



COALITION ON HUMAN NEEDS

Writing a Letter to the Editor about Sequestration and Congress's Work on Appropriations

Letters to the Editor placed around the country will heighten awareness of the devastation continued cuts to human needs programs, as called for in Congress's budget and appropriations bills, will bring to your community. It will also send a message to Congress that we are watching, and that there is another path they should take.

Below are a suggested outline, sample Letter to the Editor (LTE) and additional talking point you can use. LTEs should refer to an article in the paper to which you are responding and should use your own words to increase your chance of publication. Think about how you can connect news stories or opinion pieces to Congress's decision to keep harmful sequestration cuts in place next year and slash essential human needs programs even further in future years. Include examples that are personal to you, the issues you work on, and your community. It is helpful to put a face to the numbers; incorporating stories that make the data come to life will increase the impact. How have you or someone you know benefited from the programs that would be cut under sequestration?

Many papers limit LTE submissions to 250 words or less. Check with the paper you plan to submit your LTE to for specific requirements.

Think about including some of these pieces in your Letter to the Editor:

- Include information about your role and stories from your community or your organization to make this personal and put faces to these statistics.
- Describe the proposed cuts to human needs programs included in budget & spending bills. Focus on one or a few specific programs that will be cut. Include information on how valuable these programs are, and how sequestration cuts threaten them. For example, if cuts go through, XX people in your state will lose housing, Head Start, etc. Use resources from the White House ([here](#) and [here](#)) and the [Center on Budget and Policy Priorities](#) for state data. Mention [past cuts](#) to that program as well.
- Give an overview of what's going on in Congress: Budget resolutions have passed that include sequestration & further cuts; work on annual spending bills continues, adhering to those cuts; President Obama has threatened to veto bills that include sequestration caps.
- Offer a solution. It's not too late for Congress to change course, end sequestration, increase funding to the programs, and help vulnerable people in your community. In some states where the climate is right, show support for the President's budget and his vow to veto bad appropriations bills.
- Preempt any anticipated counter-attacks, like that our country can't afford it. Note examples of increased Pentagon spending and tax cuts for corporations and the wealthy as evidence that we can afford a different route. Note evidence that corporate tax cuts don't lead to job creation.
- Make the case for added revenue. Everyone should pay their fair share so we can help those who truly need it.

Sample LTE

As a housing advocate who works with our low-income neighbors in Springfield, I see the effects of cuts to housing programs every day. From children growing up in shelters to families living on the streets, I know we must do better. That's why I'm even more disheartened that Congress intends on cutting funding for housing programs even further ("Senate Passes Transportation-Housing Spending Bill," 6/10/15). If Congress has its way, more than 1300 Illinois families will lose their housing vouchers next year. This comes on top of years of cuts. Poverty will increase not only here in Springfield, but across the nation. Thankfully, President Obama has threatened to veto this bill and all spending bills that stick to drastic sequestration cuts that will slash housing and other vital human needs programs. With this impasse looming, Congress should throw out its budget and spending bills, go back to the drawing board, and increase funding for programs Illinoisans need to survive and get ahead. We can afford a different path. Instead of rigging the rules for the wealthy and big corporations, Congress should ensure everyone pays his or her fair share so we can ensure everyone has a safe place to call home.

Additional Talking Points You Can Use

Overall Cuts:

- In Congress's budget outline, [two-thirds](#) of proposed non-defense cuts come from programs for low- and moderate-income people, like SNAP/food stamps, Medicaid, Pell Grants, and others. These programs constitute just 23 percent of the total federal budget.
- Congress has been cutting vital programs for years. Since FY2010, [138](#) important education, housing, job training, and many other programs serving low-income people have been cut, 50 of them by more than 15 percent and 39 by more than a third.
- Congress's budget would cut spending by more than \$5 trillion over 10 years, slashing funds for education, transportation, housing, health care, SNAP/food stamps and other vital human needs programs. The plan not only keeps oppressive spending caps ("sequestration") in place for FY16, over the next decade it cuts these programs by nearly \$500 billion below sequestration levels – more than doubling sequestration cuts. Under this plan, there will be record lows spent on everything from education to roads to health care.
- When sequestration cuts were in effect in FY 2013, hundreds of thousands of families were hurt. We have started to reverse these cuts, but these spending bills would take us backwards.
- While Congress abides by damaging spending caps for human needs programs, it busts through them to increase the Pentagon's slush fund to \$96 billion. If Congress wants to increase Pentagon spending, it should increase spending for human needs programs by at least the same amount.
- Congress's outline calls for cutting more than [\\$3.6 billion](#) from the Labor, Health and Human Services, and Education departments. These departments cover many critical human needs programs.

Child Care:

- Child care is one of the most significant expenses in a family budget, especially for low-income families. President Obama's budget would guarantee all low-income families with children under age 4 have access to quality child care. Unfortunately, Congress didn't follow suit.

- The Child Care and Development Block Grant (CCDBG) is the primary source of federal funding for helping low-income families pay for child care. However, because of a lack of funding, only [one in six](#) eligible children receives help through the CCDBG. Cuts proposed by Congress will leave even more families without the help they need to ensure they have access to quality, affordable child care. (Click [here](#) for CCDBG spending changes [by state](#))
- Making child care freely accessible to low-income parents means they can go to work to support their families and advance their careers. Access to high-quality child care and early childhood education [particularly benefits low-income children](#), including their social and emotional well-being.

Head Start:

- [During sequestration](#) in 2013, Head Start lost \$405 million in funding, which meant that 57,000 children lost access to Head Start services. While the lost funds have since been restored, Head Start will [face similar cuts again](#) if Congress doesn't act this year to end sequestration.
- Congress's proposed appropriations would allow an estimated [46,000 fewer children](#) to participate in Head Start, compared to President Obama's proposed budget.
- Head Start participants are more likely to attend college and be employed and less likely to be a teen parent or in poor health. [Research has shown](#) that this closes one third of the gap between children with median family incomes and those in the bottom quartile, and occurs even though these impacts are not visible in later test scores.
- In purely economic terms, Head Start [pays for itself](#): researchers have found that Head Start's positive impacts on children's health, lifetime earnings, involvement in crime, grade retention, and special education placements, are collectively greater than the costs of the program.

Juvenile Justice:

- The House Commerce-Justice-Science bill contains [massive cuts](#) to juvenile justice programs, entirely eliminating Title II Part B formula grants and Title V delinquency prevention grants, two vital programs to aid juvenile offenders and at-risk youth, as well as significantly reducing total funding for juvenile justice programs.
- The programs were [already underfunded](#). For example, Title II grants received only \$55.5 million in funding this year while the Obama budget has requested \$70 billion for FY 2016. Title V grants have declined from \$65 million in FY 2010 to \$15 million this year.
- [Formula grants](#), which the appropriations bill entirely eliminates, are crucial to ensuring that critical juvenile rights are upheld, such as prohibiting the detention of nonviolent status offenders (offenses such as possessing alcohol or skipping school) and fighting ongoing racial disparities in the juvenile justice system. Upholding these "core requirements" is a condition that must be met to receive the grants; absent funding, the requirements cannot be enforced.

Job Training:

- There are 24 million adults with low skill levels working in the U.S. Roughly [14.5 million](#) of them earn less than \$28,000 a year, placing them in the lowest 30% of earnings for all full-time workers. Job training programs not only help these individuals get better paying jobs, they help our economy when these workers pay more in taxes and have more to spend.
- Under Congress's plan, [2.3 million fewer people](#) would receive job training and employment services, including skills training and help finding jobs, compared to President Obama's budget.
- Congress's bills not only include no new money for job creation, they cut job training programs and spending on transportation infrastructure which could create good jobs and improve our crumbling infrastructure.

Housing Vouchers:

- Congress's plan not only fails to restore [67,000](#) rental housing vouchers lost due to the 2013 sequestration cuts, but would also result in the loss of another 28,000 vouchers, leaving the program about 100,000 vouchers behind. *(For cuts by state and local housing agency, click [here](#))*
- Even absent cuts, demand for vouchers far outstrips supply. Cities across the country have extraordinarily long voucher waitlists. For example, before the Washington, D.C. Housing Authority closed its waitlist in 2013, it had an [average wait](#) of 22 years for a two-bedroom apartment and 43 years for a studio apartment.
- While low-income housing remains underfunded, federal spending continues to subsidize higher-income homes. In 2010, federal benefits (such as mortgage interest and property tax deductions) to families with incomes over \$200,000 averaged over \$7,000, which is [more than four times](#) the average federal benefit received by households making less than \$20,000.
- Vouchers have been shown to reduce poverty, homelessness, and crowded living conditions, and can help families move to lower-poverty neighborhoods, which has proven benefits for children.

Seniors:

- Since 2005, the nutrition network for seniors has served [17 million fewer](#) meals all while waiting lists continue to mount in every state. When sequestration cuts were in effect in FY 2013, poor homebound seniors nationwide were denied home-delivered meals. Funding was increased in FY 2014, but our most vulnerable seniors can't afford a second round of sequestration.
- Meals on Wheels is cost effective. A senior can be fed [Meals on Wheels](#) for an entire year for approximately the equivalent average cost of a week in a nursing home or one day in a hospital.
- Older Americans and individuals with disabilities would lose vital services under Congress's plan, [potentially including](#) approximately 500,000 fewer rides to doctors and grocery stores, 200,000 fewer hours of assistance to seniors unable to perform daily activities, and 100,000 fewer hours of care for adults in group settings.

Low-Income Tax Credits:

- In 2013, the EITC and CTC lifted 9.4 million people out of poverty and made 22 million others less poor. But key provisions of the Earned Income Tax Credit and the Child Tax Credit are [set to expire](#) at the end of 2017 if Congress does not act to make them permanent. This would result in 50 million Americans, including 25 million children, losing part or all of their EITC or CTC benefits; 16 million people, including 8 million children, would fall into – or deeper into – poverty. *(For state data, click [here](#))*
- Even absent cuts, the EITC needs to be expanded to better protect childless workers, 7 million of whom are [currently taxed](#) into or further into poverty without adequate tax credits.
- An abundance of [research](#) has found that low-income tax credits have a significant positive effect on labor force participation, providing incentives to work at every benefit level. And the EITC and CTC are cost-effective: researchers have found that tax credits raise student test scores, which results in earnings gains that offset a substantial fraction of the cost of the credits.

Tax Cuts for the Wealthy and Corporations:

- Rather than raising taxes and ending tax loopholes for the wealthy and corporations, Congress's joint budget resolution assumes more tax breaks for corporations and the rich. Some say this would result in tax cuts to millionaires and billionaires of \$50,000 to \$200,000 each. Congress should ensure everyone pays his or her fair share so we can invest in critical human needs programs.
- In April, the House [voted](#) to give millions of dollars more to heirs of the wealthiest estates in America at a cost of \$269 billion. This money could have funded pre-school for all four year olds, expanded and protected tax credits for 50 million low-income families, and supported many other human needs programs. We can afford a different path.
- Tax cuts for lower- and middle-income folks are [more effective](#) than tax cuts for the wealthy at spurring economic growth. Lower taxes for the wealthy and corporate giveaways have added inequality, not jobs.

Failure to Invest in Our Future:

- Our economy is out of balance. We can get it back on track by investing in schools, health care, nutrition, roads, etc.
- Congress's spending bills include less funding for needed investments in education, infrastructure, research, and other services for Americans. We can afford a different path that allows our country to invest in our future.
- A failure to invest in our future will leave our country and the next generation worse off. We can't afford to let that happen.

For **tips on writing and sending a Letter to the Editor**, see this [tip sheet](#) from our friends at NETWORK. Please send a letter of your final submission to CHN's Senior Policy Writer Lecia Imbery at limbery@chn.org and let her know if your submission is accepted.