A Faith Reflection on the Budget

March 27, 2015

This reflection, written by communities of faith, calls for a compassionate and comprehensive vision for the future. We urge you, our elected leaders, to craft a budget and spending bills that promote the good of every member of society, especially those who are poor and struggling to reach the middle class and to future generations through our collective responsibility as stewards of Creation.

Scripture calls on us to provide housing, food and healing. Yet, these are among the funding areas most frequently threatened during budget debates, while some in Congress advocate for additional spending through tax breaks benefitting corporations and the wealthiest.

Our shared traditions insist that piety and righteousness cannot remain only individual endeavors, but must also encompass our society’s commitment to justice and mercy.

The Prophet Isaiah challenges us, as a nation, to know and abide by God’s ways:

“Is not this the fast that I choose: to loose the bonds of injustice, to undo the thongs of the yoke, to let the oppressed go free, and to break every yoke? Is it not to share your bread with the hungry, and bring the homeless poor into your house when you see them.”

In the Gospels, Jesus calls on us to embrace the just vision presented by Isaiah:

"The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor"

The Qur’an teaches a piety that is inextricably linked with the spending of money for the betterment of those who are struggling:

“Never shall you attain to true piety unless you spend on others out of what you cherish yourselves; and whatever you spend – verily, God has full knowledge thereof.”

Guided by these sacred texts, we lift our voices to call for a budget, appropriations and tax policy that speak to the social and ecological challenges we face together under God -- as a people, as a nation, and as global citizens. Therefore, we call on you to take particular care for the most critical necessities of all members of our communities in your budget and appropriations decisions. We call on you to focus on job creation and economic revitalization, an equitable tax system based on fairness, and true human security over disproportionate military spending and to end harmful sequestration cuts.

ECONOMIC OPPORTUNITY

Economic opportunity is a value that defines us as a nation, but unfortunately too many of our brothers and sisters have not yet seen the benefits of the ongoing economic recovery. Today, countless working Americans and their families earn the minimum wage yet live in poverty, while others see their job security threatened because their employers do not provide basic workplace protections like paid sick leave. Structural changes in the economy have prevented many Americans from accessing higher paying jobs due to inadequate training.
Long-term unemployment remains stubbornly high. We believe the federal budget ought to respond to these challenges. Budgets are moral documents that reveal what, and more importantly, who we prioritize in society. We urge Congress to prioritize funding for programs that will create sustainable jobs with livable wages, foster empowerment in the workplace, and help lift families out of poverty.

EDUCATION

Education plays a cornerstone role in personal success, community viability, and the development of a vibrant economy in the US. The faith community believes that providing children with well-maintained schools and highly qualified teachers lays the groundwork for their future prosperity. Congress can fortify its commitment to our nation’s children by providing new funding for Head Start to prolong the program year, expanding access to full day preschool and kindergarten, and allocating new funds for Early Head Start Child Care Partnerships. They can ensure the development of an innovative workforce by expanding access to Pell Grants, Title IX funding, the Individuals with Disabilities Act, and Title I Formula Grants. Additionally, it is critical that our nation provides vocational training to meet provide persons with opportunities to earn a good living by meeting community needs not requiring a college education. It is our responsibility as members of the faith community and citizens of this country to advocate for access to quality education, and we urge congress to generously fund initiatives that will advance equity for the underserved in the US.

HOUSING

Housing is a moral imperative, fundamental to the healthy development of individuals, families and communities. Programs that most effectively target people at risk of homelessness must be supported. We believe fully funding the Department of Housing and Urban Development ensures and preserves programs that protect low-income and extremely-low-income individuals and families. Over 2.2 million people receive rental assistance. We support the renewal and restoration of 67,000 vouchers targeted to those with the greatest need and most vulnerable. Homeless children and youth remain at greatest risk of long-term trauma incurred while homeless. The Runaway Homeless Youth Act and the Education for Homeless Children and Youth are critically important to protect children. Continued and expanded investment in the National Housing Trust Fund (NHTF) will provide communities with funds to build, preserve, and rehabilitate affordable rental homes for extremely- and very-low-income families. Access to affordable housing and shelter is a basic human right and one we must guard.

NUTRITION

As a faith community, we are concerned that nutrition programs that benefit those at the margins of society remain robust and accessible to all who are in need of support. The Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Programs (SNAP) in combination with WIC, school meals, after school snack and summer meal programs help all our children to grow and develop, having the energy to learn. Older adults and those people with disabilities depend on programs such as Meals on Wheels and the Child and Adult Care Programs. Yet these programs continue to face threats through funding cuts and exclusions from eligibility. It is critical that these programs be fully funded, and that there not be exclusionary policies attached to them.

The Child Nutrition Program and The Women, Infants and Children programs (WIC) are up for re-authorization this year. It is critical that budget decisions give room for robust programs based on recommendations from
the health community. Research has shown that children receiving these supports have improved educational achievement, nutrition, health and economic security.

HEALTHCARE

The importance of health care must not be diminished or dismissed in this year’s federal budget. Health care is a foundational human right, grounded in our belief in each person’s individual human dignity. It is our shared responsibility to ensure inclusive, accessible, and affordable health care for all, especially the vulnerable and those struggling with poverty. Medicaid, Medicare and the essential services they provide must be fully funded, and attempts to decrease or block grant their funding are unacceptable. Similarly, funding for the Children’s Health Insurance program (CHIP) should be renewed and accounted for in this year’s budget. Finally, the budget should uphold the Affordable Care Act—its administrative costs, and the cost of its subsidies—as it provides needed coverage to millions in the United States.

POPULATIONS FACING PARTICULAR STRUGGLES

We believe that our nation is responsible to ensure justice for all people. However, there are populations facing significantly greater barriers than most. They include those caught in a criminal justice system that has become an industry, persons with disabilities, the elderly and children who face the highest levels of poverty. Among the children, we have a special need to provide due process and care for unaccompanied children.

Though the flow of unaccompanied children from Central America has slowed down in recent months, there still remain thousands of children in the United States and more arriving each day. As a result, we request sufficient funding within the Department of Health and Human Services to cover the needs of these children without diminishing funding for other key programs that support and protect our most vulnerable brothers and sisters. Specifically, we request funding for the Office of Refugee Resettlement (ORR) to ensure that children continue to be placed with family members, friends, or in foster care as opposed to detention facilities. In addition, such funding will ensure that all unaccompanied children with legitimate claims to asylum and to refuge have the opportunity to apply for and receive the relief they are granted under national and international law. Finally, such funding will also enable HHS to continue to provide medical care for unaccompanied children arriving at the U.S.-Mexico border.

MASS INCARCERATION

As people of faith and conscience, we are deeply concerned for the many millions of men, women and children arrested, sentenced, incarcerated and returned home from incarceration throughout this country. The U.S. has the highest incarceration rate in the world, with five percent of the world’s population but 25% of the world’s prison population. Since 1980, the size of the federal prison population has increased nearly 800%. Approximately 210,000 people are confined in federal prisons; 12% are in facilities managed by for-profit corporations. Thousands of people swelling the prison roles are facing mandatory minimum sentences for nonviolent drug-related charges. This is unnecessary, overly expensive and unjust. Many federal prisons are dangerously overcrowded and rehabilitative programming and treatment opportunities are lacking. The nearly $6.8 billion (25% of the Department of Justice budget) could be used for more effective policing and public safety efforts.

DEFENSE SPENDING AND SEQUESTRATION
There are costs for providing true security to the people of our nation. There is a human cost to children growing up feeling insecure, lacking stable housing, nutrition and healthcare. Our nation needs to assess spending across both defense (known for waste and inability to perform an audit) and support for real security of all the people. We believe budget decisions should reflect our values.

We support a firewall between Pentagon and non-defense spending, prohibiting movement of money from one to the other. We appreciate that the Bipartisan Budget Act of 2013 did not shift the burden of Pentagon budget cuts onto non-defense programs and maintained the 50/50 split in discretionary spending. However, boosting Pentagon spending through the OCO account is an unacceptable budget gimmick that makes transparency impossible.

Congress must protect vital programs for low income families by ending sequestration cuts scheduled to resume October 2015. 69% of the cuts proposed by the House and Senate Budget Committees are to low-income support spending. Our nation’s fiscal problems should not be addressed by imposing more hardship on the poorest most vulnerable Americans.

REVENUE AND TAX EXPENDITURES

Every year, billions of dollars are generated in tax revenue that are then reinvested in ways that serve the public interest, like providing for our security and building our roads, bridges, and schools. Paying taxes to enable government to provide for the needs of the common good is an appropriate expression of our stewardship in society.

Specifically, we urge Congress to make permanent the 2009 improvements to the EITC and CTC as a part of any tax legislation or budget negotiation. The Earned Income Tax Credit (EITC) and Child Tax Credit (CTC) are two of the largest, most effective anti-poverty programs in the country. In 2012, the two credits combined lifted more than 10 million people out of poverty, including 5.3 million children. The 2009 refundable tax credit improvements reduced the marriage penalty for the EITC, expanded the EITC for families with three or more children, and allowed families to count earnings below $13,000 towards the CTC. Allowing the 2009 improvements to expire would push an estimated 16.4 million people, including 7.7 million children, either into or deeper into poverty. Research shows that a majority of households claiming the credit do so for only two years before moving into a higher income bracket, becoming ineligible for the credit. We call on Congress to make current benefit levels permanent this year.

CONCLUSION

We call on all members of the House and the Senate to act with compassion for all members of our communities, as they develop and vote on appropriations that bring the budget to reality.
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