

Who Will Get the Lifeboats?

Potential SSI Cuts Target Nation's Vulnerable

By Sarah Walz

There used to be an expression that went, "Women and children first." The idea was that in a disaster, those who were weakest or most vulnerable should receive whatever assistance is available — lifeboats or ladders or speedy access to the nearest exit.

Feminism dispelled the myth women are innately weaker. Some of us gals of the right age and constitution can tread water, fight a fire, or put bread on the table along with the men. But age and infirmity, injury, disability, and other circumstances of life make escaping a sinking ship or simply surviving day-to-day more difficult for others.

In a civilized society, and a wealthy one such as ours, you might think that compassion for the least fortunate or less able would be unquestioned.

Not so. Many services that help the less fortunate have been targeted for cuts during congressional budget negotiations, including Supplemental Security Income (SSI). Though removed from the budget resolution that passed last week, SSI cuts still could happen. House Ways and Means Committee Chairman Bill Thomas said in a news conference that he intended to look at the House's previous budget plan that ordered \$18.7 billion in cuts from programs under his committee's jurisdiction, which would include SSI.

If you are young, lucky and healthy you probably don't know what SSI is. SSI was signed into law by President Nixon — not a much admired president, but apparently a fellow who was not utterly lacking in compassion. Nixon received bipartisan support for the bill in a Congress that was then controlled by Democrats. So we might call them compassionate guys and gals all around. Those were the days!

SSI was designed to aid low-income blind, disabled and elderly people by helping pay for food, clothing and shelter. The program, which is administered by the Social Security Administration, requires a means test for eligibility, including a limit on current assets. That means you only qualify for SSI only if you are blind, disabled, or both elderly and

poor. The money comes from the general budget, the taxes most of us pay — not our Social Security contributions.

Seven million Americans receive SSI (that's around 2 percent of the population). Of those, 43,000 are fellow Iowans. More than 80 percent of those Iowans are people with disabilities, the rest are elderly. SSI recipients aren't getting rich. The maximum monthly benefit for an individual living alone is just \$579 — 25 percent below the poverty line. You see, SSI is designed to work with other benefits like Food Stamps and Medicaid to lift these folks above the poverty line. Qualifying for SSI helps to establish eligibility for Medicaid.

In general, the argument for cutting spending is that the cost of government programs places a strain on the economy. In theory, this money could otherwise be used to create jobs, invest in the stock market or in capital for industry, promote entrepreneurship, etc. Those are good things, and even more so if you subscribe to the notion that a rising tide lifts all boats.

In essence, what those who propose cuts to SSI are saying is that the blind, the severely disabled, and the elderly who have found themselves in the added situation of being in poverty are a drag on the economy and we need to cut them off like so much dead weight. This seems to ignore the fact that in order to benefit from the rising tide of a healthy economy you must first be in a boat, or at least have access to a boat.

For a society that would begrudge such minimal aid to those who are least able to fend for themselves, an appropriate motto might be “sink or swim.” So much for compassion!

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Sarah Walz is a research associate for the Iowa Policy Project, a nonpartisan, nonprofit research organization based in Mount Vernon. Iowa Policy Project reports are available to the public, free of charge, on the web at www.iowapolicyproject.org.