

We're Gonna Do What? Iowans Don't Think So!

*A Summary of Six Public Hearings on the Federal Budget and
Services for Vulnerable Populations*

Introduction

In September 2005, 286 Iowans gathered across the state to share stories with their neighbors about the vital role government programs play in improving their lives and the lives of their family and friends. The powerful statements collected in this report reveal that Iowans depend on programs like Medicaid, Food Stamps and Social Security. Those who gathered in Mason City, Council Bluffs, Des Moines, Davenport, Cedar Rapids and Waterloo have shared their stories with members of Congress, and in this report they are sharing their stories and comments with the public. They hope that everyone in Iowa who cares about our people and communities will join them in calling on Congress to protect programs that serve our most vulnerable people.

The hearings were advertised in local newspapers and were open to anyone, with any political view. Participants hailed from 43 towns across Iowa and represented a broad cross section of our state. They included pastors, parents, elected officials from both the Republican and Democratic parties, people living with disabilities, people caring for someone living with a disability, retirees and teenagers. Each one found ninety minutes on a weeknight to share stories about their own lives, to express hopes about our shared future and in some cases, to voice outrage about what is being proposed in Washington, D.C.

Some participants came because they had family members or friends who use these vital services. Others shared that they valued the programs because they believed that together we can support each other and improve the lives of our fellow Iowans. Some recognized that they were a paycheck away from needing these services. Many of the participants were using the programs themselves. One woman from rural Iowa spoke about eating at the soup kitchen, using food stamps, participating in Medicaid, and she pointed out that the dress she was wearing came from a source of donated clothes. And until she started telling her story, no one in the room would have guessed that her face was the face of poverty in Iowa. The stories shared at the public hearings represent thousands of stories from across the state of people who depend on these programs and whose stories need to be told.

In the past year, leaders in Congress have proposed dramatic cuts and restructuring to programs that serve literally hundreds of thousands of Iowa children and families. Many of these proposals are coalescing in the end of the year budget process. In all six

public hearings, Iowans were sounding an overwhelming NO to this budget reconciliation process that would slash basic services to our nation's most vulnerable, while at the same time, extend tax cuts to our nation's wealthiest. In the case of Social Security, their voices have already been heard as proposals to cut benefits and privatize a portion of the program have been rejected for now.

During these public hearings, many people chose to take action by writing letters to members of Congress. While some of those who wrote letters were seasoned advocates, others were writing to their congressperson for the very first time. Iowans participating in these public hearings wrote 107 letters to congress, recorded 91 personal stories, and penned 40 post cards. In all cases, letters and postcards were completely handwritten in participants own words. Each of Iowa's seven members of Congress will receive a copied set of the letters and stories as well as a copy of this report.

This report comes directly from these letters and stories.

Democracy and the Common Good

A responsible democratic society has an obligation to all its citizens to provide a safety net in the case of disability, dependent children, and the elderly. Anything less is immoral.

Merv Croubaugh
Cedar Rapids

The laws, of course, are made by adults who eat daily. It is imperative that these well-fed adults legislate with the vulnerable little ones at the forefront of their minds. Over half of all recipients of food stamps are children. Please, please remember them and preserve their lives. In the wake of hurricane Katrina especially, I encourage you to maintain funding programs like food stamps at the present level. It is time for us to rally together to uphold those who are in peril.

Susan Schneider
Des Moines

Living in a land of such abundance should ensure nutritious food for all our people.

Cece Arnold
Urbandale

Social Security is a fine example of how from the start we Americans have tried to look out for each other. Currently, we are in a period of strong individualism, contrary to our traditional, long-standing communal spirit. Social Security is a wonderful way to carry out this American communal spirit.

Rev. Msgr. Lyle Wilgenbusch
Waterloo

There are limits to how much a faith-based organization can subsidize tax cuts for the wealthy. The welfare reform bill of 1996 cut over 18 billion dollars from the food stamp program and the number of people needing food stamps has increased each of those years. We are the wealthiest nation in the world. Help us not look into the faces of hunger!

Betty Milford
Council Bluffs

Most of the poor in my experience are working poor. In many ways they work harder than many of us with little return.

Mollie O'Meara Conrad
Davenport

I view myself and wife as "in-betweeners." We are not as well off as we would like to be, but a lot better off than we might be. Thinking about our children, in their forties, and what their prospects are with possibly a recession on the horizon, less or no medical insurance or pensions from their employers, and a burgeoning federal deficit hanging over their heads, I worry more about their future than I do about ours. We have Social Security and small pensions, escalating medical costs and premiums and co-pays. I can only imagine the dire future faced by those without these protections.

Don Whitfor
Robins

This Could Happen to Anyone

My father lost 1/3 of his 401K portfolio in the stock market at the time of his disability. My father before his disability had often worked 2 full time jobs.

Dori Rammelsberg-Dvorak
Clutier

My neighbor lost his wife in a car accident. His two children were very young. He could not have made it if he didn't have Social Security. He wouldn't have been able to raise those children alone.

Gloria Goll
Klemme

People here are really struggling and yet they are mostly hidden in this struggle. Most people are working, elderly or disabled that need food stamps. Please, please continue funding this program at an adequate level.

Barbara Grant
Cedar Falls

Jo Rod shared about a family member who was diagnosed with M.S. in his forties. After writing about this person's experience and the support provided by Social Security, Jo shared a sentiment that was consistently expressed through the six public hearings.

This can happen to anyone.

Jo Rod
Ames

The Need IS Great

We are doing incredible work by local generosity, smart leadership and God's grace. But, if you cut more out – people – my friends in my area will die. Maybe slowly, maybe invisibly, maybe quietly, but they will die.

Wally Paige
Clarinda

My church serves a free dinner each Sunday evening. In July 2005, the church served 265 meals and 25 of the diners were children – a record high number. We need to have government do its part; the churches can't solve the problem alone. Neither the tax cuts nor the program cuts should be implemented.

Ellen Fisher
Cedar Rapids

I work for an inner city Presbyterian Church in Des Moines that has a social ministries program that helps families with basic needs. The irony is that the majority of these families were – are working full time at minimum wage jobs but face a crisis, such as an ill child, a broken down car, that make it impossible for them to continue to pay their rent, buy food, etc. Please do not burden these families further by cutting food stamps.

Roberta Victor
Des Moines

I know that providers are stretched to the max, and if food stamps are cut this will be devastating to these local good Samaritans.

Charlie Wishman
Des Moines

A friend of mine (58 years old) works 60 hours a week, 30 as a checker for one employer and 30 as a checker for another employer. And she doesn't have health insurance.

Larry Huntley
Grimes

These Programs ARE Working

I believe it is immoral and un-Christian to consider lowering taxes for the most wealthy Americans, when also considering significant cuts to food stamps. My family received food stamps for two years in the late 70s when my children were very young. Now I've graduated from college and make a comfortable income.

Chris Carman
Cedar Rapids

My father had a stroke four years ago. Without Medicaid, he would not have had the care he needed.

Lee Webb
Grundy Center

In 1972, I separated from my alcoholic husband. I had two small boys. The food stamps gave me food for the table and the support I needed to further myself. I now am a United Methodist minister.

Rev. Marlene Brown
Macedonia

The Social Security disability benefit is my source of income-the income that pays all my living expenses. Without Social Security disability, I would be homeless and without the ability to feed myself. Social Security disability is a lifeline for me.

Nancy Glass
Mason City

I have a friend who had diabetes and heart disease. She is at home now, in a wheel chair and she has an aid that comes in several times a week. Without Medicaid, she could not have health care or live at home.

Jane Teaford
Cedar Rapids

Our family has a Down syndrome adult. This has caused us to be aware of disabled folks who benefit and require Medicaid for survival. I sincerely hope state and federal legislators will vote to maintain Medicaid funding – please not cuts!

Mary McCally
Cedar Falls

I have been on Medicaid for the past 6 years. If I don't have the help, especially with prescription help, I will die. Without prescription benefits, my meds run \$350 - \$400 per month. We have \$878 a month to live on and it takes all we get and that is paying \$1.00 per prescription. Please help me stay alive.

Bonnie Correll
Clarinda

At 19 years of age, I was a widow with a small child. I had no safety net other than Social Security. Four years later, my brother was disabled, his wife died at 29 and left 3 young children. Their safety net was Social Security. My mother has no outside income other than Social Security at age 88.

Betty Ellis
Grinnell

When I was 17, my father died suddenly of a massive coronary. The Social Security monthly payments helped my mother be able to keep her two youngest children in clothes and able to feed us. Those monthly checks for dependents helped fund my college years. Social Security provides basic living expenses for many elderly and when I was younger it helped our family survive.

Rev. Mark Young
Council Bluffs

I am very concerned about privatizing Social Security. I did some research 4 years ago looking at women and risk-taking behavior. Research across a variety of disciplines shows that women are more risk-averse than men. This means that approximately half of the US population will benefit less from private accounts. Moreover, women live longer than men, and thus will need more money for retirement. There is a hidden or unspoken gender bias in the privatization plan.

Karla Twedt-Ball
Cedar Rapids

As a retired mental health professional, I have been aware how important Medicaid is to persons with chronic mental illness. Without Medicaid paying for their medical care and medications, these folks would in most cases be hospitalized at a much higher cost to our government. I hope you will do the right thing to assist the most vulnerable members of our society.

Robert Rod
Ames

We know that thousands of Iowans were not able to make it to these hearings, but their stories and voices are reflected in this report.

I'm on a program for disabled working. And what I do is baby-sit my grandkids. And basically without this program and Medicaid, I would be in real deep trouble because I wouldn't have any way to pay for any doctor visits or any medications. So I'm hoping that you can add my story to the others. I do not know what I'd do, I really don't know what I'd do without the program.

Message from anonymous caller
left on ICAN's voice mail the
morning of one of the public
hearings

Iowans Reject Cutting Programs that Serve Our Most Vulnerable

Please do not support proposed cuts to the food stamp program. Let's not balance the budget on the backs of the poor.

Rev. Anita Johnson
Traer

Do not make cuts to the budget that affects Medicaid funding. This funding continues as an important funding mechanism for the complex healthcare needs for our citizens in Iowa. Our citizens, and in particular our children continue to need the healthcare that is required for them to develop, succeed in school and become contributing community members. My sister, a single working mother, works hard at a full time job without any healthcare for herself or her son. Medicaid is needed.

Jean Hartwell
Council Bluffs

Stop all the cuts. Too many people live without insurance or are uninsured. I am personally affected because of a disability I've lived with since 1987. I am on Medicaid. Losing any of these benefits will greatly hurt me and the way I live my life.

Sandy Vopalka
Carlisle

I am writing to ask you to protect the current Medicaid program from the threatened budget cuts in Congress. The cuts were bad business before the hurricanes hit but now to proceed down this path would be sheer bureaucratic stupidity! I would like to think the men representing me in Congress are both smarter and more compassionate than that! There are 186,000 Iowa children on Medicaid but another 43,000 are uninsured. Medicaid is low income children's best chance to grow up healthy and able to become productive citizens.

Leila Carlson
Des Moines

I urge you to maintain and increase funding for Medicaid. Our great country can do better. The tax cuts for the wealthiest must be reconsidered.

Sharla Yeuntsy
Urbandale

Medicaid is essential for the health care needs of our children. Too many low income citizens, adults and children, are finding it is difficult to find providers who will accept Medicaid patients. I found this to be true when living in rural Iowa for the last 13 years. I urge you to refuse all cuts to Medicaid and do all you can do to meet the medical needs of our poorest and most vulnerable citizens, young and old.

Brian Carter
Des Moines

The American government “of the people, by the people, for the people” should not cut Medicaid and food stamps. It is immoral and inequitable to make the tax cuts permanent at the expense of society’s poor.

Kate Milligan
Cedar Rapids

We need to honor and respect our most vulnerable citizens and not cut the benefits.

Sr. Marilyn Shierbrock, CHM
Davenport

I started paying into Social Security when I was about 16 years old and began working at my first job. Now I’m about ten years away from retirement and hearing talk of changes to the system. This feels like ‘bait and switch’ at best...At worst, it feels like a broken promise from a trusted friend. Don’t make cuts to this program.

Joan Thorson
Cedar Rapids

Conclusion

In a democracy, government is one of our best tools for creating a society that is fair and supportive. Participants in the public hearings overwhelmingly believed in the power of government to improve the lives of Iowans. Nearly every comment made or written down during the public hearings gave support to federal programs that empower Iowa families and communities.

Organizers of these hearings have deep appreciation and gratitude for those Iowans who participated in these public hearings and thus made our democracy that much stronger.

This report is authored by Lana Ross, Advocate, Iowa Conference of The United Methodist Church and Matt Russell, organizer Iowa Citizen Action Network.

Appendix I

Co-sponsors of Public Hearings

Call to Renewal

Child and Family Policy Center

Every Child Counts

Iowa Citizen Action Network

Iowa Coalition for Housing and the Homeless

Iowa Conference of The United Methodist Church

Iowa Farmers Union

Iowa Human Needs Advocates

Iowans United to Protect Social Security

League of Rural Voters

National Association of Social Workers, Iowa Chapter

National Catholic Rural Life Conference

Progressive Action for the Common Good

Quad Cities Interfaith

Rural Americans for a Secure Future

Sojourners

True Majority

Appendix II

Cities and towns of participants in the public forum

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|--------------|----------------|-----------------|
| Adel | Council Bluffs | Macedonia |
| Ames | Davenport | Marion |
| Belle Plaine | Des Moines | Mason City |
| Bettendorf | Dysart | McClelland |
| Blue Grass | Essex | Mount Vernon |
| Britt | Grinnell | New Hartford |
| Buffalo | Griswold | Rockwell |
| Camanche | Grundy Center | Traer |
| Carlisle | Hawkeye | Urbandale |
| Cedar Falls | Indianola | Washington |
| Cedar Rapids | Iowa City | Waterloo |
| Clarinda | Johnston | West Des Moines |
| Clear Lake | Joice | Wilton |
| Clutier | Klemme | |
| Corralville | Lacona | |