

## **PROTECTING PEOPLE FROM CUTS IN VITAL SERVICES: RECOMMENDED MESSAGE POINTS**

*The following explains what is happening in Congress this summer and fall, as the committees prepare “reconciliation” bills that cut spending and provide yet more costly tax breaks. It then suggests some talking points for use with Members of Congress and the press (starting on page 3).*

### **BACKGROUND**

The budget resolution passed by Congress earlier this year required that legislation be prepared this fall that will result in cuts totaling \$35 billion over 5 years, including from Medicaid and Agriculture Department programs (likely including Food Stamps). The legislation is called a *reconciliation bill*, and congressional committees must prepare it by September 16. In addition, the budget requires a second reconciliation bill, due September 23, with tax cuts worth \$70 billion over 5 years. These reconciliation bills have special rules in the Senate. They cannot be filibustered, so they need only a simple majority (51 votes) to pass.

The budget resolution did not call for cuts in low-income programs like the Earned Income Tax Credit, Supplemental Security Income (SSI), Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF), child support collections or child welfare services. However, House Ways and Means Committee Chairman Thomas has suggested that he might cut these programs as part of the reconciliation bill.

(The budget reconciliation process does *not* affect “discretionary” programs, which will move on a separate track through the annual appropriations bills. These include Head Start, WIC, housing assistance, juvenile justice, and a variety of other programs.)

It is also very likely that new tax cuts that will add to our already mounting deficits will be proposed beyond the \$70 billion in the reconciliation bill. Another \$36 billion in tax cuts was included in the budget resolution. While these can be filibustered in the Senate and so would need 60 votes to pass in that chamber, some of the tax cuts are popular and may well be able to attract the necessary votes.

### **A lot is at stake in the reconciliation bills. How can advocates affect the outcome?**

Advocates who wish to prevent the loss of benefits that children, the elderly, and other vulnerable people need must persuade members of Congress to oppose such harmful cuts. Even though committees must rewrite the laws to achieve specified dollar cuts, ***how they do it is up to them.***

- \$10 billion in cuts in Finance Committee programs with all or most of the cuts assumed to come from Medicaid – but there is no requirement that the \$10

- Billion come from Medicaid. At least portions of these savings should come from programs not targeted for low-income Americans, such as Medicare. Cost efficiencies in Medicaid, such as prescription drug cost-containment, should be identified that will not harm the vulnerable populations that Medicaid serves.
- \$3 billion in cuts in Agriculture Committee programs are required – but they do not have to come from reducing or eliminating Food Stamp benefits. The Committee can pare back farm supports and other programs rather than nutrition aid for vulnerable people.
  - No cuts are required in other vital low-income programs (EITC, SSI, TANF, etc.) Congress can choose not to add cuts in these areas.

Advocates must use the summer months to tell members of Congress to reject cuts that will force vulnerable people to go without medical care, food, and other necessities. Members of Congress must also get the message not to allow essential federal eligibility and benefits protections in Medicaid and Food Stamps to be weakened or eliminated by transferring authority to states, and to oppose block grants or federal funding caps, either as multi-state demonstrations or nationwide.

***Timing is critical.*** The reconciliation bills are due in mid-September, but negotiations around them have already begun and will be taking place in July, before the August Congressional recess. The more members of Congress understand that opposition to harmful cuts is widespread, the more likely they will be to look for answers elsewhere.

Advocates must also tell Congress to oppose unaffordable and unfair tax cuts. ***We must always show that we get it: that unnecessary tax cuts deprive the nation of resources for needed services.***

Once information is released about the specifics of the reconciliation bills, advocates can decide whether to oppose them outright. If spending cuts are made in ways likely to hurt vulnerable people, it is a safe prediction that advocates across the nation will work vigorously to defeat the bill. (Environmental advocates, who already know that the reconciliation bill will include language leading to drilling for oil in the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge, are expected to urge a no vote right from the start.)

Can we prevail on a simple majority reconciliation bill vote? We can't know yet. Here is what we do know:

- Our work starting ***now*** to show widespread opposition to harmful and shortsighted cuts will help both to improve the bill and/or to lay the groundwork for opposition to it.
- Our work to build opposition to tax cuts can prevent at least some of them from passing this year, and increase our chances of protecting needed revenue in the years to come.
- Silence won't help.

## **RECOMMENDED MESSAGES**

### **Messages for Members of Congress:**

#### **If you're making a brief pitch on the phone:**

Please oppose reducing or eliminating services in Medicaid, Food Stamps, and other critical assistance. Please do not allow states to require vulnerable people to pay more for lifesaving services. Working families have already been hit hard by these economic times – Congress should not be making their lives even more difficult. And it is simply wrong to enact unnecessary and unfair tax cuts while cutting essential services.

#### **When you're writing a letter or in a meeting:**

**Please oppose cuts in Medicaid, Food Stamps, and other help for vulnerable children, the elderly, and people with disabilities.** Cuts in these services can mean the difference between life and death for people who are sick and have no place else to turn. Requiring vulnerable people – including working families – to pay money they do not have for services will mean they will go without lifesaving medical care. Cutting food stamps means more people will go hungry.

**Congress must not allow essential federal eligibility and benefits protections in Medicaid and Food Stamps to be weakened or eliminated.** Giving states more authority to reduce benefits or to ask needy people to pay more of the costs of medical care is the wrong choice.

**Congress must reject caps or block grant proposals that restrict federal funding for Medicaid, Food Stamps, or other vital assistance.** Such restrictions, whether applied to some or all states, make it harder to respond to growing need during hard times when more people lose jobs and health insurance.

**If Congress cuts these lifeline services, more families will be uninsured, with untreated illnesses and more trips to the emergency room.** More children will be undernourished, and will be more likely to get sick and suffer delays in growth. Cuts that deny people essential help are not only morally wrong – they mean higher costs for all of us, as our health insurance rises to cover the costs of the uninsured.

**Children and families are our future.** The federal government should invest in nutrition and medical care so that needy children can learn and do well in school. Please reject cuts that result in fewer children getting the food and medical care they need.

**Please vote against more tax cuts.** Tax cuts that aren't "paid for" drain badly needed revenues from the federal government and worsen the deficit. Plus, it's the wrong priority to cut taxes at the same time service cuts are being proposed to deny essential help to low-income elderly people in nursing homes and children and families.

**We stand with the majority of Americans who do not want to hurt vulnerable people.** We don't want to deny them health care. We don't want children to go without food. We don't want to pass along deeper deficits to our children because the government made the wrong choices and enacted tax cuts paid for with borrowed money. Please stand up for the right choices – reject harmful service cuts and irresponsible tax cuts.

**Some additional messages about specific programs:**

**Medicaid:**

- **I know people in my community who need the lifesaving care that Medicaid provides.** A catastrophic accident or illness or loss of job could put me in the same situation. Cutting Medicaid benefits or eligibility is the wrong choice.
- **We have a health care crisis, not a Medicaid crisis.** The government should work to control the costs of prescription drugs and other care, not cut lifesaving care for vulnerable people who cannot afford coverage on their own.

**Food Stamps:**

- **Cuts in basic nutrition for children make it harder for them to learn in school and grow up to become healthy, productive members of society.** Community food banks are already stretched to their limits; don't make things worse.
- **Millions of families in America lack the money to buy enough food at all times for healthy living.** Medical research shows that children in such families are more likely to get sick or have impaired development. Food stamps can prevent children from suffering ill health and slow growth. Cutting this essential benefit is simply wrong.
- **The Food Stamp Program is well managed and well targeted;** it has a low error rate and almost all the benefits go to households below the poverty line (for example, below \$16,000 for a 3-person family).

**Earned Income Tax Credit:**

- **Oppose raising taxes on hard-working people by cutting the Earned Income Tax Credit.** People who work long hours just to put food on the table should not see their taxes go up while people with investment income get even more tax breaks. Those are the wrong priorities.

**Supplemental Security Income (SSI):**

- Reject cuts in SSI that will hurt vulnerable people with disabilities. We should be protecting them, not making it harder for them to afford basic necessities.

**Messages for the press:**

*These messages are not dramatically different from the language you would use with a member of Congress, but they avoid policy jargon like “error rates” and “block grants.”*

**These are tough economic times.** Congress should do more to protect children and the elderly from hunger and loss of health care, not less.

**Cutting lifesaving medical care for the elderly and children does not solve the problem of rising health care costs.** Congress should deal with prescription drug costs; it should not cut Medicaid services.

**Most of us know a grandmother in a nursing home; most of us are only a serious illness or a job layoff away from losing everything.** Medicaid and food stamps are lifelines that Congress should protect, not cut.

**Cutting aid to the elderly, children, or people with disabilities is a terrible choice –** both irresponsible and unfair.

**Congress needs to get its priorities straight.** We are counting on our Senators and Representatives to oppose budget cuts that deny help to vulnerable children, the elderly, and people with disabilities while adding billions in new tax breaks for well-connected businesses and individuals.

**There are thousands of families earning less than the poverty level of \$16,000 a year in our state,** too often with no health insurance through work, and struggling just to put food on the table. Cutting Medicaid and food stamps just pushes them farther behind.

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For more information, contact Deborah Weinstein, **Coalition on Human Needs**, [dweinstein@chn.org](mailto:dweinstein@chn.org); (202-223-2532). Website: [www.chn.org](http://www.chn.org)