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## Nonprofits Must Fight Obama's Cuts in Aid to the Poor



*Richard White/Chronicle of Philanthropy*

*By Pablo Eisenberg*

The failure of nonprofit leaders to defend antipoverty programs and push for stronger ones is one of the reasons the Obama administration has gotten away with ignoring the plight of our poorest citizens.

Nonprofit leaders have not done nearly enough to point out how perverse it is that a president who ran a campaign that pledged to focus on social and economic justice is now making so few efforts to help poor and working-class people in a time of recession.

Throughout the country, millions of people are without jobs and sufficient nutrition; many have lost their homes, lack adequate health insurance, and cannot receive the social services they desperately need. One in seven Americans now lives officially below the poverty rate, the highest percentage in 15 years.

Instead of helping those people, President Obama's policies—including the budget he submitted last week—have done far more to aid corporate America than those in need.

But we have heard little alarm from nonprofit leaders about those and other efforts the administration has proposed that will cause harm to our most vulnerable citizens. In fact, nonprofit leaders have been deafening in their silence.

That is a sharp contrast to the way they responded when federal policies were proposed that threatened to undermine the Great Society efforts passed by President Johnson.

When the Ford administration took aim at social-welfare programs in the early 1970s, a broad, powerful coalition of nonprofits—including labor unions, social-service organizations, and groups that represented women, minorities, and young people—quickly formed to defeat the White House efforts.

After the successes achieved by that effort to fight off cuts, numerous national coalitions were created to solve problems rooted in the country's widespread poverty.

These groups stoked the fires of change, supported by grass-roots social-change organizations like welfare-rights groups, public-housing residents' councils, legal-services units, and community-organizing groups.

Those efforts lost energy in the 1990s, in part because of the decline in the influence of labor unions and the increasing conservatism of the nation's politics. The issue of poverty, despite its prevalence, all but disappeared from our political radar screen in the past two decades.

It should shock our consciences that during the recession the fight against poverty has not surged back on the agenda of so many nonprofits whose mission is to serve the neediest.

Why haven't they, especially the most progressive ones, put strong pressure on the president and his administration to develop jobs, fight for tax equity, and protect the antipoverty programs that are still left?

The reasons say much about significant weaknesses throughout the nonprofit world:

**Fragmentation of nonprofit groups.** The rise of one-issue groups, founded by people with passion for a single cause, has made it difficult for most organizations to embrace a larger vision and join coalitions with broader agendas. Adding to the problem: Large foundations have been reluctant to underwrite such coalitions.

**Cozy ties with government.** Progressive nonprofits, despite their disenchantment with the president, have hesitated to criticize or pressure the administration "because he's our guy," forgetting the noble tradition of dissent in American democracy. Some have not wanted to strain their relations with the White House for fear of losing federal financial support.

**Growing complacency.** Nonprofits in general and progressive organizations in particular have not exhibited the courage to oppose some of the administration's most egregious policies. They appear to have forgotten the mission they embraced many years ago: to fight to improve the conditions of the most vulnerable. They have lost the passion for both antipoverty efforts and the fight for economic and social justice. The warriors of old have been replaced by fearful and gutless successors.

So here is a challenge to nonprofit leaders, the ones who should be taking bold steps:

Rally your organization's supporters to express their anger that the president and members of Congress didn't fight very hard when the Republicans wanted extra tax breaks for the rich. Remind legislators and the administration that had they not caved in on the tax battle in December, the federal government would have a revenue source to finance much greater assistance to those in need.

Then tell them just how devastating the cuts in the budget proposed last week would be to your communities and constituencies. Explain how community-action programs and the thousands of nonprofits they support will be jeopardized by a severe cut in Community Services Block Grants.

Demonstrate how housing and community-improvement efforts will be stalled by the reductions sought in Community Development Block Grants.

And point out how frail elderly people and young children in your hometowns will be forced to sleep in the cold because of proposed cuts in programs that pay the utility bills of the poorest Americans.

Then provide examples of what it will mean to the people you serve if Congress approves the president's pledge to freeze spending on all federal programs over the next five years.

That by itself is a powerful message. But nonprofits should be willing to say more. They should also object to the administration's hypocrisy in pulling back on programs to help the poor while at the same time allowing American financial institutions, which were in large measure the cause of our economic recession, to ride high.

It's time for nonprofits to demand that the poor get better treatment than corporate titans.

Unless nonprofits step up their work to preserve and strengthen programs to assist low-income and working-class people, the poor will continue their tragic trajectory into third-class citizenship, confined to the dustbins of American history.

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