

Children Need to Fly, Too, to End Sequestration

Written by Marian Wright Edelman
Wednesday, 08 May 2013 00:00



Anyone despairing that Congress can't get anything done should note last week's swift vote to get furloughed air traffic controllers back to work. Congress can move very quickly and efficiently when it wants to and when its own comfort and that of constituents well-off enough to fly was affected.

Reduced unemployment benefits, children dropped suddenly from Head Start programs, poor mothers and babies losing food supplements, teacher layoffs, and cancelled meal deliveries for seniors didn't move them—but airport delays as members headed out of town for their April recess were apparently unacceptable.

Poor 3- and 4-year-olds denied the early child development services that can help them succeed in life may not be able to call Congress, but we need to speak out for them to stop those cuts too. We know that eliminating a child's early education investments now will increase his chance of going to prison later by 39 percent. And paying for that prison will cost all of us nearly three times more a year than it would have cost to provide him a quality early learning foundation to get ready for school. So I hope parents and grandparents and all of us will tell our members of Congress to "be careful what you cut" because some cuts create scars that last a

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lifetime and public costs that drive up budget as well as human capital deficits.

When Congress flies back next week they must stop the unjust across the board cuts imposed by sequestration. And the needed fix isn't just moving around cuts from one part of a federal agency to another as Congress did with the Federal Aviation Administration (FAA). Sequestration is dangerous policy that is hurting many children who are homeless and hungry, the unemployed, seniors, and others across the country. This slow death by a thousand indiscriminate cuts is hindering our still sluggish economic recovery. And while the jobs numbers released this week were better than expected, millions of Americans are unemployed and have been for long periods of time. Much greater improvements are needed with greater urgency. Sequestration must be repealed so that people already suffering in multiple ways from economic downturn are not hit further while they are already down.

The Coalition on Human Needs and others have been keeping close track of the impact of sequestration in local communities and have provided just a few examples of sequestration's harmful effects:

In Michigan, id="mce_marker"50,000 in projected federal cuts to the Head Start program in Menominee, Delta, and Schoolcraft counties are forcing the closure of the program up to three and a half weeks early for 254 children and their families.

College Station, Texas's Head Start and Early Head Start will eliminate a 20-day summer

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instruction program because of a \$99,000 sequestration cut. They will also reduce staff training, field trips, and food and eliminate child care for parents participating in training sessions.

In Kentucky, the Jefferson County Public Schools are losing about \$6 million in federal funding and projected cuts to Title I programs for low-income, special education, and Head Start children which could affect 300 teacher and staff positions, including reading tutors and other intervention specialists who help these children catch up.

The Lebanon school district in Pennsylvania has a \$334,000 shortfall from federal funding cuts for Title I schools even after the state provided extra funding to make up some of the sequestration cuts. School officials expect to lay off 20 elementary school teacher aides and will not fill vacancies for a literacy instructor and a 5th grade teacher. These cuts are on top of 22 positions eliminated in 2011.

Starting April 28, about 400,000 long-term unemployed workers in California received a 17.7 percent cut in their federal unemployment benefits because of sequestration. The average weekly unemployment check of \$297 in California faces an average payment cut of \$52 a week. In February, California was tied with Nevada and Mississippi as having the nation's highest unemployment rate at 9.6 percent.

Faced with a nine percent sequestration cut, the Henry County Senior Center in western Illinois has shortened its transportation services for seniors by two hours per day, making it harder for

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them to schedule doctor appointments and food shopping. Worse, the center will need to cut back on some meal deliveries to homebound seniors according to Cassandra Schmoll, the center's executive director.

In New Orleans, a 17 percent decrease to the housing services budget meant the city was forced to rescind about 700 recently awarded Section 8 housing vouchers. According to officials, there were already 13,250 names on the waiting list.

Approximately 3,400 AmeriCorps volunteers are expected to be cut, including 600 of the 8,000 AmeriCorps VISTA volunteers, the service program designed to fight poverty. More than 1,600 seniors will lose Senior Companions who help prepare meals, drive them to medical appointments, and fill in for family caregivers. And 9,000 children will not be helped by Foster Grandparents who receive small stipends for mentoring youths in schools and juvenile justice and other community facilities.

These cuts are being or will be repeated in communities, counties, and states across our country along with cuts to legal aid societies, services for individuals with disabilities, and more.

While needlessly hurting those who need assistance most in this challenging economy, sequestration is also needlessly harming our national economic health by cutting benefits and jobs and causing furloughs.

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The Congressional Budget Office, the nonpartisan arbiter of budgetary impacts, estimated in February that sequestration will reduce gross domestic product growth in 2013 by 30 percent compared to what would have happened without the indiscriminate cuts. This is expected to cost the nation 750,000 jobs.

While today's jobs numbers help assuage fears of a sharp economic slowdown, the fact is that with 11.7 million Americans unemployed in April of 2013 and an unemployment rate of 7.5 percent—the 52nd consecutive month of unemployment at or above 7.5 percent—any policy that cuts jobs is a policy we cannot afford.

Our Congressional leaders need to make better choices but enough citizens must demand they do so. Don't we want to remove more people from the unemployment rolls? Don't we want to prevent more children from falling deeper into poverty and further behind? Instead of indiscriminate cuts under the guise of deficit reduction, we need a comprehensive strategy that includes a mix of investing in job creation and early childhood development and learning supports; tax increases for the wealthiest; and spending cuts to non-vulnerable groups to help strengthen the economy and meet the needs of children today and prepare for tomorrow's workforce and military and future economic growth.

Tomorrow is today, so contact your Representative and Senators and urge them to repeal sequestration, get about the real business of strengthening our economy, and to be careful what they cut.

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Marian Wright Edelman is president of the Children's Defense Fund whose Leave No Child Behind® mission is to ensure every child a Healthy Start, a Head Start, a Fair Start, a Safe Start and a Moral Start in life and successful passage to adulthood with the help of caring families and communities. For more information go to www.childrensdefense.org.