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Social Security Cuts Would Decimate Vermonters: Program Deserves Fixing Not Fear Mongering

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The release of the 2025 Social Security and Medicare Boards of Trustees report has rekindled fears of Social Security going bankrupt. Although these fears have sparked some legitimate discussions about how to fix the program's funding, the fact is that neither this report nor any other honest assessment has found that Social Security is going bankrupt. Instead, the report found that the Old-Age and Survivors Insurance (OASI) trust fund would only be able to pay out 77% of promised benefits starting in 2033.

Yet the actual contents of such reports haven't stopped the Republicans (and an increasing number of Democrats) from spending the past two decades fear mongering about the imminent collapse of Social Security. Since Bush proposed his plan to cut and partially privatize Social Security in 2004, Republican leadership has used the rhetoric of 'crisis' and 'bankruptcy' to justify cuts.

President Trump, for his part, has decided that the best way to address the problems facing Social Security is to make the largest cut to Social Security Administration staff in history. Trump's planned cuts include the loss of 12% of SSA workers, hollowing out IT and hiring departments, and leaving some local offices with less than half their operating staff. By debilitating SSA offices, the Republicans have found a way to effectively dismantle Social Security without technically reducing benefits. However, the damage of these cuts will not fall evenly on all parts of the country. Rural communities depend more on local SSA offices, meaning residents of highly rural states like Vermont will face even greater challenges accessing benefits.

Worse still, the recent passage of the One Big Beautiful Bill will make Social Security lose money even faster. Despite how much Congressional Republicans talk about financial responsibility and cutting waste, their new budget will burn through the $2.7 trillion OASI trust fund in only seven years. Congress's

reckless budgeting will hurt citizens of every state, but will be especially harmful to Vermont, whose population of seniors is growing at the second fastest rate of any state in America.

As misinformed and ill-intentioned as the Trump administration's attacks on Social Security are, they wouldn't be possible if there weren't a real issue underlying them. As the ratio of Social Security beneficiaries to active workers continues to decrease with declining population growth, beneficiaries will receive a smaller and smaller percentage of their promised benefits. That means the 22 million Americans kept out of poverty by Social Security (including a third of elderly Americans and nearly a million children) will see some of their lifeline gradually dissolve.

The unfortunate truth is that Social Security will eventually be partially in the red, and its trust funds are going to decrease-- it may be some 20% short in about 2033. Cutting costs by reducing benefits is not a reasonable option -- not only because millions depend on benefits to keep them out of poverty, but also because taking benefits from those who have already paid their fair share is little better than theft. Senator Sanders put it well when he said, "at a time when half of older Americans have no retirement savings and 55 percent of seniors are trying to survive on less than $25,000 a year, our job is not to cut Social Security."

Thus, the real question is how taxes should be raised to support Social Security. Congress could either raise the payroll tax rate on all workers who pay into the system or raise the cap on taxable income from its current level ($176,100 as of 2025). Congress has not changed the rate or cap since 1983, and four decades of increasing political division means the fight to save Social Security will be even harder this time. If Democrats don't adopt a focused and united strategy for raising Social Security revenue, Trump and the congressional Republicans will use the growing fear around Social Security as an opportunity to butcher the program.

Thankfully, what the Democratic strategy should be is obvious. The payroll tax is an ostensibly proportional tax but because of the payroll tax cap, it actually functions as a regressive tax in which the wealthy end up paying a lower rate than middle and working class Americans. If Congress wants to be fair to working and middle-class Americans, if it wants to do right by seniors, it needs to increase the payroll tax cap. The longer Congress waits to act, the more it weakens public faith in Social Security and the government's ability to do what the American people want and need.

The proposals that Steny Hoyer and other congressional leaders told us makes sense is to raise the payroll cap in Social Security so the wealthiest pay their fair share. As Speaker Emerita Pelosi often says about proposed Social Security funding changes, "First do no harm." The reality is that starting in 2033 Social Security is not bankrupt, but about 20% short of being able to pay full benefits. The other critical strategy is to NOT use the Social Security Trust Fund surpluses for other purposes like tax breaks for the wealthy-- the surplus is now $2.7 trillion. Vice President Gore famously called for Social Security's surplus to be in a "lockbox." It may take a different composition of the House and Senate, however, and the upcoming elections for those and President will be critical.

Bob Weiner is former Chief of Staff of the House Aging Committee under Chairman Claude Pepper, also staff for Cong. John Conyers, Charles Rangel, Ed Koch, Sen. Ted Kennedy, 4-Star Gen./Drug Czar Barry McCaffrey, and a White House spokesman in the Clinton and Bush administrations.

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