With First Budget, Trump Cuts a Gaping Hole in the Safety Net

With unrestrained vigor, this administration attacks the less fortunate among us on behalf of the extremely wealthy.

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The modern, democratic state's safety net lies at the heart of its social contract and is tasked with providing its citizens with insurance against the ravages of extreme poverty, sickness, and hunger. The safety net reassures us that our government will serve as a buffer between us and deprivation, and it is the safety net that provides opportunity and resources to those who have none of either.

In his first fully fleshed out budget since taking office, President Trump has made it perfectly clear that he has little use for safety net policies or the millions of vulnerable Americans who benefit from them. Released under the title "A New Foundation For American Greatness," the President's budget for Fiscal Year 2018 is a scorched earth attack on virtually every major federal program that provides relief for our nation's most vulnerable populations. Like a reverse Robin Hood, President Trump and his band of budgeteers have laid out a vision of an America that takes from the poor to give directly to the rich.

In addition to the cuts in HIV programs detailed elsewhere by AIDS United, cuts were made to most safety net programs—with Medicare being a notable exception—arguably none were quite so cruel and destructive than the $610 billion that the President's FY18 budget aims to cut Medicaid over the next decade. When taken into account with the $839 billion in Medicaid cuts included in the House-passed version of the American Health Care Act (AHCA), this means that the Trump budget would cut Medicaid spending nearly in half by 2027. With around 74 million low-income Americans and more than 40% of all people living with HIV in care currently on Medicaid, these massive cuts to the program would be catastrophic.

Moving outside of health care, the Trump budget also aims to rip away vital benefits from low-income families in need of food, housing, and financial assistance. In a move that Rep. Rosa DeLauro called, "a cruel and heartless turning of our backs on people in this nation who are hungry," the President's budget calls for a nearly 30% cut to the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP)—as the Food Stamp program is now known—slashing $193 billion from it over the course of 10 years. At the same time, the Trump budget would also cut $21.7 billion from the Temporary Assistance to Needy Families, a program designed to provide much needed

financial support to impoverished families with young children, and completely eliminates the Low Income Home Energy Assistance Program, which helps poor households keep their lights on and their furnaces running, and the Community Development Block Grant program, which helps low-income communities with everything from foreclosure assistance and home repair to commercial development.

The President's 2018 budget also features cuts to programs for disabled Americans that are so severe that some disability rights advocates are saying that they could wind up "setting the clock back 50 years or more." In addition to breaking his campaign promise not to cut Medicaid, President Trump also went back on his pledge not to the cut Social Security. The Trump budget would make significant cuts to Social Security Disability Insurance and Supplemental Security Income, programs that provide limited basic income to those who are disabled or very poor. President Trump's Director of the Office of Management and Budget, Mick Mulvaney, has insisted that the President has kept his promise to the American people, saying that "999 people out of 1,000" think that SSDI is not a part of Social Security. This claim is a blatant and callous falsehood, as SSDI is a program that is run by the Social Security Administration and which is paid for by payroll taxes. The Trump administration's assertion that SSDI isn't really Social Security is just another cynical ploy to paint those who are forced by circumstance to rely upon the state for income as categorically different and less deserving than the general population, reinforcing the traditional "welfare queen" (or king) narrative that has been a conservative bogeyman for decades.

Both Democrats and Republicans have spoken out against the President's 2018 budget to varying degrees since its release early this week, but the HIV community cannot afford to be complacent in the belief that Congress will swiftly reject the inhumane cuts that it threatens. Slashing the budgets of federal government programs designed to provide health care, housing, and subsistence to the poor and the disabled will directly affect many people living with HIV. It has also long been at the core of conventional Republican domestic policy. The primary differences between the Trump budget and more typical Republican agendas, like House Speaker Paul Ryan's "A Better Way" plan, are the transparency and unrestrained vigor with which the Trump administration attacks the less fortunate among us on behalf of the extremely wealthy.

Congress will be out of session this week, which means that Senators and Representatives will be coming back to their home states and districts. It is incumbent upon all of us to meet with them and to tell them that cuts to social safety net programs and the cuts to HIV funding in the President's budget and in the American Health Care Act are unacceptable. Many of you have met your Members of Congress at a town hall over the Memorial Day recess and demanded that they firmly oppose the draconian cuts to safety net programs and support robust HIV funding in President Trump's budget. If they don't hold a town hall, show up at their office or at local public events where they're in attendance and speak your truth there. The Trump budget is an absolute nightmare, and it is up to all of us to ensure that nightmare does not become reality.

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