
Greenstein: Trump's Reorganization Proposals Affecting Low-Income Programs Raise Serious Concerns

We should evaluate President Trump's reorganization proposals affecting nutrition and low-income assistance programs in light of his actions to date affecting low-income Americans. In that light, we question whether the plan is largely an attempt to bolster efforts to cut basic assistance for millions of low- and moderate-income Americans.

This proposal follows the President's 2019 budget, which called for taking away health care, food assistance, and housing from millions of struggling American families. This Administration has taken executive action that will increase the number of people without affordable health care coverage, has tried (unsuccessfully) to ignore regulations promoting fair housing, and has pulled back regulations that would ensure more workers receive overtime pay for extra hours they work. Rather than developing proposals to reduce poverty and expand opportunity, strengthen job training, expand health coverage, and the like, the Administration appears more interested in moving programs around on an organizational chart — and in ways that can further its goal of cutting many of them.

Indeed, the proposal to rename the Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) the “Department of Health and Public Welfare” appears calculated, at least in part, to use a term often employed to malign efforts to assist struggling families. The term is misleading in this context. “Welfare” is commonly understood to refer to cash assistance for very poor families, many of whom aren't currently employed, while HHS administers a far broader set of services that include child care assistance for working families, Head Start to help young children prepare for school, child support enforcement that collects child support from noncustodial parents and delivers it to children to whom it's owed, and community-based assistance for seniors and people with disabilities so they can remain as independent as possible.

In addition, moving federal nutrition programs from the Agriculture Department to HHS would strip their longstanding connection with agriculture policy, weakening the traditional, bipartisan coalition that supports these programs. This is of particular concern. The nutrition assistance programs have largely eradicated the severe malnutrition that was prevalent in parts of the United States a half century ago, before these programs were created or expanded.

Of further concern, the proposal calls for the establishment of a “Council on Public Assistance” consisting of federal agencies that administer assistance programs. The proposal indicates that this council would have “statutory authority to set certain cross-program policies, including on uniform work requirements.” The Administration has pursued new requirements that would take away health care, nutrition, and housing assistance from individuals unable to meet rigid and poorly designed work requirements and appears to be seeking a new tool to move this agenda. This

proposal raises the concern that the Administration is seeking broad new executive authority to revamp basic elements of programs without congressional input.

Finally, executing this plan effectively would be costly and time consuming, and would demand a high degree of administrative acumen. This Administration has yet to demonstrate that it has the capacity to do this well and in a manner that improves — rather than weakens — critical help for children, seniors, people with disabilities, and other families in need.

#

The Center on Budget and Policy Priorities is a nonprofit, nonpartisan research organization and policy institute that conducts research and analysis on a range of government policies and programs. It is supported primarily by foundation grants.