

POVERTY AND ITS IMPACTS ON
AMERICAN FAMILIES

The SPEAKER pro tempore (Mr. CURBELO of Florida). Under the Speaker's announced policy of January 6, 2015, the gentlewoman from California (Ms. LEE) is recognized for 60 minutes as the designee of the minority leader.

GENERAL LEAVE

Ms. LEE. Mr. Speaker, I ask unanimous consent that all Members may have 5 legislative days in which to revise and extend their remarks and insert extraneous material on the subject of this Special Order.

The SPEAKER pro tempore. Is there objection to the request of the gentlewoman from California?

There was no objection.

Ms. LEE. Mr. Speaker, first, I want to thank my friend and colleague from New Jersey, Congresswoman BONNIE WATSON COLEMAN, for her tireless work on so many issues, and for allowing us to use the Congressional Progressive Caucus' time tonight to organize this Special Order on poverty and its impacts on American families.

Also, I would like to recognize my friend and colleague from Missouri, and thank our cochair of the Congressional Black Caucus' Poverty and Economy Task Force, Congressman CLEAVER, for his leadership on poverty, opportunity, housing, and so many issues that he cares about and has been a champion about for so many years.

Also, to our colleague and our good friend and whip, Mr. HOYER, his unwavering commitment is very evident in making poverty a priority for this body.

Also, to Leader PELOSI, I want to thank her and recognize her for her commitment to the most vulnerable, and for reminding us constantly that 20 percent of America's children continue to live below the poverty line.

So this evening, I rise as the chair of the Democratic Whip's Task Force on Poverty, Income Inequality, and Opportunity, and cochair of our Congressional Black Caucus' Task Force on Poverty and the Economy to call on all of our colleagues, and our country, really, to refocus our efforts on programs and policies in funding that help lift Americans out of poverty, but also to remember that there is a safety net that has to be preserved until we can do just that: People want to work; people want opportunity.

I invite all of our colleagues to join us tonight in creating a national strategy to eradicate poverty once and for all.

Mr. Speaker, I am going to hold my remarks and yield to my friend and colleague from Ohio (Ms. FUDGE), former chair of the Congressional Black Caucus and member of the Education Committee and the Ag Committee. She has been, consistently, since she has been in Congress, and before she came to Congress, worked and spoke on behalf of the most vulnerable in our country.

Ms. FUDGE. Mr. Speaker, I thank the gentlewoman for yielding.

I just want to say that there is no one in this Congress who works harder and puts in more time trying to find a way to come back and eradicate poverty than BARBARA LEE. It is my pleasure and my privilege to work with you every day. I have learned so much from you, and I just want you to continue to do the people's work, and I appreciate it.

Mr. Speaker, I rise to address a topic that many of us know far too well, and that is poverty. I see its impact on the people of the 11th Congressional District every day.

My district has some of the Nation's most impoverished cities. The overall poverty rate is 28 percent. Out of the 435 Congressional districts in the United States, my district is one of the top 20 poorest districts in America.

Nearly 200,000 of my constituents live in poverty. I see and talk to poor people every day. Mothers and fathers without jobs, families with little to no access to healthy food or adequate housing, and children—yes, Mr. Speaker, children—who are in overcrowded classrooms with outdated textbooks.

Poverty is the source of our Nation's most persistent social and economic issues. It permeates our entire society and has victimized too many Americans for far too long.

We don't need another committee hearing on hunger or poverty to tell us what we already know. We know what the problems are and how to address them.

My colleagues and I have been proactive in finding solutions to eradicate poverty in this, the wealthiest country in the world. I have introduced bills supporting initiatives to feed children and families, fought to protect safety-net programs, and insisted Congress develop policies that create jobs that pay a living wage.

The majority in this House has not been a willing participant. Some Members believe that if you don't work, you are lazy. Others believe that poor people are looking for handouts.

Let me be clear, Mr. Speaker, none of that is true. The people I have spoken to are not looking for a handout. They simply need a hand up, a job to take care of their families and pay their bills. The dignity of work is what we all want.

□ 1745

We must put aside politics and pass policies that give everyone a fair chance at the American Dream. When we do not work together, our constituents suffer.

FDR said: "The test of our progress is not whether we add more to the abundance of those who have much; it is whether we provide enough for those who have too little."

We must act now.

Ms. LEE. I thank the gentlewoman for her very powerful statement and for, once again, her leadership.

I want to remind this body that she has been such an active advocate on behalf of those needing that safety net of SNAP and food stamp benefits and for making sure that people have the right to eat in this country regardless of how much money they have.

Again, I thank Congresswoman FUDGE.

Mr. Speaker, I yield to the gentlewoman from Connecticut (Ms. DELAURO), the ranking member on the Appropriation Committee's Labor, Health and Human Services, Education, and Related Agencies Subcommittee, on which I am honored to serve. Every day she is a champion on behalf of all of those who we are discussing tonight in terms of making sure they have an opportunity to live the American Dream.

Ms. DELAURO. I thank my colleague, Congresswoman LEE, for organizing this effort this evening. It isn't just this evening. Every day, 24 hours a day, in her heart of hearts, she knows what her mission is here. That is to make sure that there is a better life for our families and to make sure that there is a better life for our children. It is an honor to work with her on these issues.

Mr. Speaker, there is a saying that the strength of a nation starts with the strength of its families. The child tax credit was created in 1997 to help working families afford the expense of raising children. As we all know only too well, the cost of child-rearing goes up every single year.

According to the latest figures from the Department of Agriculture, the average two-parent, low-income household will spend more than \$218,000 per child up to the age of 18. Middle-income families will spend even more. We in this body have an obligation to do what we can to help households cope with these mounting costs.

Today the child tax credit helps improve the lives of some 38 million families. According to the Center on Budget and Policy Priorities, in 2013, the child tax credit alone lifted 3.1 million people out of poverty, including 1.7 million children. The child tax credit, together with the earned income tax credit, lift more children out of poverty than any other Federal program.

Thanks to the 2009 expansion of the credit, a household with two children and one full-time minimum wage earner receives a total credit of about \$1,812 per year. That is a real help to families who might otherwise struggle just to make ends meet. Unfortunately, each year, the value of that credit declines with inflation as the cost of raising a child increases each year.

In the last big tax deal, Congress made the estate tax cut both permanent and indexed to inflation. The beneficiaries of the estate tax are one-tenth of a percent of the people in this Nation. It strictly benefits the children of the wealthy. I don't want to deny them benefits, but I want us to consider the children in low-income families.

Congress should do the same for working families with the child tax credit. We should provide a cost-of-living increase as costs go up for raising children. By the end of this decade, the simple measure would save an estimated 750,000 children from falling back into poverty.

Another statistic, my colleague from California, is that there are about 7,450 estates in the United States that benefit from the estate tax. If we indexed—provided a cost of living—for the child tax credit, 19 million children could be lifted out of poverty. Where is our balance? Where is our sense of right and wrong?

The value of indexing our anti-poverty programs cannot be understated. Because Social Security benefits are indexed, the rate of seniors in poverty has been relatively stable, at close to 10 percent for the last four decades. Because SNAP benefits—food stamp benefits—were re-indexed in the 2008 farm bill, families saw the value of their benefits stabilize.

The biggest economic challenge facing our country today is that far too many hardworking people are still not earning enough to make ends meet. Middle class wages are stagnant or are in decline. We need to do whatever we can to support working people.

No family in our country should have to struggle to raise a child. By indexing the value of the child tax credit—providing the cost of living—and making the expansion permanent, we would help millions of parents afford these costs by giving them a permanent tax break, which helps families and does not lose its value over time.

This year, at this time, we should reaffirm our Nation's support for its hardworking families. We should provide them with the same benefit that we provided the children of the 1 percent when we made the estate tax exemption permanent and indexed it to inflation.

The fact of the matter is that the families that we are talking about—and these are not my words, but those of Economist Mark Zandi, who was the economist for JOHN MCCAIN.

When he was asked what would be most stimulative in our economy, he talked about food stamps because people spend that money. He talked about extending unemployment benefits because people spend that money right away and engage and drive our economy. He also talked about the refundable tax credits, like the earned income tax credit and the child tax credit, because people will spend that money and use it to drive our economy.

I want to say a thank you to my colleague from California. It is an important discussion. I thank the gentlewoman for organizing it and for always being there to make sure that those of us who serve here do not forget and that we keep our focus where it should be, on the sons and the daughters and the children of working families, of low-income families, and of middle class families.

Ms. LEE. I thank the gentlewoman from Connecticut for that very poignant statement and for her tremendous leadership each and every day.

Also, I want to thank the gentlewoman for laying out what the choices are in terms of our priorities and the fact that we know how to eliminate, really, poverty if we just have the will to. So I thank the gentlewoman for laying it out.

Mr. Speaker, I yield to my friend and colleague from New Jersey, Congresswoman WATSON COLEMAN, who each and every day is so consistent with her votes and her voice in terms of doing what is right for children, for the American people, for her constituency.

Once again, I thank her for giving us the time this evening to talk about poverty because that certainly is a priority of hers. With the Progressive Caucus, she has just hit the ground running and has really captured this moment to talk about the issues that the American people care about.

Mrs. WATSON COLEMAN. I thank the gentlewoman for yielding and for organizing, coordinating, this opportunity for this discussion. I thank the gentlewoman because she is the most vibrant and is the strongest voice for those who are the most vulnerable in our communities across this Nation.

Mr. Speaker, poverty isn't just a problem in America. It is a crisis. We are not doing enough about it.

In September, the Census Bureau released the newest data on the number of Americans living below the poverty line. The report further confirms what my colleagues and I have been trying to get the majority in this body to acknowledge, and that is that poverty may be one of the greatest challenges facing our Nation right now.

The median household income stayed the same. The poverty rate remained the same as well. Women and minorities did worse than the average. Overall, nearly 15 percent of American families—almost 47 million people—earn less than \$24,000 a year.

The fact that terrifies me the most is that the way we calculate the poverty rate has several inherent flaws, and when you dive deeper into the numbers on this issue, you come up with a picture of an America that is deeply broken.

The poverty rate is just a snapshot of a single year. Last year, for example, 22 percent of all children lived in families that fell below the poverty line, something we should be embarrassed by in not devoting more resources to fixing.

But childhood lasts more than 1 year, and when you look at the span of childhood, you find that nearly 40 percent of our children have spent at least 1 year in poverty, double what we see in a single year. We have more children who are living in poverty than in most developed nations.

That alone should serve as a wake-up call to all of my colleagues on the other side of the aisle who so fre-

quently invoke the need to protect our children's futures when they are debating bills here on the floor.

In case that is not enough, here is another indicator: The number of people who are living in high poverty areas—better known as slums—doubled between 2000 and 2013. That is a very big deal because living in an impoverished community fundamentally changes the futures of children.

Study after study has found that they are more likely to be poor later in life, less likely to achieve in school, less likely to find jobs, less likely to achieve the milestones that are necessary to change their trajectories, like graduating from high school and attending college, and they are more likely to end up in one of our penal institutions.

The biggest problem, Mr. Speaker, is that we are not doing enough to fix poverty. In fact, in some cases, we are making it worse. Take housing assistance programs, for example.

We leave it up to the States to dole out funds for low-income housing programs. These States then place the overwhelming majority of low-income developments in already low-income areas, depriving those families of quality schools, of access to jobs, and of a variety of social services that more affluent communities benefit from.

At home in New Jersey, I have fought hard against just such discrimination with legislation that required all communities to build affordable homes. We need the same kind of initiatives at the Federal level, laws that will ensure affordable housing exists beyond urban and lower income boundaries, that will give working families access to child care, that will lower the cost of college, and that will increase wages.

We also need to think about what it really means every time we deny a cost-of-living increase or refuse to give Federal workers the pay they deserve. Groceries still cost more every year. Rent still goes up. Bus fare gets higher. We are asking them to do more with less because we are unwilling to enact policies that actually work. That is flat out wrong.

Mr. Speaker, for many of the challenges facing our Nation, we have yet to find a clear solution. Poverty isn't one of those. With the willpower to act, we could eradicate poverty and build a stronger future for generations to come.

I thank the gentlewoman from California.

Ms. LEE. I thank the gentlewoman from New Jersey for her very eloquent statement, but also for laying out a pathway out of poverty.

It is comprehensive. We have to do this together in an integrated approach. Whether it is child care, whether it is housing, whether it is SNAP benefits, whether it is higher education, whether it is K-12, Congresswoman WATSON COLEMAN has laid out the intricacies of what we mean when we talk about pathways out of poverty.

I thank the gentlewoman very much for taking us to the next level in terms of how we need to really view our strategies.

Mr. Speaker, I now yield to the gentleman from Maryland (Mr. HOYER), our Democratic whip, who has really insisted that we, as a body, look at how we develop our pathways out of poverty within the context of our Task Force on Poverty, Income Inequality, and Opportunity, because it takes opportunity to help lift people out of poverty.

Again, I thank the gentleman from Maryland for making this a priority for this body and for continuing to beat the drum on behalf of those who have the least.

Mr. HOYER. I thank the gentlewoman for yielding.

No one more than Congresswoman BARBARA LEE in this House has been focused on how we lift those in poverty out of poverty and into the middle class.

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Of course, as she so well says, it will be good for those in poverty, but it will also be good for all the rest of us. They will help build a better economy. They will help grow jobs, and they will help America be stronger.

Mr. Speaker, I am honored to join my friend, Chairwoman BARBARA LEE of the Democratic Whip's Task Force on Poverty, Income Inequality, and Opportunity, for this Special Order.

I also want to thank Chairman CLEAVER of the CBC's Poverty and Economy Task Force for the work that it has done in this area.

Mr. Speaker, poverty is bad for your health. Poverty is bad for your mental health. Poverty is bad for children. Poverty is bad for families.

More than 50 years after President Johnson declared unconditional War on Poverty, 46 million Americans are still struggling in poverty. That is not to say we haven't made some progress. There are programs we have adopted.

Frankly, Medicare is a tremendous poverty program. Our seniors are better off, and far less of them are in poverty because of Medicare. Medicaid is a critical program to make sure that those who cannot afford it are, nevertheless, given health care, which is important for all of us to have healthy citizens with whom we deal on a daily basis.

Ours, Mr. Speaker, may be the wealthiest nation on Earth, but we can best measure America's economic success not by how many are at the very top, but how few are stuck at the bottom of the economic ladder. By that measure, we have a long way to go to fulfill America's promise as a land of equal opportunity and of success.

Even in 2015, the lines between rich and poor trace the old divides of race and background, with 29 percent of Native Americans, 26 percent of African Americans, and 23 percent of Latinos living in poverty.

Poverty also strikes, of course, our rural communities. In fact, in many respects, there is more poverty in our rural communities than in our cities and urban communities. It is more visible in our cities because they are aggregated; although, we ought not to forget that literally—as I just mentioned about minorities—millions and millions of nonminorities struggle in poverty every day. Poverty strikes children at a higher rate, unfortunately, one in five children in America, as our leader says.

The task force we launched and which BARBARA LEE chairs has been working hard to raise awareness in Congress of these very real and very difficult challenges of poverty in America and to provoke policies that help alleviate suffering in the short term while working to eradicate poverty over the long term.

Speaker RYAN has raised poverty as an issue on which he is focused, and he has visited areas of poverty in our country. We could recognize poverty. We can visit those in poverty. But what it is important to do, Mr. Speaker, and what BARBARA LEE is leading us to do, is to adopt policies that almost eliminate, reduce, and empower those in poverty.

The number one rule on the War on Poverty, of course, ought to be first, do no harm. This means making sure that we refrain from disinvesting in the critical programs that serve the poor and help millions stave off hunger, homelessness, and disease. Mr. Speaker, we ought to have those criteria in mind when we consider the appropriations bills, tax bills, and other policies that affect our people.

Thankfully, the recent bipartisan budget deal prevented the return of sequestration's severe and painful automatic cuts, which would have disproportionately harmed the most vulnerable in our economy. Now Congress has a responsibility to follow that up by passing an omnibus and avert a shutdown.

However, not doing further harm is not enough. Congress has a responsibility first and foremost to help create jobs that put Americans back to work and enable them to rise out of poverty and, as Congressman COLEMAN WATSON indicated, to make sure that, when we ask people and give people the opportunity to work, we value that work and pay them a living wage.

We cannot enable people to rise out of poverty if it keeps lurching from one manufactured crisis—when I say “it,” our policies here in Congress on budgets, on debt, on investment, and on taxes—to the next. If we lurch from one crisis to another, we will not be able to succeed in enabling and empowering those currently in poverty. We need to work together to invest in education, workforce training, and innovation to make our workforce more competitive and open doors of opportunity for those looking to get hired.

We also, Mr. Speaker, need to expand assistance for housing and nutrition as

well as access to health care, especially for children. Poverty need not be a cycle and should not be a cycle from generation to generation. That is debilitating certainly for them, but we ought to all recognize it is debilitating for us, our communities, and our country.

The promise of America has always been that this cycle can be broken. That is what we think about America. Even if you are born in circumstances that are tough, if you work hard and play by the rules, you can rise above it. We need to make sure that we give them that opportunity.

We need to take steps to make sure that hard work pays off, that those who have jobs can earn enough not only to get by, but to get ahead. This means making child care more affordable for working parents, enacting paid leave to care for sick loved ones, and raising the minimum wage.

The new Speaker, Mr. RYAN, has indicated he takes very seriously the issue of poverty, as I said. I hope we can work together to address that problem in a serious, responsible, and effective manner. Not to do so would be a grave disservice to the future of our country and its people.

One area he has suggested we might find agreement is in expanding the earned income tax credit to childless adults, which could lift an additional half a million Americans out of poverty. In addition to that, we ought to index the ITC, we ought to index the child tax credit, and we ought to index the opportunity tax credit so that we can empower and enable those who are working, those who have children that we want well-cared for and safe to be more productive citizens.

I thank, again, Chairwoman BARBARA LEE and all of the members on the Democratic Whip's Task Force on Poverty, Income Equality, and Opportunity and the CBC's Poverty and Economy Task Force, led by my good friend Representative CLEAVER, for all the work they are doing to wage this War on Poverty with the determination and purpose this challenge requires.

I thank the gentlewoman for her leadership.

Ms. LEE. I thank our whip for that very important statement.

A couple of things I would like to just comment on, Mr. HOYER, that you mentioned. In terms of “first, do no harm,” a couple of years ago—and this was with bipartisan support—in all of our appropriations bills, we put in language that said that we will do nothing in this legislation that would increase poverty. We did that on a bipartisan basis. Also, when Speaker RYAN was the chair of the Budget Committee, we talked about poverty and tried to determine a way to put into legislation—it was our job to develop a national strategy to eliminate poverty.

So what you are raising tonight I think is very important in terms of a window of opportunity for us to work

in a bipartisan way to begin to really do this in terms of reducing and eliminating poverty for the 46 million people who deserve to live the American Dream. I think that this task force and yourself, really, with Speaker RYAN should be able to do this on behalf of the American people.

I yield to the gentleman from Maryland.

Mr. HOYER. Mr. Speaker, I certainly hope she is correct, and I believe she is absolutely correct that we can work in a bipartisan fashion. There is nobody in this House who wants to see people in poverty. We may have different views of how to achieve the objective of empowering all of our people to seize the opportunity and to be paid a living wage and to support themselves and their family in a way we want them supported. We can work together—I agree with the gentlewoman—in a bipartisan fashion on that issue. I thank her for her leadership in achieving that objective.

Ms. LEE. I yield to the gentlewoman from southern California (Ms. ROYBAL-ALLARD), my colleague, friend, and an individual whom I have known for many, many years who has been consistent over the years on behalf of supporting pathways out of poverty, the most vulnerable, our immigrants, our immigrant women, our children. Congresswoman LUCILLE ROYBAL-ALLARD serves on the Subcommittee on Labor, Health and Human Services, Education, and Related Agencies, which Ranking Member ROSA DELAURO serves on also. She has done unbelievable work on this subcommittee, again, being as consistent as she has ever been since I served with her in the nineties in the California Legislature.

Ms. ROYBAL-ALLARD. Mr. Speaker, I would like to focus on child poverty. Before I do, I would like to commend my colleague, Congresswoman BARBARA LEE, for her long and steadfast commitment to addressing the crisis of child poverty in our Nation.

According to the 2015 National Center for Children in Poverty report, in the United States, more than 16 million children live in families with incomes below the Federal poverty level. A new study by the Urban Institute found that almost 40 percent of all American children live in poverty for at least 1 year before they reach the age of 18.

America's children, who represent 23 percent of the U.S. population, make up over 32 percent of those living in poverty. Sadly, my home State of California is an example of this human tragedy. Today, 2.5 million Californians live in deep poverty, and 33 percent of them are children whose family income is less than \$12,000 a year. In my district alone, 37,000 children live in extreme poverty.

The harmful conditions associated with poverty include substandard housing, lack of nutrition, overcrowding, and exposure to violence, all of which can be toxic to a developing child's

brain. Research tells us that, even when experienced for a short period of time, many of the negative effects of living in poverty stay with children for the rest of their lives. This includes higher rates of health and developmental problems, poor academic achievement, and lower rates of high school graduation.

In addition to the individual tragedy of child poverty, it ultimately impacts all of us, costing our country an estimated \$500 billion a year in lost earnings, higher crime-related costs, and increased health expenditures.

Unfortunately, there is a deep void in awareness and government accountability for the devastating crisis of child poverty in our country.

□ 1815

To address this lack of awareness, this year Congresswoman BARBARA LEE and I offered an amendment to the Labor HHS appropriations bill to fund a comprehensive National Academies of Science nonpartisan analysis of child poverty in the U.S.

Such a study would enable Congress to better understand the root causes of child poverty in our Nation. It would provide invaluable information on how Congress and service providers can improve the effectiveness and outcomes of poverty-related programs and services.

Fortunately, our appropriations colleagues on both sides of the aisle agreed with us and unanimously supported our amendment. We are grateful that it was included in the final House version of the FY16 Labor Health and Human Services bill.

Our amendment is now part of a package of bills being conferenced with Senate appropriators. It is our sincere hope that our child poverty amendment will be included in the conferenced Labor, Health, and Human Services appropriations bill for FY16.

Mr. Speaker, it is unconscionable that, in the United States, the richest country in the world, child poverty is destroying the lives of millions of our Nation's children. We must address this tragedy now. I thank Congresswoman LEE for organizing this Special Order and for her relentless leadership in the call to action to end child poverty in this country.

Ms. LEE. I want to thank the gentlewoman from Los Angeles, California, for her very powerful statement, but also once again for her tremendous leadership on the Committee on Appropriations and in her district on so many issues, especially relating to children. It would never happen if it were not for Congresswoman LUCILLE ROYBAL-ALLARD on the subcommittee. Thank you so much.

Hopefully, our amendment will hold in the conference report. But, if it doesn't, it is certainly not because you haven't worked hard and have not been committed to reducing and eliminating childhood poverty. I am pretty confident that we are going to win this

one. Thank you again for being here with us tonight and for your leadership.

Mr. Speaker, I would like to come down and put some charts up in the well and speak so that the statistics will be very visible before the public as it relates to the poverty rates in the United States.

First, let me just say, Mr. HOYER, our whip, talked about the 50th anniversary this year of President Johnson's War on Poverty. Now, this War on Poverty included such initiatives as Medicare, Medicaid, Head Start, the Higher Education Act, and the Department of Housing and Urban Development. There was a very important immigration bill—you name it—50 years ago.

This legislation, the War on Poverty, really has helped to reduce our poverty rates in the United States. Poverty has fallen from 26 percent in 1967 to 15 percent in 2015. Yet, we have a long way to go. It is not time to end this War on Poverty.

Actually, it is time to increase our efforts to make sure that the 47 million people living in poverty have access to all of these initiatives that were begun 50 years ago that really have lifted families out of poverty and have prevented families from moving into poverty. That is very important to remember about this 50th year anniversary.

The Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program, for example, SNAP, that has kept nearly 5 million Americans, including 2.2 million children, out of poverty in 2014. That is why we do not want to see any more cuts to this program.

Social Security benefits kept 1.2 million children out of poverty in 2013. Medicaid kept nearly 3 million people out of poverty in 2014.

Programs beyond the War on Poverty, like the earned income tax credit and the child tax credit, which Congresswoman DELAURO and Whip HOYER spoke about, these two initiatives, these two policies and programs, have kept nearly 10 million Americans, including 5 million children, out of poverty in 2014 alone. These programs strengthen our economy, increase opportunity for families, and provide millions of Americans with pathways out of poverty.

We have tried to make sure that our Republican colleagues understand these facts and not gut these critical programs because they are extremely important. We do not need to continue to fund tax breaks and giveaways to corporations and the well-connected while so many people are still living below the poverty line.

Stealing aid to the poor and handing more to the rich is really shameful and utterly unacceptable. We need to come together to really begin to recognize that we have got to lift people out of poverty and create a level playing field so that everyone can have the opportunity to live the American Dream. Cuts to these programs not only cost

our government more money—the taxpayers, in the long run—but it is really morally wrong to cut these programs.

Now, as a former food stamp recipient myself and public assistance recipient, I know firsthand just how important these safety net programs are. I would not be here today if it were not for that lifeline, that bridge over troubled waters, that these types of programs extended to me when I was a single mother, on welfare, raising two amazing sons, trying to get my life together so that I could move on and take care of my family and live the American Dream.

Believe me, I know. No one wants to be on food stamps. No one. Everyone wants a good-paying job that allows them to provide for their family and contribute to society. They want to take care of their kids. There are bumps in the road, yes, and now the economy has turned around for many, but not for all.

That bridge over troubled waters is needed now more than ever. I hope that, in the negotiations in this omnibus bill, we are going to make sure we remember these people and not raid the programs that keep people out of poverty and provide a safety net. As Mr. HOYER said, let's do no harm in this bill and let's help people move into the middle class.

We must recommit ourselves to combating poverty and inequality once and for all. It really is a disgrace when you look at these charts, when you see the percentage of people living below the poverty line, and this is in the wealthiest and most powerful country in the world.

It is a challenge to all communities. Communities of color, of course, are disproportionately impacted and affected, but American Indians, Alaska Natives, African Americans, Latinos, Asian Americans, Asian Pacific Islanders, Whites living below the poverty line in Appalachia and rural America. There are people living in poverty all over the country.

I come from California. Close to 17 percent of the population of California, mind you, is living in poverty. That is almost 2 percentage points higher than the national average, and that is in California.

While many people believe that poverty only touches cities and urban communities, as our whip indicated, our rural communities continue to be plagued with persistent poverty while lacking many of the resources found in cities, such as public transit, food banks, and access to critical workforce training.

According to the United States Census Bureau, 85 percent of our Nation's persistent poverty counties, defined as 20 percent or more of a population living in poverty, are in rural America.

Mr. CLYBURN, our Democratic Assistant Leader, has laid out a formula for years—10, 20, 30—which would direct and target Federal resources to these counties and to these areas that would

lift people out of poverty. We need to really understand where people are and make sure that our tax dollars go to those communities to lift people out of poverty.

More than one-third of rural Americans and one in four rural children live in poverty in 2015. These statistics are appalling. Poverty touches our population that really needs help the most, including our children and our seniors.

In 2015, more than 6 million seniors—now, that is 15 percent of all people over 65 years of age—are living in poverty. Even worse, while children make up just 23 percent of the population in the United States, they account for one-third of all Americans living in poverty. That is one in five kids. That is just plain wrong.

I would like to inquire, Mr. Speaker. How much time do I have remaining?

The SPEAKER pro tempore. The gentlewoman from California has 15 minutes remaining.

Ms. LEE. I would like to in just a minute yield to my colleague from Florida (Ms. GRAHAM), who would like to take the floor and talk about poverty in her own community. She has been such a tremendous voice on eliminating poverty and working to lift those who live below the poverty line out of poverty.

We know that families around the country living on the minimum wage have to make choices each and every day. She knows that. She is here to speak to that. I really appreciate her presence tonight on the floor.

I yield now to the gentlewoman from Florida (Ms. GRAHAM).

Ms. GRAHAM. Congresswoman LEE, I really appreciate you inviting me and allowing me the opportunity to speak tonight on this very important subject.

I am incredibly grateful for the work you are doing to highlight this issue and end poverty in America. Thank you on behalf of my district and all the districts across the country.

Twelve of the 14 counties I represent are rural counties that face many unique challenges, like access to social services, access to quality education, and access to health care. All of these issues are complicated by a cycle of poverty. This is especially prevalent in areas like Gadsden County, where more than 26 percent of the population live in poverty.

It is unacceptable for one in every four Americans to live in poverty in any part of our country. We must do more to help rural families break the cycle of poverty and move into the middle class.

One program that is successfully working to do this is the United States Department of Agriculture's StrikeForce Initiative for Rural Growth and Opportunity. Since its inception in 2010, StrikeForce teams have collaborated with more than 500 community partners and public entities across 20 States to bring targeted assistance to rural areas experiencing chronic poverty.

StrikeForce efforts have helped direct over \$16 billion in investments to create jobs, build homes, feed kids, assist farmers, and conserve natural resources in the country's most economically challenged areas.

As the USDA considers expanding StrikeForce into more States, I urge them to bring this program to Florida, especially to north Florida and Gadsden County. Farmers in rural communities are the backbone of our State, and StrikeForce will help develop our economy, create jobs, and fight rural poverty.

Again, thank you, Congresswoman LEE, for bringing attention to this important issue. I look forward to working with you to end poverty across our country.

Ms. LEE. I want to thank the gentlewoman from Florida for that very important statement and for once again raising the issue of rural poverty and the StrikeForce and the fact that we know how to eliminate poverty.

We just need the political will to do that. I know your constituents are very proud of you, and you are waging a noble fight each and every day on their behalf. Thank you for being here this evening.

There are a couple more statistics which I would like to discuss for just a few minutes. That is the issue of raising the minimum wage. We know that raising the minimum wage is not only good for our hardworking families, but it also makes economic sense, too.

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According to the Economic Policy Institute, raising the minimum wage to \$12 an hour by 2020 would lift more than 35 million Americans out of poverty—that is just to \$12 an hour. But in many parts of the country, even \$12 is not sufficient. We are mounting campaigns around the country for \$15 an hour. In some communities and States, you can barely get by on \$15 an hour, but raising it to \$12 is a step forward. Just raising the minimum wage is a step forward.

So many poor people are working. They are part of the working poor. They are working two jobs, and they still have to rely on SNAP benefits, Medicaid, and Section 8 housing.

People who work should not be poor, and so we have got to have a living wage. We have got to raise the minimum wage and get to a living wage so that everyone in our country can live the American Dream, as we continue to say, and so that opportunity can be provided for everyone.

Some people are working two jobs and barely can make it with children because their wages are stagnant and they are just too low to be able to survive in this American society. So raising the minimum wage to a living wage is a critical strategy. It is a critical policy that this body should embrace and pass.

I yield to my colleague from Georgia Congressman JOHNSON, who has been a

steady voice on so many issues since he has been here in Congress, especially on behalf of the most vulnerable in our society: the poor and the working poor. His voice and his work has certainly been a major contributor in terms of our task force growing to over 100 members. Thank you again for being a member of the task force and for what you do each and every day.

Mr. JOHNSON of Georgia. Mr. Speaker, it is my honor and my privilege to serve alongside you, Congresswoman, with all of the bigness of your heart and the care that you have for people, particularly those who are on their way up. You don't have anything against those who are already in place and doing well, but your heart is constantly on display toward those who are less fortunate. I am just privileged and honored to join you in that quest.

Today has been a great day. This morning, we celebrated the 150th anniversary of the passage of the 13th Amendment abolishing slavery in America. And to think back 150 years and look at the 100 years it took from that point to get to the point where we could pass a Voting Rights Act here in America, and then from that 50-year point up to today to be addressed by an African American President of the United States shows what kind of values we have in this country, what kind of opportunities we have in this country.

And so I am just filled with great tidings during this holiday season; however, I am not carried off by the winds of prosperity that may have come to some of us while to others the winds of prosperity have passed us by for various reasons, despite all of the progress that we have made as a people.

As it stands now, Congresswoman, it is not a Black or White thing; it is a people thing. We have more Caucasian Americans living in poverty than we have African Americans. So poverty is not a discriminator when it comes to national origin, when it comes to race, or when it comes to sex.

The fact is we have more women living in poverty and we have more children living in poverty. There is nothing to be joyful about that. We have more elderly people falling into poverty today.

My heart cries out for Caucasian Americans between the ages of 45 and 60 who, studies show, are meeting an early and untimely death at their own hands—suicide. Also, alcoholism and drug abuse are ravaging that particular demographic, as well as liver disease and other chronic ailments.

It all, I would posit, stems from the sense of hopelessness that pervades the people at this particular time. We see all of the prosperity. We see the prosperity of the few, the top 1 percent. You can look at the top 10 percent and see the concentration of wealth in this country. You see it, you watch the TV, and you aspire for all of the goods that are displayed to you on TV, but yet there is a sense of hopelessness about

you being able to achieve that, despite the fact that you are working two and three jobs and still qualify for food stamps and other social services.

We are realizing that, despite the hard work and the effort, the playing field is not level and the game is skewed in favor of the few on top at the expense of the masses on the bottom, and so something is wrong with that picture. That is an imbalance that we need to correct. So that is why I am so happy to work on the Out of Poverty Caucus.

Some say, "Why try? It can never be done"; but I am one of those who say that, if we don't try, it won't be done. If we try, it can make a difference.

I think that with the proper people in place to make the policy decisions that we make here in Congress, there is so much that we can do to relieve poverty in this country and to offer opportunity for people who only want to work hard and play by the rules. They long for the day to return when they can look at their children and their grandchildren and rest assured knowing that the opportunities for them will be at least, if not greater than, those that existed for themselves.

And so our job is to make things better on the ground for people. Our mission is to help those who need help. There are always going to be some people who need it, and there is nothing wrong with helping somebody who needs help. In fact, that is what living is all about: serving your fellow man. That is why I am here. I know that is why you are here, and I am just happy to serve with you.

I would add that it has been 51 years since 1964 when President Lyndon B. Johnson launched the War on Poverty, an ambitious set of initiatives to increase access to education, spur job growth, and improve nutrition and health to our poorest Americans. Fifty-one years later, it is estimated that up to 45 million Americans live in poverty. In the greatest Nation on Earth, there are 45 million starving children, impoverished seniors, and families that struggle every day to obtain the bare necessities to survive.

I know how it feels because, for 1 week, I tried to exist on the food stamp challenge with you, Congresswoman, and that was tough. I got off of it after, I think, about 5 days. To try to exist on what we give the average food stamp recipient is quite tough.

In Georgia, 25 percent of the people who are 50 or older and whose income level is less than \$22,000 a year struggle with hunger. In my district, that is an important issue, because in DeKalb County, 10 percent of the people live below the poverty line, and the majority of those are children. In Rockdale County, it is 13 percent.

Ms. LEE. I thank the gentleman for his message of hope tonight and for reminding us of the fact that poverty does take its toll on the mental health and well-being of the human spirit.

I want to thank all of the Members who participated. I hope we can move

in a bipartisan fashion to address some of the major, major issues that this body knows that it can address if it so chooses.

Mr. Speaker, I yield back the balance of my time.

Ms. EDDIE BERNICE JOHNSON of Texas. Mr. Speaker, I would like to offer remarks on poverty and income inequality in America in light of our recent budget discussions. In the world's most rich and powerful nation, more than 46 million Americans live in poverty. In Texas, 18 percent of residents live in poverty and 25 percent of children under 18 live in poverty. In Dallas, TX, the number of low-income people rose 41 percent between 2000 and 2012.

These numbers are staggering in a nation, state, and city with such wealth. Congress can and must do more to create opportunity for people who live in poverty. Passing a strong federal budget with anti-poverty programs, creating educational opportunities for students who come from low-income families, ensuring children and families have adequate food, advocating for a higher minimum wage, and keeping our federal health programs strong are just a few examples of the ways Congress can help lift these individuals and families out of poverty.

We know that these programs work. The Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) kept almost 5 million Americans, including 2.2 million children, out of poverty last year. Medical kept almost 3 million people out of poverty last year and that number continues to increase as more states expand Medicaid. The Earned Income Tax Credit (EITC) and the Child Tax Credit (CTC) helped to lift 10 million Americans, including 5 million children, out of poverty last year.

Anti-poverty programs not only help families rise above and stay out of poverty, they keep families contributing to the economy on a daily basis. Rather than keeping low-income Dallasites, Texans, and Americans on a tight-rope where they are one medical emergency, job loss, or large car expense away from dipping into poverty, we must bolster our resources. During the very year that we celebrated the 50th anniversary of several War on Poverty programs enacted by President Johnson, we must make it easier and not more difficult for working families in this country.

REMOVAL OF NAME OF MEMBER AS COSPONSOR OF H.R. 381

Mr. JOHNSON of Georgia (during the Special Order of Ms. LEE). Mr. Speaker, I ask unanimous consent to remove myself from H.R. 381.

The SPEAKER pro tempore. Is there objection to the request of the gentleman from Georgia?

There was no objection.

FOREST MANAGEMENT AND WILDFIRES

The SPEAKER pro tempore. Under the Speaker's announced policy of January 6, 2015, the gentleman from Pennsylvania (Mr. THOMPSON) is recognized for 60 minutes as the designee of the majority leader.

Mr. THOMPSON of Pennsylvania. Mr. Speaker, as chairman of the House