



COALITION ON HUMAN NEEDS

07/12/2016

An Open Letter to Members of Congress:

Our nation cries out for leadership. We need you to lead and heal now by acting to remedy wrongs and prevent harm visited disproportionately on communities of color. There are meaningful steps you can take this week, before you leave for your summer recess, that will protect children and begin to correct long-standing injustice.

The communities of faith, human service providers, civil rights, labor, and other advocates for low-income people represented in the Coalition on Human Needs call upon you to exercise leadership by taking these steps:

- **Provide funding to stop children from being poisoned by lead contamination** – in Flint, Michigan and elsewhere. Senate bipartisan legislation including funding to clean up lead contamination has been approved in the Environment and Public Works Committee as part of the Water Resources Development Act, S. 2848. The House should agree and finally at long last provide funds to stop children (and adults) from being poisoned. In all communities, it is low-income people who are disproportionately affected, with communities of color in places like Flint hit very hard. Lead in water is not the sole source of poisoning; Congress should also take more steps to protect families from lead paint and dust in housing. But you have debated and come to bipartisan agreement on funding to address water contamination. Further delay needlessly endangers children. Please take action before you go home.
- **Provide adequate funding for Zika prevention** – If you go home without acting to prevent the spread of Zika, it will be a gross failure of leadership. Zika has started to spread in Puerto Rico and Florida; it will spread further in Southern states, and will disproportionately endanger communities of color because they are more likely to be poor, to work outside, and to be less protected by air conditioning. This situation is urgent. Leadership means stripping out divisive riders and recognizing that as a public health emergency, offsets are not required, and that insisting on controversial cuts in other programs directly threatens the health of women and babies. Please take action now.
- **Enact S. 2123, the Sentencing Reform and Corrections Act of 2015.** This too has bipartisan support. The legislation would reduce sentences for many of those convicted of drug offenses – who are very disproportionately African American, Latino, and low-income. Your leadership is needed now to reduce the discriminatory disparities in sentencing for crack versus powder cocaine, to limit unfairly long mandatory minimum

sentences, and to provide earlier release and transition to the community for eligible prisoners.

There are many steps Congress should take to show that it values the lives of all Americans. Not least, basic funding of vital government functions must happen by the end of September, and Congress should set a path to the earliest possible omnibus appropriations bill – not a long-term Continuing Resolution that abdicates your basic responsibilities.

But at minimum, we call on Congress not to leave this week for its recess before it has taken steps to reduce lead poisoning, Zika infections, and unfairly long prison sentences. These issues have been debated at length; they have bipartisan support. Health and lives are at stake; injustices must be corrected. You can exercise leadership and take practical, meaningful steps that will save lives, protect health and right wrongs. You can act now to show that these lives matter. These would be important steps in our needed national healing.

Please – do not fail to lead when your leadership is so needed.

Sincerely,

Deborah Weinstein,
Executive Director
on behalf of the Coalition on Human Needs