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Washington's Latest Budget Cruelty Hurts Detroit and Nation's Vulnerable

By Robert Weiner and Ben Lasky

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Gary Trudeau has not lost his touch. A recent (June 24) Sunday Doonesbury cartoon column talked about “what passes for policy in Trumpworld.” He got right to it from the mouths of his characters: “Cutting food stamps and Medicaid, tripling assisted housing rents, tearing apart refugee families, eliminating meals-on-wheels and heating fuel assistance, and on and on...” The main character concludes, “The contempt for the vulnerable is palpable! It’s the meanness, the sheer cruelty of these people that just floors you!”

On June 19, House Republicans released a proposal that would balance the federal budget in nine years by cutting entitlement programs like Medicare and Social Security. Two days later, the House passed a farm bill that included changes to the food stamp system that Center on Budget and Policy Priorities President Robert Greenstein said “would eliminate or reduce food assistance for more than one million low-income households with more than two million people.” Food stamps (now SNAP) has kept 46 million Americans from going hungry and allowed people to find jobs.

With one of the country’s top five poverty rates, Detroit is especially vulnerable, and the Administration’s housing cutbacks hit especially hard in a city regularly exposed for deteriorated and vacant structures.

In April, HUD Secretary Ben Carson proposed raising rent for those living in subsidized housing to 35 percent of their income, up from the current 30 percent, itself up from the 1970’s when it was 25 percent. The current \$50 a month for the poorest families would triple to \$150. A Detroit resident in low income housing would see rent increased by an average 21 percent. Instead of helping Americans living in poverty afford housing, the Administration is creating policies that will lead to more evictions and homelessness.

Carson, who was born and raised in Detroit, believes raising the rent will make people “more self-sufficient.” In reality, the increase in public housing rent will hurt Detroit’s most vulnerable.

Congressional Republicans recently floated the idea of a rescission package that would take back \$15.4 billion in approved and promised funds. If passed, this would mean even less money for children’s healthcare and housing for the poor and the rest of the HUD budget. The Trump administration’s 2019 budget already calls for cutting \$6.8 billion from HUD, a 14 percent decrease from 2017. It would cut Medicaid and Medicare by 22.5 and 7.1 percent, respectively.

The United Nations special watchdog on world poverty, Phillip Alston, recently told The Guardian, “This is a systematic attack on America’s welfare program that is undermining the social safety net for those who can’t cope on their own. Once you start removing any sense of government commitment, you quickly move into cruelty.”

This does not even include the latest attacks to chip away at the most successful social program in U.S. history, Social Security. According to the Center for American Progress, the nine percent poverty rate would be 44 percent without Social Security. Proposals to reduce the COLA simply mean more Americans and Detroiters in poverty.

The argument for slashing HUD's budget is that the government doesn't have the money to pay for housing and social programs. The Trump administration has tried in every which way to destroy the Affordable Care Act – Trump already claims he has, but not quite. And the “not enough funding” argument forgets the \$1.5 trillion in tax cuts for the rich in this year's tax “reform” bill.

One of the most compelling messages of the miracle candidate, 28-year-old Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, who on June 26 upset 10-term Democrat Joe Crowley, was battling back the question of how to fund health, education, food and education programs. On “Morning Joe” June 27, Ocasio-Cortez said, “We had a GOP tax cut that could have actually forgiven every single federal student loan in America.” She added that even with a deficit, it's important to “understand the power of the purse that Congress has. “When we were in the Great Depression, we made the New Deal.” Her point: Congress has the money to pay for the social safety net.

Those struggling in Detroit and across the nation deserve a government that will help them and not the uber-wealthy.

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