

Our Work and the Federal Deficit

Spending is clearly out of sync with the revenues government generates and is, without question, out of control. Assigning blame is pointless. Both parties contributed and continue to contribute to the deficit in a myriad of ways.

Deficit reduction is a pressing national priority and it is important that we all weigh in; even those of us who tend to speak up for our particular programs and little else. Yet, given our unique perspective as vehicles of human and community development, we in this sector have something unique to say. We know it is not this program or that but a total strategy that is needed and is in most cases utterly lacking. We know that developing people and communities is not entirely altruistic—it produces taxes and reduces expenditures for the negative impacts of disadvantage.

OMB Director, Peter Orzag, noted the seeming duplication of similar programs across many government agencies. That happens in our democratic process as different constituencies and different members of Congress fight for their own pet programs. The impulse to look to consolidation and coordination is in order. This sector has consistently advocated for inter-agency coordination (e.g., the Interagency Task Force on Homelessness, Federal Youth Coordination Act, Federal Mentoring Council). Consolidation can get dicey, though; because all things that look alike are not necessarily and alignment of related enterprises does not always work (AOL and Time Warner come to mind).

It is strategy that matters. Not just strategy program by program but strategy relative to what we as a nation want to achieve relative to children, families, older adults, and communities, strategy that cuts across the silos that laws and bureaucracies erect and maintain. Increasing the number of kids who succeed to become well-functioning, tax-paying adults is not about education or mentoring or after school programs or resources that enable parents to make a better living. It is about all of those things and more. No one says this kind of thing and those of us engaged in human services and community development have the experience to assert it with authority.

Cuts across the board, cuts to this program and that (pitting one essential element of human development against another) are the alternatives and most unsatisfactory alternatives at that. Actually, it is more likely to be the case that human and community development will be pitted against programs and expenditures, such as defense, where this is greater public understanding and consensus.

A really bold Administration would deal with the near term issues even as it insists upon a strategic review of the several major buckets of government expenditure and service. Its 2010, for heaven's sake: maybe it's time to do things entirely differently. Bold Congressional leaders would insist on it as well. But it's hard to be critical of the Administration and Congress when the forces of piecemealism and inefficiency are endemic.

As a sector, can we continue to suffer death by a thousand cuts or succeed in keeping our own particular programs even as other necessary resources are decimated? Are there ways we can exercise our leadership, yes, via the National Assembly and other vehicles, such as Leadership 18, to go beyond photo-ops and small victories and leverage the goodwill we enjoy to say what needs to be said?

On February 18th, 2010 President Obama signed an executive order establishing the bipartisan National Commission on Fiscal Responsibility and Reform. The Commission will build bipartisan consensus to put forth solutions that tackle the nation's long-ignored fiscal challenges. The Commission will make recommendations that put the budget in primary balance by 2015 and meaningfully improve the long term fiscal outlook. Recommendations must be reported to Congress by December 1, 2010. This is an opportunity to have our unique perspective heard. Go to <http://www.fiscalcommission.gov/> to learn more about the Commission, future meeting dates and opportunities to share your valuable insights on what it takes to care for and develop people and communities. You can also email your thoughts to the Commission at commission@fc.eop.gov.

Additionally, the Commission will conduct a public hearing on June 30th in Washington DC. If you're able to participate, e-mail your request with contact information and the organization you'll be representing to commission@fc.eop.gov by Friday, June 25th. Also, American Speaks will host a series of town hall meetings across the country, on the national budget on June 26th, 2010. The National Commission on Fiscal Responsibility and Reform plans to use the results of the town hall meetings to inform its work and make recommendations to Congress. Go to www.Americaspeaks.org to sign up for a town hall event in your area.

This is important and it is important that each of us speak up for greater wisdom than solely continuing our own programs and priorities. It takes more than a village, it takes a plan, a logic model, a strategy, one that incorporates all of the necessary ingredients and causes them to connect in ways that will maximize their collective impact. Not education or after school or economic supports for families that do not earn enough to lift themselves and their children and elder parents out of poverty, but each of these elements and others, woven together in a rational human development agenda.

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