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Witness for Justice #513

January 31, 2011

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When I think about the U.S. House of Representatives' plan to cut \$100 billion in non-defense discretionary federal spending over the next seven months, I am reminded of the old advertising slogan, "You can pay me now, or you can pay me later." Cutting federal spending and reducing debt might sound good at face value, but we would do well to consider carefully the longer-term consequences – and costs. And some of those costs might be difficult to calculate with numbers alone.

The budget proposal would mean cutting most federal programs by 30 percent, including programs like Head Start, energy conservation for low-income communities, food safety inspection, transportation infrastructure improvements, veteran's assistance, and key social safety net programs like food stamps and unemployment benefits that have kept millions more Americans from falling into poverty in the midst of economic recession.

Hard hit would be state budgets, many of which are already facing severe budget crises, and which stand to face reductions in federal government grants and support. Take the state of Arizona. Facing a \$1.1 billion shortfall, Governor Jan Brewer's budget proposal would cut nearly 280,000 from the state's Medicaid program, including thousands with mental illness or disability. Mental health advocates fear that such cuts would mean reducing already overburdened services for those with mental illness. This is an especially sobering scenario in the wake of the tragic shooting outside a Tucson Safeway store on January 8th that killed six people and wounded 14 others, including Rep. Gabrielle Giffords. Investigations into that attack show mounting evidence that the alleged gunman demonstrated signs of mental instability and did not appear to be receiving mental health care.

During last week's State of the Union address, members of Congress broke with the tradition of sitting by party affiliation and instead, Republicans and Democrats sat side by side to symbolize the need to reach across our differences and come together to face the challenges before our nation and the world. But it will be nothing more than an empty gesture if our public policy decisions do not reflect a similar commitment to the common good, or what the preamble to the U.S. Constitution calls "the general welfare."

In his speech to the nation following the tragedy in Tucson, President Obama called upon all of us to expand our moral imaginations. If ever there was a time for moral imagination, it is now. It is all too easy to imagine individual interests and quick fixes. It is all too easy to pretend we may not be affected by distant budget cuts to distant social programs that seem to have no relation to our own lives. But Martin Luther King, Jr. had it right: we are all "caught in an inescapable network of mutuality." When some of us are left behind, all of us fall behind.

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