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## **KENNEDY SPEAKS OUT AGAINST CUTS TO COMMUNITY SERVICE BLOCK GRANTS**

In the past five years, over five million more citizens have fallen into poverty. Thirty-seven million Americans live below the poverty line. Three million more working Americans live in hunger or on the verge of hunger today than in the year 2000.

It's shameful that in the richest and most powerful nation on earth, nearly 20 percent of all children go to bed hungry at night because their parents, even working full time, still can't make ends meet.

The needs of the poor in America have been constantly ignored by the Bush Administration—but Hurricanes Katrina and Rita have shown a bright new light on the unacceptable poverty that continues to plague America today. We all watched the heartbreaking scenes of countless low-income residents with no cars, struggling to escape the path of the Hurricane, and then struggling again to escape the flood waters. The poor were left largely on their own, fending for themselves.

American people expect their leaders to stand for fairness, freedom and opportunity. Those values are the cornerstone of the American dream. We believe that if you live right and work hard, you should be able to care for your family, afford rent in a safe neighborhood, and to send your children to college.

We also believe that when life deals you a severe shock, you can count on your neighbors to pitch in. If you lose your job or become seriously ill, we all want to help out. If you lose your home, your belongings, and your security from a natural disaster, it's some comfort to know at least that you haven't been deserted and that help is on the way. You deserve a chance to pick yourself up, dust yourself off, and start all over again--to reclaim the American dream for yourself and your family. That's the American way, the American spirit.

The state agencies and the community action agencies funded by the Community Service Block Grant program know that spirit well. They fight poverty and encourage self-sufficiency in low-income communities everyday.

Their services include literacy, child health care, after-school activities, low-income housing development, food stamps, and emergency shelter assistance.

Unfortunately, the Administration and the House of Representatives have closed their eyes to the needs of the poor and to the important work of these community service agencies across the nation. The Continuing Resolution that was sent to us by the House cuts funds for the Community Service Block Grant program in half.

At a time when poverty is increasing, and in the wake of the devastation of the hurricane, the House has decided to limit funds to the very agencies that came forward to help people least able to help themselves.

As Hurricane Katrina hit, Assistant Secretary for Children and Families Wade Horn acknowledged the unique role of the agencies in disaster relief and called them to action in a memorandum of September 2nd. He said that community action grantees “particularly those in Alabama, Louisiana, Mississippi, Arkansas, Texas, Florida, Georgia and Tennessee [should] open [their] doors to those displaced families who have sought refuge in [their] community and seek new ways to support individuals, families and children impacted by this disaster.”

The agencies had already begun providing support and other help to those in need. According to the National Association of State Community Service Programs, community action agencies have assisted over 171,000 evacuees. Much of their time was volunteered.

But the services and facilities they are using will draw from the funds allocated by the government. The services for new residents, even temporary ones will change the community priorities already set for dwindling block grant resources. How can the Administration encourage these agencies to do more while simultaneously cutting their funds?

Over the past three years, Community Service Block Grant funds have been eroding, and lack of funds has impaired the ability of these agencies to reach out to the poor. If the Community Service Block Grant is cut in half, their services will be compromised even more, and the agencies will face a crisis of their own that will strain their reserves.

Programs that depend on grant resources for support such as fuel assistance, the earned income tax credit, Medicare outreach, and food pantries will be seriously hurt, and in some cases will be eliminated.

With rising home energy costs, a 50 percent cut in funding will jeopardize the LIHEAP program. October and November are especially busy months for the community action agencies that administer it. The program year begins October 1st, and many agencies sign up the vast majority of LIHEAP participants right away. Most states get almost 90% of their annual allotment in the first quarter.

In three months the loss to Massachusetts will be \$2 million. Half of the state’s 4000 staff will be affected, either through temporary or permanent layoffs. Yet our state serves over 400,000 persons including many from the Gulf states.

According to Action Inc., a community action agency in Gloucester, Massachusetts, a temporary 50 percent cut in funds will result in the elimination of its housing and family legal services. 350 very low-income local families who suffer housing problems will be at risk of homelessness. 40 families with active legal cases will not have access to their attorney.

The family law program will also be eliminated. Yet it helps 75 very low-income residents a

year by providing legal assistance on issues such as divorce, custody, visitation and child support. 425 families will not have the legal assistance that helps prevent evictions and solve critical family issues.

Action Inc. is only one example of the numerous agencies in Massachusetts and across the nation facing lay offs and program cuts or even elimination because of the harsh cuts in the Continuing Resolution.

It's wrong for the Administration and the House of Representatives to ask for cuts in America's safety net, when so many Americans are already falling through it. We know how to mend it. All we lack is the will and the leadership to do it.

The Community Services Block Grant agencies have been fighting to alleviate poverty with great skill. It's time the government stopped forcing them to do so against such heavy odds. The challenge is too critical for Americans to ignore any longer. The soothing promises of those in powerful places have been unmasked for what they are—promises they never meant to keep.

Personal responsibility, community responsibility, government responsibility—they go hand in hand. When one of them breaks down, as it has now, we have to fix it. I'm saddened by Congress's harsh treatment of those most in need. We should be fully funding the Community Service Block Grant, not cutting it in half. I will vote for Senator Harkin's amendment to increase funding for the Community Service Block Grant program and I urge my colleagues to do the same.

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