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Advocating for Economic Security for Women and Families

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Before we even look at proposed cuts to safety net programs and income supports, I have to tell you that the jobs situation is holding women back.

The deep recession that began in December 2007 cost workers nearly 7.5 million jobs before it officially ended in June 2009. You're all aware that overall job growth has been modest, at best, since then. What you may not realize is that, as things improve generally, women are being left behind.

Since the start of the recovery, women have lost over 300,000 jobs while men have gained more than 600,000.

- It's true that men lost more jobs during the recession, so you would expect them to gain more jobs now that the recovery has started. But women lost three of every ten jobs that were lost during the recession, and since the recovery picked up in 2010, women have gained back fewer than one in ten of those jobs.

Women's unemployment rate is higher now than it was at the start of the recovery.

- Over half of all poor children live in families headed by single mothers. The unemployment rate for single mothers last month was 13 percent. If single mothers can't provide financially for their families, how can we expect their children to grow up to meet the demands of the 21st century economy?

Long-term unemployment is worsening for women.

- In the year and a half between July 2009 and December 2010, the increase in the percentage of women who were unemployed for more than six months was nearly twice as high as the increase for men.
- In December 2010, the typical unemployed woman was jobless nearly a month longer than the typical man, about 24 weeks compared to just under 21 weeks.
- For older jobseekers, the gender gap is even larger. In December, the median length of unemployment for women ages 55 to 64 was just over 39 weeks – more than nine months. That was nearly two and a half months longer than for men in this age range.

All of this is especially troubling because expected federal and state cuts in education, health care, and social services – areas in which many women are employed – could mean even more job losses for women.

- A major reason for the grim unemployment picture among women is the heavy job loss in public sector employment – we’re talking about nurses and home health care aides, child care providers, teachers – mostly women.
- Women made up 57 percent of the public sector workforce at the end of the recession, but they account for almost 80 percent of public sector job losses since mid-2009.

There was *some* success for anti-poverty efforts at the end of last year.

In December, in the lame duck session of Congress after the November elections, President Obama and Republican leaders struck a deal on an economic package that restored federal emergency unemployment benefits for long-term jobless workers and extended tax benefits for low- and moderate-income families.

Helping these families not only prevents hardship, it creates customers – poor people have to spend every dollar they get – and that means more demand for good and services, and more jobs.

The continuation of unemployment insurance benefits for workers who have been out of work longer than six months was critically needed. According to the Council of Economic Advisors, this measure alone will create 600,000 jobs this year.

The National Women's Law Center was especially pleased that the agreement included a two-year extension of the improvements to the refundable tax credits that were enacted as part of the 2009 Recovery Act.

- The extension of the Child Tax Credit for lower-income families will help 10.5 million families with 18 million children.
- The extension of the Earned Income Tax Credit for working families with three or more children and the reduction in the EITC marriage penalty will benefit 6.5 million working parents with 15 million children.
- The extension of the American Opportunity Tax Credit – a partially refundable tax credit of up to \$2,500 to help students and their families cover the cost of college tuition – will help eight million students afford college.

But the price exacted by Congress was shamefully high. Tax cuts for millionaires and corporate special interests were also extended. The estate tax was reduced so that very few families in the entire country have to worry about it. Couples can now exclude up to \$10 million dollars when they calculate their estate tax, and that’s after they deduct money spent for funeral expenses or given to their spouse.

These tax cuts are among the least effective ways to boost the economy and create jobs.

Yet the same Congress that insisted on giving millionaires these extra tax breaks *ended* a successful job creation program last year, the TANF Emergency Fund, *cut* funding for

child support enforcement, and *cut* SNAP (food stamp) benefits. *Those* are the programs that are vital to low-income women and their families.

Some in Congress are using the guise of deficit reduction to promote an extreme agenda that could result in the worst setback for women and their families in a generation.

- We can't balance the federal budget simply by cutting programs that benefit women and families. The kind of domestic spending we're talking about makes up only about 15 percent of the federal budget. Cutting out the social safety net entirely wouldn't solve the federal budget deficit.
- If Congress is serious about reducing the deficit, they should make sure that everyone pays his fair share, according to his ability to pay, now. That's the way to reduce the burden on future generations without making women's and children's lives so much more difficult and dangerous today.

For women especially, economic security and physical safety are closely connected.

The most common reasons given by women who stay in abusive relationships are lack of money, lack of a place to go, and lack of community supports. It's not hard to imagine that joblessness and other economic constraints put intense pressure on a relationship.

Poverty is thus inextricably linked to violence against women, and strengthening programs that alleviate poverty will reduce violence against women.

- The Violence Against Women Act – known as VAWA – was originally enacted in 1994. It was the first federal legislation that labelled domestic violence and sexual assault as crimes, and it provided federal money for communities to help victims and to prevent future crimes.
- The Act's re-authorization in 2000 created a much-needed legal assistance program for victims and included dating violence and stalking as crimes.
- The Act was re-authorized again in 2005, including new prevention strategies, protection from unfair evictions, funding for rape crisis centers and culturally- and linguistically-competent services, enhanced programs and services for victims with disabilities, and coverage for children and teens.

VAWA is up for reauthorization again this year. Remember to ask your Members of Congress to re-authorize and fully-fund the Violence Against Women Act.

Don't let anyone tell you it's about "shared sacrifice" right now.

Most of the cuts being pushed now are completely ideological – they won't reduce the debt owed by our children – that's simply an excuse to get rid of programs that some people have never liked anyway.

The budget process is especially complicated this year, because Congress is dealing with 2011 and 2012 at almost the same time. A 2011 budget was never approved, and it's almost time to start the process for 2012.

The House has passed a draconian spending plan for the rest of fiscal 2011, through September 30. The Senate was wise enough to reject that plan; but they also rejected a more responsible alternative. We're operating on a continuing resolution right now: a short-term appropriations bill that has the government running out of money on April 8, two weeks from now. Today's *Washington Post* labeled this "America on the installment plan."

H.R. 1, the House spending plan for the rest of fiscal year 2011, slashes funding for services vital to women and girls at every stage of their lives.

We're in Virginia today, so let me give you a few statistics for this state.

- More than 8,300 Virginia children could lose Head Start and child care, depriving them of early learning support and depriving their parents of the child care assistance they need in order to work.
- Almost 180, 000 Virginia students, mostly women, could find college less affordable, because Pell grants would be cut.
- Almost 40,000 Virginia workers – women, men, and teens – could lose federal job training opportunities. Job training is especially important to women, who are often in low-wage, low-security jobs, with little opportunity for advancement without the training.
- Nationally, a majority of new Social Security beneficiaries are women. Under H.R. 1, 12,410 Virginia applicants for Social Security benefits – retired and disabled workers, widows, and children – could face delays in getting the benefits they deserve because inadequate funding for Social Security Administration operations will force layoffs or furloughs for the workers who process those applications.

In addition, H.R. 1:

- Halts funding to implement health care reform;
- Cuts funding for maternal and child health programs and nutrition assistance for pregnant and postpartum women, infants, and children;
- Cuts funding for community health centers, housing, energy assistance, and other services for poor and vulnerable people;
- Cuts funding for elementary and secondary education; and
- Cuts funding for food safety inspections, clean water, and cancer research.

A recent NBC News/Wall Street Journal poll found that 76 percent of Americans think that cuts to K through 12 education programs are completely or mostly unacceptable, and about two-thirds are similarly opposed to cuts in Head Start, college student loans, and heating assistance to low-income families.

All of these programs would be drastically cut under the House plan.

But, instead of protecting services for millions of struggling families, policy makers are protecting tax giveaways to millionaires and corporations:

- The amount of federal revenue given away in that December deal that extended tax cuts for the wealthiest Americans would more than offset the \$61 billion in spending cuts in H.R. 1.
- Congress could eliminate a tax loophole that allows multimillionaire private investment fund managers to pay lower tax rates than ordinary workers. That would raise almost one and a half billion dollars every year – more than enough to offset the \$1.4 billion that H.R. 1 cuts from job training programs.
- Congress could eliminate tax subsidies for the oil, gas, and coal industries. That would raise an average \$4.6 billion every year – more than enough to protect current Head Start and child care services and fully-fund Social Security offices.
- International tax reforms that have been proposed would raise almost \$13 billion a year – that's more than H.R. 1's combined cuts to Pell grants, schools for disadvantaged children, the Maternal and Child Health Block Grant, nutrition assistance for Women, Infants and Children, and community health centers.

In closing, I'd like to make a few points about the lobby visits you'll be making on Monday.

Proposed cuts to public services pose a particular threat to women, both as the people who depend on these services and as the employees who provide them. You know women are the gateway to their families and their communities. You know what the country's priorities should be.

First, remember to focus on the "asks" as they're summarized in your handouts. This is the time to join hands and speak with one voice. If you want to talk about programs that particularly concern your organization, I advise you to make a separate appointment. That way, you'll get to speak to a legislative aide who understands your special concerns, and you won't dilute the focus of the meetings you're making as a group.

Remember that these aides have meetings all day long. Impress them with a couple of key points that they can remember later, when they talk to the Senator.

Finally, I urge you to be as specific as possible when you tell them what women and families need to lift themselves out of, or avoid falling into, poverty, hunger, and homelessness.

I've seen the impact of testimony from a Nevada service provider who was participating by phone in a meeting with a roomful of national advocates. She reminded Senator Harry Reid's top staffers that Nevada has been the slowest of all the states to recover from the recession, has the highest foreclosure rate and the highest unemployment rate. And then

she said that Nevada also outpaces the rest of the country in the number of women killed by men with handguns. She said job losses and financial stress create terrible pressures in families, but women can't afford to leave these abusive situations. They don't have their own money, and social services in the community are being cut. So they stay, and the violence escalates.

Welcome to town. Women and their families are counting on you.

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<http://www.nwlc.org/hr1statefacts>.