

## **Federal Budget Priorities Are Wrong**

Congress is at it again, cutting needed programs that help vulnerable Americans in order to bring down the deficit. Of course, the politicians weren't worried when they were running up obscene deficits by cutting taxes for the wealthiest Americans or pursuing a war in Iraq on the basis of a lie. But now they're all aquiver about deficits.

The federal budget that was adopted earlier this 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 black and Latino families.

So 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. And the Community Development Block Grants were cut by \$950 million, more than 21 percent below fiscal year 2010.

Of course, fully funding these programs is not as important as retaining the Bush tax cuts. They only pertain to the health, investment, and job training of the nation's most vulnerable populations, ones, by the way, that don't show up at the polls on Election Day in great numbers.

### **Potential Cuts in RSVP Funds**

Then there is the \$72 million cut in the funds for the Corporation for National & Community Service. Among its programs is the Community Service Society's Retired & Senior Volunteer Program (RSVP). This program, begun in 1966, places some 7,500 trained volunteers age 55 and older in over 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, among many other services.

They teach children and newly arrived immigrants to read, and ensure that hospital patients receive their benefits. They serve as mentors for formerly incarcerated young adults and children of incarcerated parents. 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.

## **Cuts Don't Help the Economy**

Those who support budget cutting maintain that reduced government spending will stimulate economic growth, but that's not what happened during the Great Depression of the 1930s, when budget cutting by President Herbert Hoover only deepened the economic crisis. Also, deficits can be decreased in a number of ways. 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. And 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.

But we can't seem to find a miniscule percentage in the budget to sufficiently fund programs for people who really need help. Over time, there are often supplements to government budgets. 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.

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