

Truth Squad on Domestic Investment: An Appeal

An Editorial

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How many sign-on letters—opposing this proposed cut or that one—has your organization been asked to lend its name to in the past two weeks? How many shrill appeals have you received to oppose the President's proposed cuts or freezes in child care, Medicaid, food stamps, housing, community development and other programs?

I appreciate and understand those appeals, shrill and otherwise, but if there were a deliberate divide-and-conquer strategy in place, one would have to conclude that it is working: the budget efforts of those who care about human needs are as fragmented as ever. Of the many in the human needs-human development "industry," some are silent since their ox is not being gored this time out; some are squealing because theirs is. And those that are speaking out are doing so on a host of diverse issues.

We must be fair about the President's proposal: it includes some good things---increases in the Title 1 education program, increased funding for students with disabilities; more money for community health centers; among them. Yet, some of us take a long and more holistic view. A \$50 million a year rather general gang prevention program cannot replace hundreds of millions in law enforcement, drug prevention, and juvenile justice programs. Nor will a \$300 million bump in Housing Assistance Grants compensate for cuts in a community lifeblood resource like the Community Development Block Grant.

But my intent is not to rail against the President or his proposed budget but to rally us—the people in the human/community development biz—to help the President, the Congress, and the American people understand that it is not "domestic spending," it is investing in people and communities; that caring for those who are vulnerable and investing in prevention at home is the best national defense; that domestic programs are by no means the primary drivers of the federal deficit.

Allow me to cite a recent report (February 14, 2005) from the nonpartisan Center on Budget and Policy Priorities:

"Domestic discretionary programs have contributed little to the recent return of deficits.

- *The cost of legislation enacted since the start of 2001 equals \$539 billion in 2005, more than the entire budget deficit. Increases in domestic discretionary programs represent only 7% of the cost of this legislation.*
- *By contrast, tax cuts constitute nearly half—48%--of the cost of legislation that has increased the deficit since 2001. Increases in defense and homeland security represent another 37% of the cost of deficit-increasing legislation enacted since the start of 2001."*

*"Unpublished Administration Budget Documents Show Cuts Would Significantly Reduce Funding for Most Public Services,"
Center on Budget and Policy Priorities, www.cbpp.org*

Putting this in context, domestic discretionary spending in 2005 constitutes about 3% of the Gross Domestic Product—the same level it's been at for fifteen years. If the cuts are enacted, the Center projects that such spending would drop by 25% by 2010 to the lowest level since 1962.

I love the "No Whining" sign some people have in their offices. You know, the one with the word, "whining" encircled in red with a diagonal line slashing through it, like the "No Smoking" signs. What I am proposing is not whining. Nor is it adding to the cacophony of shrill voices and fragmented messages. What I am suggesting is that the organized nonprofit human care community exercise the position of respect it holds to inform its constituents of the facts and encourage them to: a) learn; and b) speak out.

But, you say, *'Irv, those are third-rail issues—tax cuts, the war, homeland security—and we have board members and donors all across the political spectrum. Plus, if we speak out, it is only on policies affecting our own programs.'* And here's how I respond:

- I am not suggesting that we oppose the war, tax cuts or anything else—only that we put the facts out there so more people in positions of influence understand them.

- As for the issue of the “only our own programs” argument, two thoughts:
 - I am afraid the, “first they came for my neighbor, then they came for me” metaphor applies. There are no indications that there will be more funding for domestic needs next year or the year after. Programs that missed the axe this time may be on the block in the future.

 - All of our services are part of a complex supply chain: the roles we play are interdependent. When the supply chain is weakened, the burden on those that remain increases.

This is not a call to arms; it is a call to inform. My appeal is to use your board meetings, staff meetings, speeches, newsletters, etc. not to “rail” but to educate, to put it all in context, to share our unique vantage points as sector bridgers and as experts in human care and development. No one will do it for us and there are few others to speak up for the individuals, families and communities affected.

The National Assembly welcomes your response, please email nassembly@nassembly.org