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POLITICO Pro Q&A: Anti-poverty advocate Deborah Weinstein

By Ben Weyl

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Fearful that the new conservative president would shred the social safety net, a collection of more than 100 service providers, faith-based organizations, civil rights groups, labor unions and liberal advocates founded the Coalition on Human Needs to protect federal programs for low-income people and other vulnerable populations.

The year was 1981 and the president was Ronald Reagan. But in 2017, under Donald Trump and a Republican-controlled Congress — which Reagan never enjoyed — the coalition faces “a set of threats that we haven’t seen before,” according to Deborah Weinstein, the group’s executive director.

The Coalition on Human Needs acts as a key convener of anti-poverty advocates, holding a regular meeting to discuss legislative strategy when Congress is in session. Weinstein said recently that the first gathering after the election found its members “grief-struck,” but also with “a very strong spirit of determination to stand together and fight as much as we can.”

This transcript has been edited for length and clarity.

What are some of your biggest concerns about what a Trump administration and a Republican-controlled Congress will do next year?

Among the most deeply held concerns would be dismantling basic safety net programs that have served to reduce poverty and improve health coverage for tens of millions of Americans. Certainly the repeal of the Affordable Care Act is a very deep concern for us, as are the threats to block grant Medicaid or other ways of really changing the structure of Medicaid so that it can’t reach as many people; perhaps cutting back on the Children’s Health Insurance Program; the idea of restricting what is offered through the Medicare program.

All of these things would permanently reduce the amount of help that the federal government can offer both to all the people that are now served, but also if you do something like block granting the Medicaid program, in hard times when more people are unemployed, lose insurance, become poor, they will lose the opportunity to get help which could make the difference between someone’s temporary hardship becoming a catastrophe.

Republicans have produced budget proposals in recent years to significantly cut aid to low income people but until now they’ve kind of been “free” votes. They knew that President Barack Obama wasn’t going to sign them. Do you think that they will follow through on all of these changes now that they have a Republican president?

If you go by what they say, they will, and we have to take them seriously. You have somebody like Chairman [\[Tom\] Price](#), chairman of House Budget Committee and now obviously nominee to be secretary of Health and Human Services. He is opposed to most of the basic programs that he would be administering. That is a wholly new development

assuming he were to be approved as the nominee.

We're not sure what will happen, and we do know that as soon as they get beyond pronouncements to really have to show what the impact is, that there will be widespread opposition in the country. So certainly we hope that many of these proposals can be beaten back. But when you see Rep. Price, he's not like the fox guarding the henhouse, he's more like the grizzly bear guarding the henhouse.

What are your thoughts on Speaker [Paul Ryan](#)'s "Better Way" agenda and some of his anti-poverty proposals?

We think that he is willfully ignoring the tremendous good that programs such as SNAP, known as food stamps, and Medicaid and housing programs have done in alleviating poverty and instead wants to constrain those programs. There's often been talk about giving authority back to states, but when the overall thrust of the budget proposals is to drastically cut, all you're doing is shifting burdens to states that they would not take up, so the losers are poor people.

I understand the coalition has a regular meeting with anti-poverty policy advocates. What was that first one like after the election?

People are not cheerful. People recognize that we're in the fight of our lives, that even somebody as old as I am and older know that the coming together of an unpredictable, but a very right-wing in some sense, president and extremely right-wing majority in the House and Senate provides a set of threats that we haven't seen before. But, in addition to being grief-struck about the potential for such harm to come to our country, there was a very strong spirit of determination to stand together and fight as much as we can.

Republicans are talking about trying to do two budget reconciliation bills next year. It looks like they're going to go after the Affordable Care Act in the first one and try to do tax reform in the second, but they could also do a lot of other things. Are you concerned that other programs for low income people could also be included in reconciliation bills?

Yes, we're very concerned. ... They've called for block granting the SNAP program and we are extremely concerned that in a second reconciliation round they would call for doing that. As they start to put together their desires for gigantic tax cuts for corporations and upper-income [earners] and the extent to which they see that on the tax side of things any increases are very unpopular, will they go [cut] again and again to the most vulnerable people that they hope won't be able to fight back?

And with reconciliation, the filibuster doesn't exist and so Senate Democrats won't be able to block something like that.

Well Democrats alone can't. Another couple of Republicans, since the margin is awfully slim for them, could stave off some of what we consider to be disastrous decisions.

On discretionary spending, stiff caps under the Budget Control Act come back into effect next year. We've twice seen deals to raise the caps for non-defense and defense spending. Are you concerned that next year we'll just see a boost for the Pentagon but non-defense programs get frozen or cut?

We are very concerned about that. One of the things that we are doing now is an effort that we call SAVE for All: Strengthening America's Values and Economy for All, and this is [a letter that is now being circulated](#) amongst organizations around the country. ... We say at minimum, if you're going to be increasing [the Pentagon budget] that you should do no less for the domestic and international programs, discretionary programs,

that have been taking cuts year after year after year.

We certainly have heard of hints that a new Congress might just be interested in increasing the military that much more, and if they have to cut domestic spending in order to pay for it, that would be OK with them. There, too, it's easy to say that. Maybe these people will find it easy to do, but there are many, many people around the country who understand the importance of education and job training and environmental protection and public health programs and housing programs.

Congress recently passed another continuing resolution to fund the government through next April. Would you prefer lawmakers pass another stopgap to finish fiscal 2017 funding or the bills that have been drafted by the appropriations committees?

Because they didn't finally work out the deals, it's hard to know how to answer that. In some the House was better, in some the Senate was better, and it kind of depends how they would come out. Right now, it's hard to be extremely optimistic about how that would be. That plus the fact that we don't want to make it an occasion for many, many destructive policy riders to be added means we have an open mind and will look to what is being proposed.

Can you talk about how you're preparing for the fights for next year? You brought up the letter the coalition is circulating.

We consider that kind of a building block. There's also a petition for individuals. Everybody's voice is needed and we hope that by doing that, we can help be connected to as many individuals and groups as possible, so that we get past the sort of grieving and outrage today that is not connected to actual decisions that are going to be made, but instead have a very large group of people connected and ready to take action.

We're having a webinar to educate people about how Congress will seek to use the budget rules so that people understand how come they only need a simple majority here but they need 60 votes there. There'll be people from all around the country participating in that. Those are building blocks that we will then work in concert with all the other groups in our coalition to mount opposition.

Are there any areas where you might be able to find common ground with the Trump administration or places where you're hopeful that you could support policies?

If you kind of extend that out to what we know people in Congress have talked about, there has been interest in criminal justice reform and if it's possible to have common ground on that, there was bipartisan support, could we get it the rest of the way?

Perhaps it's possible to work together to have some pro-family, pro-parent with children agenda items. President-elect Trump has talked about childcare as being important. We don't primarily support the ways he would go about it, which would tend to give more assistance to those with higher incomes. There are ways of course to target childcare assistance to the people whose incomes are lower. Will we have any opening there?

There's been bipartisan support, Speaker Ryan one of the supporters, for expanding the earned income tax credit for workers without dependent children. Is that something that could move? We would like that.

On an infrastructure package, we believe those kind of investments make sense, but what we've heard so far about what the Trump plan would be does not seem to really be what we think is a needed infrastructure package. I don't know if we've got too much common ground there.

Anything else that you're working on?

It isn't as directly budget-oriented, but ... protecting vulnerable people, that's in the mission statement of the Coalition on Human Needs. Thinking about immigrants, thinking about discrimination on the basis of religion or LGBT status or race or ethnicity, those are serious concerns of ours and if there are proposals that emerge, say for a Muslim registry or to move to deport the DREAMers or other immigrants, we have to stand for vulnerable people who are making a contribution to this country and whose targeting are against American values.

Kaitlyn Burton contributed to this story.