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OPINION

An Unhappy Birthday for Medicare and Medicaid

Both programs very much under siege

BY MARTHA BURK

July 30 marks a very important anniversary in our modern political history.

Fifty-three years ago in 1965, President Lyndon Johnson signed Medicare and Medicaid into law, creating two programs that would disproportionately improve the lives of older and low-income Americans — especially women.

Fast-forward to 2018, and both programs are very much under siege. Nowhere is the struggle starker than in the House Republican budget — titled “A Brighter American Future” — now on Capitol Hill.

The importance of Medicare as a source of women’s health coverage can’t be over-emphasized.

Older and disabled women make up more than half the total beneficiaries, and two-thirds of those 85 and over. This budget from hell takes a giant step toward privatizing the program by allowing insurance companies into the Medicare marketplace, which means benefits could be caught in a



race to the bottom and become too paltry to cover all but the barest of medical needs.

Medicaid is the joint federal-state program that provides low-income people with health care. The proposed Republican budget repeals the Medicaid expansion that

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Since poor women under retirement age and their children are the biggest group

home care, Medicaid provides such care for those with disabilities and/or very low incomes — and 60 percent of those folks are women.

What’s not in the budget? Long gone is the Obama-era effort close the Gingrich-Edwards tax loophole that allows some high-income individuals (possibly including Donald Trump) to avoid Medicare and Social Security payroll taxes altogether, resulting in billions of lost revenue for both programs.

The House Republican budget probably won’t pass in its present form. But with Republican majorities in both houses of Congress, even compromises are sure to favor more cuts.

“A Brighter American Future?” Hardly. This summer’s 53rd anniversary of Medicare and Medicaid looks like a less than happy one for those that depend on them most — namely women, but really anyone counting on growing older.

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came with Obamacare, which will cause 14 to 17 million people to lose coverage.

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of beneficiaries, it stands to reason they’d also be the biggest losers.

But there’s more. Because women have more chronic health conditions like arthritis, hypertension, and osteoporosis, they’re more likely to need institutional care. Since Medicare generally doesn’t cover nursing

Let Me Tell You What Forced Separation Feels Like

U.S.-born kids behind bars, too

BY NICOLE BRAUN

The recent images of immigrant children in cages are incredibly painful to digest.

Still, many people seem to forget that the U.S. has a long track record of forcibly separating families, whether it was African Americans during slavery, the Japanese during World War II, Native Americans during colonization, or poor children whose “unfit” single mothers have lost custody today.

Another common way families are forcibly separated? Juvenile detention.

Tens of thousands of teens and pre-teens — most often the poor and people of color — are locked up in substandard, often privatized penal facilities. Children who go through these forced family separations often wind up experiencing trauma, grief, shame, and dehumanization.

The sad reality is incarceration rates are on the rise alongside economic inequality, and children aren’t exempt. Quite often, the only crime these children have committed is that they’re from vulnerable families or suffering from mental health issues.

My son and I personally experienced this.



My son became severely depressed around the time he turned 13. I was a single mother teaching as an adjunct, making less than \$20,000 a year, so the treatment he needed wasn’t available to us.

My son got into the criminal “justice” system for the initial petty crime of stealing a pair of sneakers, and he remained there for most of his high school years.

Like so many struggling kids, instead

way, because I knew how the court system saw me — as a poor single mother with no husband and a “criminal” son.

From the time he was 14 until he was 18, he was transferred to at least 10 different facilities. I often didn’t know where, because I wasn’t notified. Despite his chronic depression, he was also put in isolation a number of times — a tactic known to increase mental suffering among adult

the background.

As a parent, this experience was devastating and terrorizing. There’s no way to describe it. The trauma from that pain is still real now.

My son is older now, thankfully alive, and doing the hard work of putting his life back together. “Real therapy would have been so helpful,” he told me. “So much pain could have been spared.”

“It really desensitizes people all the way around,” he said of his experience. “It makes you value yourself less and others less, too, since other people see you as a nonhuman.”

No human should ever be treated this way. But while we are wounded, we are not broken.

Social movements are gaining momentum. For example, the immigrant rights movement is growing alongside the Poor People’s Economic Human Rights Campaign and other prison liberation movements.

Separating families due to incarceration, immigration status, mental health, and/or race and class is wrong. If the families impacted by incarceration and other traumas join together with advocates for immigrants, we can create a sea of social change.

As one of my students recently wrote, “There are more of us than them.”

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of getting the treatment he desperately needed, he was sent to subpar facilities that made his emotional pain worse. He received no real therapy, and they often refused to give him his required medication or messed it up.

He began to see himself as a number, as a terrible person. I saw myself the same

prisoners.

At one point, they put him into an adult jail in isolation for at least a month. He was 17 and had just been released from the psych ward that same day. During his once a week phone calls, I could hear the increasing desperation in his voice, as well as the screaming of other adult prisoners in