

Editorial: Congress' ideological battle hurts the neediest

NCR Editorial Staff | Aug. 2, 2013

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The rush for ideological purity in the Republican-controlled House of Representatives has become so noxious that now it threatens the most basic safety net programs for our neediest citizens. This is especially the case with the Supplemental Food Nutrition Program (SNAP), formerly known as food stamps.

For 40 years, ever since Sens. Robert Dole, a Republican, and George McGovern, a Democrat, forged a bipartisan partnership, SNAP funding has been linked to the farm bill with its subsidies for farmers. It was a win-win: Farmers were guaranteed a steady income, despite the vagaries of weather and market, and America's poor were guaranteed help in putting food on their tables despite the vagaries of the economy. The system has worked. In the most recent recession, increases in the poverty rate did not result in increased malnutrition.

In 2011, SNAP lifted 3.9 million Americans above the poverty line, including 1.7 million children and 280,000 seniors. Continued high unemployment and a still recovering economy reinforce the need to maintain adequate funding for nutrition programs like SNAP.

This year, the farm bill failed in the House after Republican Speaker John Boehner brought it to the floor with a \$20 billion cut from the \$763 billion budget for SNAP. Democrats refused support, saying those cuts were too steep; conservative tea party members also refused, saying the cuts weren't enough.

Instead of trying to forge consensus across the aisle, Boehner played to his base and brought a new bill to the floor that only included subsidies for farmers and left SNAP to another day. That bill passed July 13 on a party line vote. Ideological purity trumped governance.

The current farm bill expires Sept. 30, so some kind of legislation must be passed soon. The Senate, which has become, relatively, the voice of reason in Washington, has already passed a more traditional bill that includes both SNAP funding and farm subsidies. The fear is that if the House succeeds in splitting the 40-year coalition that has protected the needs of farmers and poor people, severe cuts to SNAP are very likely.

The House GOP caucus' lack of concern for the poor is becoming evident in other ways. Their truculence on budgetary issues led to the implementation of the sequester on March 1. This mandated across-the-board budget cuts and was originally enacted as a prospect so grim it would force Congress to reach a budget deal. There was no deal.

The cuts are only now beginning to be felt across a spectrum of programs. The idea that sequestration is fair because it affects all programs equally does not bear scrutiny, because not all program budgets are equal. Some, like the Pentagon budget, can absorb a lot of cutting, but smaller programs -- those that serve the poor -- are less able to stand the shock.

Sequestration did not affect SNAP or Medicaid, in good part because the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops organized an interfaith group called the "Circle of Protection" that helped get these vital anti-poverty programs

removed from the cutting block.

The bishops' conference is trying again to garner support to maintain funding for anti-poverty programs in the face of threatened cuts to foreign aid, health care programs, and the new SNAP bill, which envisions cuts deeper than those demanded by the sequester. It is vital that this effort succeed.

It is a sad commentary on our times that in the ideological battle that has engulfed our governing structures and thwarts government action, the first victims are the most vulnerable in society: children and elders who live in poverty.

Across the country, there's a deepening sense of uncertainty about the ability of our institutions to tackle the key issues and problems facing the nation. As one bishops' conference staffer whose job includes lobbying Congress put it in July, the question is whether Congress can "get something done on behalf of the country."

If members of Congress have any interest in answering that question, or in proving their worth, the first thing they must do is offer help to those most in need.

Source URL (retrieved on 05/29/2017 - 23:08): <https://www.ncronline.org/news/politics/editorial-congress-ideological-battle-hurts-neediest>