

LOW INCOME HOME ENERGY ASSISTANCE PROGRAM

Mr. LEAHY. Mr. President, I want to express my serious concerns with the budget for fiscal year 2018 recently proposed by President Trump. If adopted, this budget would have severe consequences on many Americans, but I am particularly concerned that it would be low-income families who are impacted the most. As vice chair of the Senate Appropriations Committee, I will do everything in my power to make sure that does not happen.

Among countless examples within a budget that is out of touch and that will drive more American families into poverty, the President's proposal to eliminate the Community Service Block Grant, the Low Income Home Energy Assistance Program, LIHEAP, and the Weatherization Assistance Program should be concerning to all of us. These are resources that are essential not only to Vermonters, but to millions of families throughout the country.

The Community Service Block Grant ensures that low-income families receive the support they need for basic food and housing assistance, financial planning tools, and fuel in winter months. LIHEAP and weatherization services ensure that families do not have to choose between food and heat. They ensure that families stay safe from harmful asbestos that may be in the walls of their old Vermont farmhouses or their inefficient mobile homes. In States like mine, home heating is a life-and-death matter.

We need to show compassion when drafting our budget and provide support for those programs that help hard-working families in need. We must see the faces behind these proposed budget cuts. Vulnerable people should never be at the whim of politically driven priorities.

We have to do better. I would like to begin by recognizing the crisis so many families will face in this country without the help of our community action agencies. Without them, families will go cold. They will choose not to eat so they can heat their homes. They will deny themselves healthcare and miss rent payments so that they can stay warm, so that they can stay alive.

Last month, I had the pleasure of seeing a longtime friend and fellow Vermonter Jan Demers, who serves as the executive director of the Champlain Valley Office of Economic Opportunity, CVOEO, Vermont's largest community action agency in Burlington. It was Jan who said it best, noting that, "President Trump's budget is like one amputation after another. Not bringing health to the community but cut after cut—loss after loss." I am proud that CVOEO and the other community action agencies continue to meet the needs of these families and hope all Senators will continue to support them as I have during my time in the Senate.

In recognition of their leadership, I ask unanimous consent that a state-

ment by Jan Demers be printed in the RECORD.

There being no objection, the material was ordered to be printed in the RECORD, as follows:

Good morning, my name is Jan Demers and I am the Executive Director of the Champlain Valley Office of Economic Opportunity. On behalf of the more than 23,000 Vermonters that CVOEO serves: Welcome. We are standing in CVOEOs Weatherization Warehouse. It is a fitting place to talk about President Trump's recently released budget. Thank you to Senator Leahy and your staff for organizing this press conference and for the leadership you provide for Vermont and the nation. Thank you to Jonathan Bond and our staff and for all the Community Action Agencies who carry on this good work. Thank you to Bobby Arnell, Sean Brown, Sarah Phillips and to our partners in the State of Vermont who uphold the values of care and wellness for all Vermonters. And thank you to Mr. Todd Alexander who typifies the strength of those we serve.

Community Action Agencies exist to support community well-being. We make sure that everyone can reach their potential and fully contribute to the total strength of our communities.

How does Mr. Trump's budget affect CVOEO? It zeros out the Community Service Block Grant—\$990,687. This is the foundational grant that undergirds the majority of our programs. It zeros out the Low Income Home Energy Assistance Program (LIHEAP) that keeps Vermonters warm in the winter. It zeros out the Department of Energy's Weatherization Program. Thankfully the State of Vermont is our main source of Weatherization funding. However, this will mean that 30 Vermont homes will not be weatherized in our area. Just those 3 cuts amount to a total of \$2,056,675.

On top of that there are the cuts to Head Start, Fair Housing, Housing assistance, Mobile Home, and Voices Against Violence. There isn't an area, program, staff person or any of the 23,000 people we served that won't be touched and experience devastation of services due to this budget.

We have heard over and over that the war on poverty didn't work. However, when the programs that created the War on Poverty in 1964 measured the percent of poverty it was at 20%. Seven years later the percentage of poverty was at 11%. It worked! Then the years of cutting started, cut after cut was enacted weakening the effort substantially. In 2012 the measured percent of poverty was 15%. Currently the percentage of poverty is 13.5%. To me that signifies that the measured efforts put into place during the Obama years are working.

There isn't a CVOEO Program that isn't decimated by this budget bringing great loss for the entire population of over 23,000 people that CVOEO served in FY 16. Community Action Agencies exist to support community well-being. Instead of health, this budget is like one amputation after another. Not bringing health to the community but cut after cut—loss after loss.

Our vision is bridging gaps and building futures for the people we serve. This budget widens the chasm and diminishes life.

This cannot be the last word in the Federal budget for FY 18.

Thank you, Senator Leahy for bringing us a better way.

PRESIDENT EL-SISI'S VISIT

Mr. LEAHY. Mr. President, this week, Egypt's President Abdel Fattah el-Sisi is in Washington where he is

meeting with President Trump and other senior administration officials, as well as some Members of Congress.

President Trump has spoken glowingly of President el-Sisi, as he has of Russian President Putin and Philippine President Duterte. "Strong leaders," he calls them, as if that is enough to justify our wholehearted support. Unfortunately, world history is replete with examples of strong, messianic leaders who abused their power in ways that caused immense hardship for their people and divisiveness and conflict in their countries.

Despite that, the White House has voiced its strong support for President el-Sisi, and for U.S.-Egyptian relations.

I have been to Egypt many times, and I have voted for billions of dollars in U.S. aid for Egypt to support economic and security programs in that country. I have recognized positive developments in Egypt when they occur, such as President el-Sisi's decision to undertake economic reforms, including by reducing some subsidies. Far more needs to be done, however, if Egypt's economy is to break free of decades of state control, endemic corruption, and gross mismanagement.

I am also aware of the security threats Egypt faces in Libya and in the Sinai, although I and others have expressed deep concern with the flawed tactics the Egyptian Government is using to combat those threats. The U.S. has an interest in helping Egypt confront these challenges by addressing the underlying causes in a manner that is effective and consistent with international law.

President Trump has called President el-Sisi a fantastic guy. Ironically, that says a lot more about President Trump than it does about President el-Sisi.

President el-Sisi, a former general who seized power by force, has ruled with an iron fist. He has effectively banned public criticism of his government since the removal of former President Morsi, enforcing what amounts to a prohibition on protests and arresting hundreds of people in connection with the ban, many preemptively.

President el-Sisi's government has engaged in one of the widest arrest campaigns in the country's modern history, targeting a broad spectrum of political opponents. Local civil society organizations estimate that between 40,000 and 60,000 people are detained on political grounds, such as for protesting or calling for a change in government. Police have accused many of having links to the Muslim Brotherhood, usually without evidence that they have advocated or engaged in violence. Many other detainees belong to other political organizations or have no party affiliation.

A systematic crackdown on Egypt's independent civil society has left it on the verge of collapse. According to human rights groups, nearly every prominent Egyptian human rights defender or civil society leader is banned

from leaving the country as part of a judicial investigation into the foreign funding of their organizations. A law signed by President el-Sisi in 2014 would allow prosecutors to seek 25-year sentences for illegally receiving foreign funding. Parliament has also proposed a new law regulating civil society organizations which, if adopted, would effectively outlaw independent human rights work in the country.

Despite repeated requests by U.S. officials, including some Republicans and Democrats in Congress, President el-Sisi's government has refused to release those detained for political reasons for months or years without charge or on trumped up charges like Egyptian-American citizen Aya Hijazi.

The media has also been targeted, with authorities threatening and jailing journalists who reported on political opposition. Some foreign journalists have been barred from the country after writing articles critical of the government. As of December 2016, Egypt was the third-highest jailer of journalists, according to the Committee to Protect Journalists. This pattern of harassment and arrests is not new. It has been happening for years, and, contrary to the representations of Egyptian officials, it is getting worse.

According to Human Rights Watch, members of the security forces, particularly the Interior Ministry's National Security Agency, routinely torture detainees to elicit confessions. This torture usually occurs during periods of enforced disappearance that can last for weeks or months. The widespread use of torture has also been reported by the State Department. Despite hundreds of reported cases of torture and enforced disappearance, since 2013, only a handful of police officers have reportedly been punished for violating the law.

According to information I have received, prison conditions remain deplorable, and political detainees are beaten, often deprived of contact with relatives and lawyers, and denied access to medical care.

The government's use of U.S. aircraft and other military equipment in its counterterrorism campaign against a local ISIS affiliate in the northern Sinai has not only resulted in indiscriminate attacks against civilians and other gross violations of human rights, it has made the terrorism situation worse. Requests by myself, as well as State and Defense Department officials and by independent journalists and representatives of human rights groups, for access to conflicted areas, have been denied.

While President Trump and other U.S. officials unabashedly praise President el-Sisi, I wonder how they reconcile their portrayal of him with his crackdown against civil society and brutal repression of dissent. In fact, it can't be reconciled, and it damages our own credibility as a strong defender of human rights and democratic principles.

I want to reiterate what I said in this Chamber on September 27, 2016, when I spoke about Aya Hijazi, the young Egyptian American social worker currently detained in Egypt. Ms. Hijazi, along with her Egyptian husband and five employees of their organization Belady, has been accused of salacious crimes that the government has yet to corroborate with any credible evidence; yet she has been jailed since May 21, 2014. Just last month, a decision in her case was inexplicably delayed until later this month. It is long past time for her ordeal to end.

The United States and Egypt have common interests in an increasingly troubled region. Egypt has acted to reduce the smuggling of weapons into Gaza, and it has helped to broker ceasefires with Hamas. Our support for Egypt is demonstrated by the fact that, over the past 70 years, U.S. taxpayers have provided more than \$70 billion in economic and military aid to Egypt. I doubt that many Egyptians know that, as most have a decidedly unfavorable opinion of the United States.

After three decades of corrupt autocratic rule by former President Mubarak, Egypt once again has a former military officer as President who has chosen to rule by force. It is neither justified, nor is it necessary. If, on the contrary, President el-Sisi were to demonstrate that he has a credible plan for transforming Egypt's economy, for improving education and creating jobs, for respecting due process and other fundamental rights, and for addressing the discrimination and lack of economic opportunities that are at the root of the violence in the Sinai, the Egyptian people would support him. They would also have a brighter future. Instead, I fear that, by relying on repression, he is sowing the seeds of misery and civil unrest, which is in the interest of neither the Egyptian people nor the American people.

MONTENEGRO'S ACCESSION INTO NATO

Mr. INHOFE. Mr. President, I am pleased the U.S. Senate voted favorably to add Montenegro as a permanent member to the North Atlantic Treaty Organization, NATO, sending a strong signal of transatlantic unity. NATO plays a vital role in maintaining security and stability throughout Europe, and including Montenegro in this strategic alliance will strengthen NATO and encourage stability within the region.

Montenegro is a growing democracy that has repeatedly proven itself to be a valuable ally since joining NATO's Partnership for Peace Program in 2006. They are partnered with our Maine National Guard, and have been a strong ally in the fight in Afghanistan since 2010. Having visited Montenegro, I can say, without a doubt, that it has demonstrated a commitment to NATO, the United States, and regional stability.

This vote sends clear message of support to our friends in Montenegro. It also sends a strong message to NATO and gives notice that the United States will stand up for Western democracies, despite continued pressure from the Kremlin. We must deter Russia's destabilizing actions in the region, including Moscow's annexation of Crimea in 2014 and its continued support for rebels in eastern Ukraine. Putin is learning lessons from these examples and will continue his quest to expand his influence as far as the world community will allow. This aggression by the Russian Federation undermines peace and stability not only in the Balkan region, but also in all of Europe, which constitutes a direct threat to U.S. security interests.

Montenegro's accession to NATO is in the best interest of the United States, NATO, and peace and stability in Europe. This vote by the U.S. Senate sends a clear message of our commitment to NATO, to the people of Montenegro, and to improving stability in the Balkan region. I look forward to Montenegro joining NATO as a full member.

ANNIVERSARY OF NATO

Mr. BROWN. Mr. President, nearly 70 years ago today, the United States and 11 other nations—in the face of Soviet aggression—joined together in mutual defense to form the North Atlantic Treaty Organization, NATO. Since its inception, NATO has expanded to 28 member nations. The breadth of its mission is impressive—from ensuring regional stability and combating terrorism to training partner countries and supporting humanitarian aid. While NATO was founded to ensure Western peace and stability in the face of the Cold War, its work has come to encompass all corners and peoples of the globe.

NATO is more important than ever today in deterring regional conflict. The U.S. must stand by its ironclad commitment to NATO's security and solidarity as Russian President Vladimir Putin flouts international law and exerts Russian aggression around the world, from meddling in our own election to the illegal annexation of Crimea.

Our NATO allies need our support. I applaud Operation Atlantic Resolve, which coordinates the deployment of additional NATO troops to our allies in Eastern Europe. I also commend other U.S. efforts that support our NATO allies, like the European Reassurance Initiative. These play an essential role in bolstering our force readiness in the region to deter Russian aggression and demonstrate our commitment to the common cause and democratic principles that NATO embodies.

American support for NATO is and must remain steadfast. The nearly unanimous vote in the Senate ratifying Montenegro's accession to be a member state is evidence of this well-established, deeply founded support.