



Faithful reflection on the federal budget

The Interreligious Working Group on Domestic Human Needs (DHN), representing religious organizations, denominations, and faith traditions from across the ideological 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 who are unable to access basic living standards. In particular, we are watching with trepidation the upcoming budget cap negotiations. Historically, we have seen these negotiations result in lower funding levels for non-defense spending and programs that provide for vulnerable populations. ***Why does the equation to reduce government spending always need to result in an increase in human suffering?*** That’s not the kind of math we want as a country.

Absent a deal on budget caps for FY 2020 and 2021 there are myriad, critical programs, already tragically underfunded, that aid struggling families at risk. The consequences of the forthcoming enacted cuts will result in a 12 percent cut as compared to FY 2019 funding levels and will impact millions of people living in this country.

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.

We urge Congress to address the harmful effects of sequestration. **Please negotiate a bipartisan budget deal that raises the caps for non-defense discretionary spending and explicitly prioritizes critical low-income programs for additional investments, primarily housing assistance and the Census.** In past budget deals, low-income programs have not received proportional investment or sequestration relief compared to other programs. We ask that Congress work to reach a bipartisan agreement that embodies these principles:

Protect Vulnerable Communities

Millions struggle to meet basic human needs every day. In 2017, 39.7 million people in the U.S. were living in poverty.^[1] Estimates show that over 40 percent of all children in America live in low-income homes^[2] and face economic instability. Our shared understanding as children of God is that everyone deserves to have food on the table, to get the medical help they need, and to live in a way that preserves dignity. The faith

community believes that Congress has a moral obligation to fund effectively the programs that serve vulnerable populations in times of need.

For too long funding for critical, low-income discretionary programs, such as Head Start, after-school programs, nutrition programs, job training, and skills development, and low-income housing and energy assistance have been deprioritized and given short shrift. While many churches, synagogues, mosques and other places of worship work to serve these needs in countless communities across the country, we cannot do the work alone. Funding levels remain far below where they need to be. 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 percent or more since 2010. It is especially important to keep in mind for low-income housing assistance programs, where only one in four eligible people actually receive assistance. We ask that the framework of a budget caps deal prioritize low-income housing.

Boost Economic Opportunity:

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, barred from quality, sustainable employment, or targeted by deceptive predatory loan practices - the system has worked against them. Everyone deserves the opportunity to succeed. As people of faith, we urge Congress to invest in programs, which will bring economic mobility to communities that have long been disregarded.

Focusing on proven ways to improve economic well-being for individuals and communities should be a priority. Expanding the Earned Income Tax Credit (EITC) for individuals not raising children, workers under age 25, and people in Puerto Rico could help move many out of poverty and foster greater economic mobility. The EITC successfully helps low-income working parents enter and stay in the workforce and raises millions of children out of poverty.

Furthermore, the development of subsidized employment programs targeted at disadvantaged and underemployed communities would offer individuals a chance to get the training and education needed to enter and remain in the workforce.

In addition, Congress must enact reforms that bolster workplace protections, such as predictable hours, increasing the federal minimum wage, wage theft prevention, and unemployment modernization, so that every individual has the opportunity to work with dignity. Policies that create workplace benefits, ensuring that all families have access to paid sick leave and paid family leave without having to worry about job security will, in turn, will create greater economic viability for those on the margins.

Reduce Harmful Deficit Reduction tactics:

The results of the budget control act and sequestration have been extremely damaging and will require substantial investment and resources to ameliorate. We need to address sequestration in a balanced way to protect critical, low-income programs. Any further funding 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 critical to the basic well-being of millions of Americans, the faith community urges Congress to start examining the true causes of our deficits. For far too long, a critical eye has been turned on human needs non-defense discretionary programs while carte blanche has been given to Pentagon and Defense spending. This trend must not continue. 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.

Further, the 2017 tax bill entrenches a system that grows the deficit and creates a false and manufactured scarcity of federal resources. This perpetuates the idea that we don't have enough money to fund the expenses of essential services that provide health care, housing, food assistance, and other critical safety net programs. Addressing the budget caps for FY 2020 and 2021 must be done in a balanced way to ensure that programs that are critical to the stability of vulnerable communities do not suffer funding cuts, but instead, receive the investments needed to support families and lift people out of poverty.

Ensure An Accurate and Comprehensive Census:

Full funding for the census is critical to ensure that communities are fully counted and federal resources are apportioned accurately. Vulnerable populations in rural and urban low-income communities, people of color, and children are historically disproportionately undercounted by the census. This means they then are underfunded in the allocation of federal funds and do not receive crucial federal assistance and programs. It is imperative that Congress ensure that this Constitutional requirement is fulfilled and ensure robust funding for an accurate and full count.

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 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. This paradigm shift will show that we are, after all, a nation of plenty. The abundance of our gifts does not have to be hoarded or apportioned – it can be graciously shared among all God's children.

Signed

Alliance of Baptists
Bread for the World
Christian Reformed Church Office of Social Justice
Church World Service
Congregation of Our Lady of the Good Shepherd, US Provinces
Ecumenical Poverty Initiative
Franciscan Action Network
Friends Committee on National Legislation
Interfaith Worker Justice
Jewish Council for Public Affairs
MAZON: A Jewish Response to Hunger
National Advocacy Center of the Sisters of the Good Shepherd
National Council of Jewish Women
NETWORK Lobby for Catholic Social Justice
Pax Christi USA
Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.)
United Church of Christ Justice and Witness Ministries
Union for Reform Judaism
Unitarian Universalists for Social Justice (UUSJ)
National Council of Churches
The United Methodist Church - General Board of Church and Society
Unitarian Universalists for Social Justice (UUSJ)

[1] <https://www.census.gov/library/publications/2018/demo/p60-263.html>

[2] <http://www.nccp.org/topics/childpoverty.html>