



COALITION ON HUMAN NEEDS

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Budget Could Move Forward in the House; Proposed Cuts to Select Programs Move, Too

After weeks of delay and uncertainty, the House budget resolution could be unveiled and debated this Wednesday in the House Budget Committee. The budget is almost certain to call for cuts to low-income programs that serve low-income and other disadvantaged populations.

To garner enough support from conservatives for the resolution, Republican leaders last week released plans to cut certain mandatory programs (those not subject to the annual appropriations process). House Ways and Means Chairman Kevin Brady (R-TX) produced plans that would cut \$16.5 billion over two years and \$98 billion over 10 years by eliminating the \$1.7 billion Social Services Block Grant (H.R.

4724), denying the Child Tax Credit to millions of children (mostly citizens) in low-income working immigrant families (H.R. 4722), and ending limits on how much can be recovered if people getting insurance subsidies through the Affordable Care Act receive too much based on their actual income (H.R. 4723). These proposals are expected to be marked up on Wednesday, March 16. In addition, Energy and Commerce Chairman Fred Upton (R-MI) released a plan to eliminate the Prevention and Public Health Fund created under the Affordable Care Act, reduce Medicaid reimbursements to states for people in prison, and cut federal funding for the Children's Health Insurance Program. His proposals, which would cut \$25 billion over 10 years, will be taken up in that committee starting Monday, March 14.

Many members of the GOP, still unhappy that Congress last year approved replacing most of the scheduled sequester cuts for fiscal years 2016 and 2017, called for cuts to mandatory programs. They claimed these cuts would offset the additional \$30 billion in discretionary spending approved as part of the Bipartisan Budget Act Congress passed last fall. However, as the [Center on Budget and Policy Priorities](#) pointed out, policymakers *already paid for* the \$30 billion discretionary funding increase when they provided in in the Bipartisan Budget Act. And the cuts being proposed go well beyond the \$30 billion increase over a 10-year period.

Senate Budget Committee Chairman Mike Enzi (R-WY) announced last week that he was postponing a markup of a budget resolution, leading many to believe the Senate won't release a budget any time soon, if at all. Because the budget deal passed last fall included totals for discretionary spending for FY17, the appropriations process can go forward even without a budget resolution.

The [Congressional Progressive Caucus](#) will be holding a press conference on Tuesday, March 15 to address their budget proposal, "[The People's Budget](#)." Many advocates support this for its investments in programs that help lift low-income Americans out of poverty and to create millions of jobs. Coalition on Human Needs' executive director Deborah Weinstein announced CHN's endorsement of The People's Budget in a *Huffington Post* [opinion piece](#).

For many more details on President Obama's budget request, including sections on select departmental budget requests and tax policy, see our [February 16 special edition Human Needs Report](#). For more information on all things budget, see our [FY17 budget resource page](#).

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Improvements to Housing Assistance Programs Get Unanimous Support in the House

In a win for low-income advocates and a rare act of overwhelming bipartisanship, the House on February 2 unanimously passed (427-0) a bill that will make federal housing assistance programs more efficient and effective, improving lives for low-income families. The Housing Opportunities through Modernization Act (H.R. 3700) will update and streamline rental assistance programs to help expand access to higher-opportunity areas, address homelessness, support renovation of public housing, strengthen work incentive, ease administrative burdens and trim program costs.

The bill improves low-income families' access to areas with low poverty and crime and high-performing schools by enabling state and local housing agencies to use project-based vouchers where it is difficult to use tenant-based vouchers. While most able-bodied recipients of rental assistance already work, the

bill improves work incentives by delaying rent increases for families when their earnings rise. It strengthens voucher assistance for former foster children, who face a high risk of homelessness. An amendment from Representative Sheila Jackson Lee (D-TX), which passed by voice vote, will direct the Secretaries of HUD and the Department of Labor to produce an annual report on strategies to strengthen family economic empowerment.

In addition to providing common-sense changes to public housing, housing choice vouchers and project-based rental assistance that will improve residents' quality of life, the Congressional Budget Office estimated that the bill would reduce program costs by \$311 million over five years. This savings means that more families could be helped with the existing level of funding.

The unanimous vote in the House gives the bill strong momentum going into the Senate, though no timeline for Senate action has been announced. If the Senate also passes the bill, it will be the first time a major piece of authorizing legislation affecting vouchers and public housing is enacted since 1998.

For more information on H.R. 3700, see [this resource page from the Center on Budget and Policy Priorities](#) and [these resources from the National Low Income Housing Coalition](#).

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Criminal Justice Reform Could Still Happen

Advocates who are pushing for criminal justice reform might have been feeling like they are on a roller coaster lately, with good reason. When the Senate Judiciary Committee passed (15-5) the Sentencing Reform and Corrections Act of 2015 (S. 2123) last October, things were looking good. However, more than four months have passed since then, and despite [action](#) by many advocacy groups, the bill has not yet been taken up by the full Senate. Some reports last week speculated that it might not happen at all – that some Republicans were not inclined to give Democrats something they would consider a win and something that President Obama [called for](#) in his State of the Union address. Since the bill is opposed by some Republicans, including presidential candidate Senator Ted Cruz (R-TX), and since the Senate Judiciary Committee is already feeling heat from many advocates for saying the Senate shouldn't hold hearings or a vote to replace Supreme Court Justice Antonin Scalia, it was thought by many that the bill might be dead.

However, Senate Judiciary Committee Chairman Charles Grassley (R-IA) said last Tuesday that revisions to the bill that would garner enough support to pass Congress would be announced soon. Details around what those revisions are have not yet been released, so advocates remain cautiously optimistic that the revisions will be acceptable and not gut major provisions of the legislation in order to gain additional support.

The version of the Sentencing Reform and Corrections Act that passed out of committee would eliminate the harsh three-strike mandatory life sentence for certain federal crimes, reduce federal penalties for some nonviolent drug-related and other crimes, and reduce sentences for inmates convicted of crack cocaine offenses before federal law was changed in 2010 to address the extreme disparities in sentencing for crack versus powder cocaine offenses that magnify racial inequalities. It would provide avenues for prison reform to reduce recidivism, allowing prisoners to reduce their sentences by participating in education programs, drug rehabilitation, a prison job or similar activities. It

would also address the treatment of youth in the federal system, specifically in the areas of solitary confinement and life without parole sentences for juveniles. While there are few juveniles in the federal prison system, it is hoped that these changes could be models for state correctional reforms.

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Child Nutrition Bill Awaits Senate Action

Advocates remain hopeful that the full Senate will take up bipartisan legislation to reauthorize child nutrition programs soon, potentially even this week. The **Improving Child Nutrition Integrity and Access Act of 2016**, which passed the Senate Agriculture Committee on January 20, sets the policy and funding structure for all of the federal school meal and child nutrition programs, including National School Lunch, Summer Food Service Program, the Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants and Children (WIC) and others.

According to the [Food Research and Action Center](#), the new legislation contains many positive changes, including allowing for an additional snack for children in care for nine or more hours a day; allowing for after-school and summer meal providers to streamline their operations through one program; and increasing the age of eligibility for children to receive benefits through WIC to their sixth birthday rather than their fifth birthday, except for children in full-day kindergarten. It also allows some families who qualify for free and reduced-price school meals in select states to receive a debit card, or Electronic Benefit Transfer (EBT) card, that they can use to buy certain foods at select stores during the summer.

Advocates are concerned, however, that stricter verification requirements for families' school meal applications in the Senate bill will cause some eligible students to lose access to free or reduced-price school meals, particularly students whose families are homeless, migrant, immigrant and/or have limited English proficiency. Advocates are also concerned that a House version of this bill would hurt low-income families more than the Senate bill, possibly by rejecting the increase in the WIC age of eligibility, rolling back some of the school meal nutrition standards, and/or other measures. No timeline has been set for when the House Education and Workforce Committee may take up this legislation.

For more information on the child nutrition reauthorization bill, see the [February 1 Human Needs Report](#) and [this analysis](#) of the Senate bill from the Food Research and Action Center.

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Funding for Emergencies: Lead Poisoning, Opioids and Zika

Congress has been slow to respond to several emergency situations. Although some progress appears possible in one case, emergency funding has been shot down in another and remains uncertain in still another. Legislation to assist Flint, Michigan and other communities beset by lead contamination in their water supply may be about to move in the Senate; a bill to provide resources to combat the epidemic of opioid addiction passed in the Senate but without emergency funding to carry out those efforts, so the Obama Administration is acting to provide some additional funding; and efforts to prevent a full-blown outbreak of the Zika virus in the mainland U.S. remain stalled.

As CHN noted in our [February 29 Human Needs Report](#), Republican leaders in Congress have repeatedly insisted on finding cuts in federal spending to cover the cost of responding to emergencies like these.

However, Congress is legally allowed to provide funds for emergencies without having to pay for urgently needed services and has done so many times in the past. Congress' insistence on offsetting funding now is considered by many advocates to be short-sighted and damaging to the Americans affected by these crises.

Combatting Lead Poisoning from Paint and Water

A bill to provide nearly \$250 million to assist with the repair of water infrastructure in Flint and other localities affected by lead-contaminated water may be closer to moving in the Senate. Senator Mike Lee (R-UT) is the only Senator with a 'hold' on the Drinking Water Safety and Infrastructure Act ([S.2579](#)), preventing it from moving forward. In addition to the continued insistence by Republicans that the bill be paid for, Sen. Lee's concerns over when the bill will be paid for are being worked out, leaving advocates hopeful that he will release his hold and allow the bill to come up for a vote. However, the lead poisoning relief is tied to the energy bill, either because it will be an amendment to that legislation or through an agreement that allows for both bills to be taken up separately. Senator Bill Nelson (D-FL) has placed a hold on the energy bill, out of concern that an expected amendment would make it possible for oil drilling in Florida waters, which he has long opposed. While Nelson supports the Flint funding, his objections must also be resolved before either bill moves forward. According to [The Hill](#), the Senate may pass its legislation as an amendment to the House's Flint bill, which did not include funding and instead focused on public education about water quality problems. How the House will respond to the Senate bill remains unclear. For more background on the Flint water crisis and the Drinking Water Safety and Infrastructure Act, see the [February 29 Human Needs Report](#).

Advocates are also working to ensure the federal government acts to protect all children and families in federal housing programs from lead poisoning. The Coalition on Human Needs joined with the Children's Defense Fund and other advocacy groups in [urging](#) the Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) to update their regulations regarding lead contamination in units it subsidizes. The groups called for HUD's regulations to be consistent with the definitions of lead poisoning adopted by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), which recognizes that there is no safe level of lead in children's blood, and for HUD to update its inspection procedures to more accurately identify lead contamination. Among other changes, the groups also called for HUD to allow families whose children exhibit lead poisoning to move to safe housing on an emergency basis; currently, these families are likely to lose their Housing Choice Voucher Program subsidy if they leave, effectively forcing them to choose between the health of their children and homelessness. These changes are also being considered as a recommendation to the Administration by the White House Advisory Council on Faith-Based and Neighborhood Partnerships, to which CHN's executive director Deborah Weinstein was [appointed](#) by President Obama.

Senator Richard Durbin (D-IL) and Senator Robert Menendez (D-NJ) recently introduced the [Lead-Safe Housing for Kids Act of 2016](#) to would require HUD to make similar changes; the bill was also introduced by Rep. Keith Ellison (D-MN) and others in the House. In response to a twitterstorm in connection with the bills' introduction, HUD Secretary Julian Castro [tweeted](#) "You'll be glad to know that HUD is updating regs to protect kids exposed to lead in HUD-assisted housing."

Details on exact changes HUD is making aren't yet fully clear.

Combating the Opioid Epidemic

The Senate last Thursday nearly-unanimously passed (94-1) a bill to address addiction to opioids, a class of drug that includes prescription painkillers and heroin. The Comprehensive Addiction and Recovery Act (S. 524) will allow the Department of Justice and the Department of Health and Human Services to provide grants to states to rein in prescription drug and heroin abuse, strengthen prescription drug monitoring programs, ramp up treatment and intervention programs for individuals who are addicted to opioids, and increase access to medication that can reverse overdoses.

While passage of the bill is a positive step, the Senate rejected ([48-47](#); 60 yes votes needed) an amendment from Senator Jeanne Shaheen (D-NH) that would have provided \$600 million in emergency supplemental funding to fight the crisis. Because of this, the bill authorizes the actions to fight opioid abuse but doesn't actually provide any funding to do so. According to [The Hill](#), the Republicans who voted against the emergency funding (five Republicans and 42 Democrats voted to allow consideration of the amendment; no Democrats voted against it) argued that the FY16 omnibus spending bill passed last fall included about \$400 million to address the opioid and heroin abuse epidemic and that more could come from the FY17 appropriations process. Democrats argued that the amendment was needed to make sure money quickly got to communities dealing with this crisis now.

The day after the legislation passed the Senate, Department of Health and Human Services Secretary Sylvia Mathews Burwell [announced](#) the department's plan to award \$94 million to health centers to improve access to substance abuse services, especially in underserved communities. The money will come from Affordable Care Act funding and will help awardees hire roughly 800 providers to support nearly 124,000 new patients. President Obama's FY17 budget requested \$1 billion in new mandatory funding over two years and an additional \$559 million in discretionary funding for FY17 for this fight.

It is not yet known when the House Judiciary Committee will consider legislation to fight the opioid epidemic, nor is it known if they will take up the Senate-passed measure or the House version of it, H.R. 953.

Fighting a Zika Outbreak

Congress has yet to move on a February 22nd request from the Obama Administration for \$1.9 billion in emergency funding to combat the Zika virus in the U.S. GOP leaders have insisted that dollars left over from the 2014 fight against Ebola could be used for this purpose, and that any emergency funding that is approved would have to be [paid for](#) with offsetting cuts elsewhere. Democrats [rejected](#) those notions, noting that waiting for funding through the regular appropriations process would take too long to combat the disease. As CHN noted in this [blog post](#), major cuts to public health funding have left health departments unable to deal with a serious outbreak of the Zika virus, which has a potentially disparate impact on low-income people.