These are programs in the crucial areas of health care and job training that are desperately needed by the nation's low-income families, many of whom are without a jobholder. In the midst of all this budget cutting, no mention has been made of an increase in taxes to accompany cuts in programs. Apparently,

the very idea of a tax increase is no longer politically possible; it has become a toxic subject in a nation whose citizens are made to feel that they are over taxed by an ever expanding government.

Budgets and tax policies always reflect a government's and a nation's sense of priorities. Ours are all wrong. We are overextended militarily in Afghanistan, Pakistan, and now Libya, while still being stuck in Iraq. We spend billions every year in tax subsidies for farm conglomerates that don't need government aid. Our tax code, which originally allowed deductions for donations to organizations that provide direct help to the poor, now sanctions deductions for donations to places like universities whose endowments are rolling in dough – deductions that deny the government billions of dollars in revenue every year.

We can't seem to find a miniscule percentage in the budget to sufficiently fund programs for people who really need help. Our representatives in Washington should ensure that public funds are added for RSVP and other programs that aid low-income Americans who have borne the brunt of a brutal economic downturn.

David R. Jones is president and CEO of the Community Service Society (CSS), the leading voice on behalf of low-income New Yorkers for over 165 years. For over 10 years he served as a member of the board of directors of the Puerto Rican Legal Defense and Education Fund. The views expressed in this column are solely those of the writer.