

FAITH REFLECTION ON THE FEDERAL BUDGET

The Interreligious Working Group on Domestic Human Needs (DHN), representing religious organizations, denominations, and faith traditions from across the spectrum is dedicated to advocating for a just and sustainable budget. In Proverbs (31:9) we are reminded of our responsibility to “*Speak up, judge righteously, champion the poor and the needy.*” Yet we repeatedly witness budget debates and policy decisions that neglect to prioritize individuals and families unable to access basic living standards. We are particularly troubled by the oncoming effects of sequestration for those desperately trying to make ends meet. Even absent sequestration, many critical programs that aid struggling families are already tragically underfunded, having suffered years of underinvestment.

We view the budget as a moral document, outlining the values and priorities of this country. The federal budget should be a budget that fosters hope, opportunity, and a place at the table for all, especially those experiencing hardship and oppression. DHN’s budget priorities are grounded in shared values that together ensure a just foundation upon which to grow the economy and strengthen our country.

Protect Vulnerable Communities:

Value: Millions struggle to meet basic human needs every day. In 2015, 43.1 million Americans were living in poverty, 20% of which were children; 42.2 million were at risk of hunger¹. Our shared understanding as children of God is that everyone deserves to be able to put food on the table, to get the medical help they need, and live in a way that preserves their dignity. The faith community believes that Congress has a moral obligation to fund programs effectively serving vulnerable populations in times of need.

Priority:

- **Protect means tested mandatory programs from harmful structural changes such as problematic work requirements, block grants, or per capita caps.** Medicaid and the Supplemental Nutritional Assistance Program (SNAP) ensure basic human needs are met. In 2015, SNAP alone brought 4.7 million people out of poverty². Medicaid provides health coverage for nearly one in five Americans, mostly children, seniors, people with disabilities, and low-income families.³ Block Grants and Per Capita Caps prevent programs from automatically responding to an increase in need. They will significantly hinder not only the amount of recipients

¹ <http://www.feedingamerica.org/hunger-in-america/impact-of-hunger/hunger-and-poverty/>

² <http://www.cbpp.org/blog/safety-net-programs-lift-millions-from-poverty-new-census-data-show>

³ <http://kff.org/medicaid/issue-brief/10-things-to-know-about-medicaid-setting-the-facts-straight/>

and dollars per recipient, but also charitable organizations that provide the care to some of our most vulnerable populations. Such structural reforms will cause Medicaid and SNAP to eventually become unresponsive. Temporary Assistance for Needy Families' (TANF) inability to respond to the Great Recession and the tragic increase in the number of families living on less than \$2 per person per day, demonstrates the lasting harm that structural changes such as block grants and per capita caps, can have.

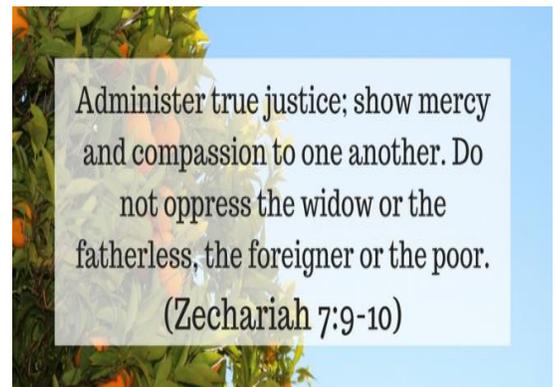
- **Adequately fund critical low-income discretionary programs**, such as Head Start, after school programs, nutrition programs, job training and skills development, and low-income housing assistance. Many churches, synagogues, mosques and other places of worship work to serve these needs in countless communities across the country, but they cannot do the work alone. These programs cannot afford further cuts. According to the Coalition on Human Needs, nearly one third of domestic human needs programs have been cut by 25% or more since 2010.

Boost Economic Opportunity:

Value: People living on the economic margins of society, disproportionately people of color, women, and people with disabilities, are consistently excluded from opportunities that could lift them out of poverty. Whether it is being denied loans to own homes, denied access to quality education, or being barred from quality, sustainable employment, or being targeted by deceptive predatory loan practice - the system has worked against them. Everyone deserves a shot at success. As people of faith, we urge Congress to invest in programs, which will bring economic mobility to communities that have long been disregarded.

Priority:

- **Expand the Earned Income Tax Credit (EITC)** for individuals not raising children. The EITC successfully helps low-income working parents enter and stay in the workforce. However, low-income adults not raising children are the only group consistently taxed into poverty. Expanding the EITC for this population could move many out of poverty and foster greater economic mobility.
- **Develop subsidized employment programs** targeted to disadvantaged and underemployed communities. These initiatives provide individuals with a chance to get the training, and education needed to enter and remain in the workforce.



- **Boost workplace protections**, such as predictable hours, wage theft prevention and unemployment modernization so that every individual has the opportunity to work with dignity. In addition, push for workplace benefits so that all families have access to paid sick leave, and paid family leave without having to worry about job security.

Reduce Harmful Deficit Reduction tactics:

Value: We need to address sequestration in a balanced way to protect critical low-income programs. Sequestration cuts pose an especially harmful threat to the nation's working families, struggling to make ends meet. Non-defense discretionary programs only make up a fraction of the federal budget, yet they receive disproportionate scrutiny compared to other areas of the budget that actually have more waste, fraud, and inefficiencies. We can afford to see cuts to the Pentagon budget without undermining national security. Instead of cutting programs that are so critical to the basic wellbeing of millions of Americans, the faith community urges Congress to start examining the true causes of our deficits.

Priority:

- **Audit the Pentagon and address waste, fraud, and abuse.** Recently, it was discovered that pentagon buried a report that indicated there was a \$125 billion waste at the department of defense.⁴ America's fiscal security cannot afford to continue shelling out billions of dollars to the pentagon without accountability.
- **Reevaluate tax code.** The U.S. spends more than \$1.5 trillion every year through the tax code.⁵ Tax deductions, exclusions, credits, and other tax expenditures disproportionately benefit wealthier individuals and corporations.
- **Protect non-defense discretionary programs**, particularly low-income programs, from sequestration cuts. Address sequestration in a balanced way to ensure that programs that are critical to the stability of vulnerable communities do not suffer funding cuts but receive the investments needed to succeed. At the very least, any increase in Pentagon spending, whether in the base budget or through Overseas Contingency Operations (OCO), should be matched dollar for dollar with increases to non-defense spending, prioritizing programs that serve those most in need.

Congress must craft the federal budget, a moral document, to ensure that all are able to live in dignity and participate in the nation's economy; that all federal programs – military and non-military – are examined for their efficient and effective responses to the actual needs

⁴ <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2017/mar/20/pentagon-never-audited-astonishing-military-spending>

⁵ <https://www.jct.gov/publications.html?func=startdown&id=4971>

of the nation; and that those whose income and wealth make them most able to support the shared needs of the whole society are called upon to do so. We cannot hurt those who can least afford it. It is what God asks of us.

Sincerely,

Bread for the World

Conference of Major Superiors of Men

Congregation of Our Lady of Charity of the Good Shepherd, US Provinces

Ecumenical Poverty Initiative

Faith & Credit Roundtable, Center for Responsible Lending

Franciscan Action Network

Friends Committee on National Legislation

Interfaith Worker Justice

Islamic Relief USA

Islamic Society of North America

Jewish Council for Public Affairs

NETWORK Lobby for Catholic Social Justice

National Advocacy Center of the Sisters of the Good Shepherd

National Council of Jewish Women

Office of Social Justice, Christian Reformed Church in North America

Sisters of Mercy of the Americas' Institute Justice Team

Union for Reform Judaism

United Church of Christ

The United Methodist Church – General Board of Church and Society