

A better deal for kids in the budget? Democrats and Republicans say 'yes'

Written by Ann Challet, Special to the NNPA from, New America Media
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June Jimenez of Silver Spring, Md. was pregnant when she was laid off from her job at a public affairs firm last year. She tried unsuccessfully for months to find a job and worried about losing her home.

"My mortgage is \$1,500 a month and I only received \$320 a week in unemployment," she says.

Her health insurance policy at the time didn't provide her with maternity coverage, and when she tried to purchase an individual plan, she discovered that she couldn't because her pregnancy qualified as a pre-existing condition. She qualified for Medicaid, which covered the cost of her pregnancy, including an emergency C-section.

But she found herself facing the possibility of having to choose among making her mortgage payments, paying for utilities, and buying food.

What sustained her, she says, was that by her sixth month of pregnancy she was able to enroll in WIC (the Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children). She used WIC to buy food for her and her daughter for the next nine months.

Today Jimenez is working again, and her daughter Karanda is now almost a year old. "Without a doubt, Medicaid and WIC saved us," she says. "[Those programs] provided a crucial bridge for me."

At a congressional briefing last week, children's advocacy organization First Focus Campaign for Children, in conjunction with advocacy group MomsRising, presented the results of a nationwide poll that found bipartisan public support for protecting funding for children's programs in the federal budget.

The survey of 800 voters, commissioned by First Focus and conducted by polling firm American Viewpoint, found that strong majorities of both Democrats and Republicans opposed cuts to programs like the ones that sustained Jimenez.

Voters were surveyed by landline and cell phone in the first week of December.

"Kids were affected significantly by the budget sequestration that took effect earlier this year," says Ed Walz, vice president of communications at First Focus. Cutbacks, he says, have

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disproportionately impacted programs serving children.

While some federal programs such as Social Security are mandatory, children's programs like WIC, Head Start (which provides early childhood services to low-income families, including education and child care), and K-12 education are funded through the appropriations process.

Head Start programs, for example, had to cut services for close to 60,000 children in the 2013-2014 school year.

According to the survey, three in four voters oppose cuts to K-12 education funding, including 87 percent of Democrats, 63 percent of Republicans, and 71 percent of independent voters.

Voters specifically oppose cuts to early learning for young children by a ratio of nearly two-to-one (62 to 32 percent), including half of Republicans, more than three in four Democrats, and almost 60 percent of independents. Nearly two in three voters oppose cuts to Head Start.

Sheila Arias of Durham, N.C. says that when she lost her job as an interpreter, she couldn't afford to keep her daughter, Jaslene, who was two at the time, in daycare. Arias went to the local Children's Developmental Services Agency for help, and was told that Jaslene would probably qualify for Early Head Start.

The agency helped Arias apply, and three weeks later, her daughter was accepted into the program. Jaslene has developmental disabilities, and Arias says that the teachers "offered her important structure and a regular daily routine" that, in addition to therapy, have helped with managing her special needs.

Jaslene will start kindergarten next year, and Arias says that Early Head Start is now helping her with her younger child, who is showing signs of a disorder that also affects his sister.

Democrats and Republicans recently reached a budget deal that would restore some of the funding to programs that were affected by sequestration. First Focus reports that if sequestration relief were to be applied proportionally to children's programs, about \$3.6 billion federal dollars would be restored to these initiatives in 2014, including \$1.8 billion for K-12 education and \$370 million for Head Start.

The poll found that when voters are asked to prioritize deficit reduction or protecting investments in children, 31 percent of respondents place a higher priority on investments in children and 41 percent rate the two options as equally important. "Voters reject what they consider a false choice," says Walz. "What this shows is that 72 percent of voters reject that the way to reduce the budget deficit is to cut children's programs."

"Congress has struggled to prove responsive to the concerns of the American people," he says. "What the current deal does, in a nutshell, is create an opportunity for Congress to undo some of the damage done in this budget year."

(This article is part of ongoing coverage by New America Media on the Affordable Care Act,

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