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OPINION

Allow a Vote on Unemployment Benefits

Crucial support for people fallen on hard times

BY JUDGE GREG MATHIS

On Dec. 28, 2013, more than 1.3 million Americans lost their Emergency Unemployment Insurance benefits. The program allowed individuals who have lost their jobs to receive additional unemployment benefits for up to 47 weeks.

The critical question on this issue is whether or not America should maintain its commitment to a robust social safety net for our nation's working class families and other Americans that have fallen on hard times. It is the same ongoing debate between Republicans and Democrats in Congress over programs such as Social Security, the

Supplemental Nutrition and Assistance program (food stamps), and other forms of social assistance.

Republican leaders regularly criticize government support to working class families, but defend tax credits and government sponsored programs to benefit the wealthy.

Billionaire Warren Buffett once stated that due to tax policies that favor the rich, his effective tax-rate of 17.4 percent was lower than his secretary's 35.8 percent rate.

A recent study by the National Priorities Project found that America's top earners will receive an average tax cut of over \$66,000 dollars while the bottom 20 percent receives an average of \$107 dollars. The wealthy can write off loan interest payment for vacation homes, get special tax treatment on capital gains and certain inheritance as-

sets, and large corporations use tax shelters to hide trillions in earnings.

At a time when the average CEO makes almost 300 times more than his or her employees, I think it would be an unconscionable and callous decision for politicians in Washington to keep chipping away at America's social safety net.

If Republican's are serious about reducing America's deficit they should focus on restructuring our nation's tax system, which strongly favors rich individuals and large corporations - we should not downsize America's social safety net.

Conservatives often demonize our nation's social programs by arguing they make people lazy and discourage them from working, but the facts do not support this. Opponents of social programs have used limited cases of illegal fraud and abuse to misguide some American's into believing most people receiv-

ing social assistance are cheating the system.

The truth is that unemployment support is temporary and only available to individuals who are actively looking for work. In addition, individuals who receive emergency unemployment assistance are only eligible to receive up to one half of their previous income and this amount is often less due to state caps on overall support. These payments only account for a fraction of what individuals would typically earn.

Unemployment insurance benefits provide crucial support to hard working people who have temporarily fallen on hard times, allowing them to feed their families and keep their homes as they search for work.

Families across our country have been waiting since January for politicians in Washington to pass an extension of unemployment ben-

efits and last week the Senate passed legislation to extend the program. The bipartisan bill will extend unemployment benefits for almost three million Americans.

Unfortunately, House Speaker John Boehner has indicated he will not allow members in the House of Representatives to vote on the bill, which would certainly pass. At the same time, Congress is set to approve several extensions on corporate tax breaks. This is wrong and we must stand up to members of Congress that are obstructing an unemployment insurance extension. Call Speaker John Boehner's office and tell him to do the right thing.

Judge Greg Mathis is known for his advocacy for equal justice. His inspirational life story of a street youth who rose from jail to Judge has provided hope to millions who watch him on the award-winning TV court show Judge Mathis.



Ryan Budget is a Path to Economic Disaster

Drop this plan and get serious

BY MARC H. MORIAL

In the same week that we marked the 46th anniversary of the assassination of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. and learned that 7.1 million Americans had enrolled in the Affordable Care Act, House Budget Committee Chairman Paul Ryan introduced a draconian 2015 budget plan that increases military spending through 2024 by \$483 billion - to pre-sequester levels, yet cuts non-defense spending by \$791 billion.

This illogical plan proposes to repeal the Affordable Care Act, end Medicare as we know it, and slash critical safety-net programs, including the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (or SNAP - formerly food stamps), Head Start and Pell Grants.

It is ironic that a plan called the "Path to Prosperity" is nothing more than a path to political grandstanding and partisanship that has no place among constructive efforts focused on real prosperity for all Americans - not a select few.

At a time when Americans are looking to Washington for solutions to the problems of income inequality and the ever-increasing Great Divide, the Ryan budget goes in the opposite direction.

Rather than closing the gaps, it exacerbates the problems by raising taxes an average of \$2,000 for middle-class families with children, according to the Office of Management and Budget, while giving the wealthiest taxpayers a break by lowering their taxes from 39.6 percent to 25 percent.

The Economic Policy Institute (EPI) estimates that the "prosperity proposal" would result in the loss of three million jobs over the next

couple of years, thereby reversing the gradual upward trend in job creation. In short, the Ryan budget, while not surprising in its familiar ideology or fanciful push towards austerity, represents the height of irresponsibility and is a blueprint for disaster for millions of hard-working Americans. It has immediately, and rightfully, drawn widespread condemnation.

Ethan Pollack, Senior Policy Analyst with the non-partisan Economic Policy Institute concluded that much like the budget Ryan proposed last year, this one burdens seniors, the disabled, and children - while cutting taxes for the rich. "Tax cuts for people who don't need them and economic insecurity for everyone else is grossly irresponsible budget and economic policy," he added.

The non-profit Center on Budget and Policy Priorities reports that "Some 69 percent of the cuts in House Budget Committee Chairman Paul Ryan's new budget would come

from programs that serve people of limited means. These disproportionate cuts...contrast sharply with the budget's rhetoric about helping the poor and promoting opportunity."

The Center for American Progress called Ryan's plan "the same conservative, top-down policies that have failed the nation's middle and working-class families, seniors, and the economy," while the New York Times called it "Destructive to the country's future."

Thankfully, spending for the next two years was set by the budget agreement passed in the Senate and the House and signed by President Obama in December 2013. So it is unlikely that the Ryan budget will become law in the short-term or is for anything more than show.

Nonetheless, it is a dangerous "vision" for our nation. The National Urban League strongly rejects this budget because of its likely destructive impact on employment,

the economy and poverty. We urge Paul Ryan and his colleagues to drop this plan and get serious about developing a responsible budget that does not depend on hurting millions of working and middle-class Americans to benefit the richest few.

The night before Dr. King's April 4, 1968 assassination, he said:

"The question is not, if I stop to help this man in need, what will happen to me? The question is, if I do not stop to help the sanitation workers, what will happen to them?... Let us move on in these powerful days, these days of challenge to make America what it ought to be. We have an opportunity to make America a better nation."

We can start now by stopping the Ryan budget - and even more importantly, stopping its budget-cutting fever that threatens the economic health and recovery of our nation.

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