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Lloyd Doggett

The banner includes a portrait of Lloyd Doggett, a signature, and three small images: a church, a field of blue flowers, and the U.S. House of Representatives seal.

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U.S. Rep. Doggett on Improving Temporary Assistance for Needy Families

Washington, DC — Today, U.S. Rep. Lloyd Doggett (D-Texas), Ranking Member of the Human Resources Subcommittee, discussed the need to improve the Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) Program to better address poverty in America:

Please click here <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BTmEgQaoji0> to watch Rep. Doggett's remarks

[Remarks as prepared for delivery follow below]:

Mr. Speaker, I believe in the value of work. I voted for the 1996 welfare law because I supported moving people from welfare to work. Our laws should foster job creation. In this important effort, today's bill is not so much malevolent as irrelevant to those poor people.

Because of the way the TANF program is currently structured, only about one percent of the working-age adults across America who are poor are participating in TANF work activities.

To most living at the bottom of the economic ladder, this bill and this program are largely irrelevant. Whether or not waivers are granted will make no difference in the lives of the overwhelming number, who are struggling to find a good job and climb out of poverty.

And today, a higher proportion of our population lives near the bottom of that economic ladder than when welfare reform was enacted. In 2011, the poverty rate was 15% or 46.2 million Americans. The census bureau estimates about 350,000 of these individuals are in the San Antonio area.

Amidst this rising poverty, we have the lowest level of poor children receiving direct cash assistance from TANF in almost 50 years. In my home state of Texas, only about one of every 20 poor children receive any such TANF aid. And when they do get help, it's not very much.

Short term extensions like today's bill and its predecessors offer convenient political opportunities to reinforce old welfare Cadillac stereotypes and blame the poor for being poor. A previous extension focused on prohibiting any withdrawals of cash assistance at strip clubs, liquor stores, and casinos.

While I certainly didn't object to that restriction, it did not even attempt to address the core issue of how to get more Americans out of poverty. Nor does today's bill.

Poverty should be viewed as a major national problem to be resolved, together, not a weapon to be used for scoring political points. It's the poverty of cooperation on solving the bigger problems, a poverty of balance that is resulting in so many children and their parents seeing so little progress.

If you evaluate how TANF has operated over the last decade and a half based upon the number of poor people to whom it denies any assistance, it has been a great success. But if you evaluate it based upon the number of poor people, who have been able to utilize it to secure a good, long term job, at a livable wage, its success is, at best, spotty.

I think that the responsibility for those failures is shared by many: states who did not do their part, an Administration that did not come forward with its own plan, and Republicans here in Congress who have continued to build on old false stereotypes as this TANF reauthorization has been considered.

The only focus of our latest short-term extension has been on attempting to limit the Administration and giving the states added flexibility.

In my opinion, in some areas, they have too much flexibility already and basically use TANF as a slush fund to fund some of the social services that they should be providing themselves, and were in some cases providing themselves, to assist those who were poor to move into the workforce and to develop better skills.

I believe that today's attempt to restrict state authority to strengthen welfare to work initiatives totally contradicts what is happening this very moment with a blockheaded Republican budget that would block grant unbridled authority to the states to weaken health care.

As to whether States need additional flexibility with regards to TANF, there's some good argument that they should, but what we really should be doing is a broad reauthorization of this program, looking at whether it fulfills its original purpose and whether we can make it work better for the taxpayer and for those that it is designed to provide temporary assistance to.

I think all of us want to see fewer people receive assistance because they found a good job, but this is no indication that these folks that are not receiving assistance found a good job, and no one should consider it a success when fewer and fewer very poor children and families have access to a program meant to serve them.

Instead of focusing on waivers and simply waving good-bye to the many people in America who are economically disadvantaged and want a better opportunity, who want some hope to get out of poverty, let's try to do more to assist those people in more productive, long-term programs.

Mr. Speaker, we have a lot of work to do to improve TANF and I wish that had been the focus of this legislation, and the focus of more attention from the Administration.

We should measure the success of TANF on getting recipients into jobs, rather than simply measuring how many have been denied assistance.

The TANF program needs to be part of the puzzle in addressing poverty in our country, instead of the broken link that it has become. Our focus should be on helping people find work, rather than trying to perpetuate myths about welfare queens.

We need to conduct a thorough and careful review of more than just the work requirements to help make TANF satisfy its original objective.

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