

of every report that has been issued in a bipartisan way, most recently by the so-called Gang of Six, or the Simpson-Bowles Commission, or the Senator Domenici-Alice Rivlin Commission—all had a central premise: Do not take actions that undermine the most vulnerable among us. Those were all bipartisan commissions.

I know my friends on the Republican side of the aisle who pride themselves on being the party of Lincoln understand Lincoln's message of healing and bringing us together and making sure that we lifted up our fellow citizens and cared for the sick and the homeless and for the young and, yes, for the old.

So as I said, I thank Chairwoman LEE, such a courageous and powerful voice on behalf of those who sometimes have no voice. I am pleased to join my voice to hers and hopefully to all 435 of us who have been given the privilege of serving in this body to raise our voices on this day on behalf of a Nation that has been perceived around the world as being a Nation of hope, of opportunity, of heart, and of soul. Let us reflect that in whatever way we go forward in ensuring the fiscal health of our Nation, both in the short term and in the long term. And understand that the health of our people physically, mentally, financially will be equally important to the health of our Nation.

I thank the gentlelady for leading this debate.

PASS FREE TRADE AGREEMENTS

The SPEAKER pro tempore. The Chair recognizes the gentleman from Texas (Mr. CANSECO) for 5 minutes.

Mr. CANSECO. Mr. Speaker, if one were to ask the average American what their top three priorities for the Congress to work on would be, I think you would get the answer of jobs, jobs, and more jobs.

That's the answer because the employment situation in America is not good. Over 14 million Americans are out of work. We have had 29 straight months with the unemployment rate at 8 percent or higher and monthly jobs reports that show anemic job growth.

Clearly, we need to turn our economy around so robust job creation can occur. The American people want and expect nothing less.

Much of why our economy is not creating jobs is because of uncertainty in the economy that has been created by policies passed by Washington, like the government takeover of health care, the credit-restricting financial regulation bill, and the out-of-control spending.

We tried it the way desired by President Obama and Washington liberals, attempting to spend and borrow our way to a better economy. And their bills, all they did was add to the debt that is dragging the economy down.

Worst though is that Washington is ignoring three very easy actions that, if taken, will immediately help our economy. There are three pending

trade agreements with Colombia, Panama, and South Korea that will create jobs and are at no cost to the taxpayer.

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Altogether, it's estimated by the Business Roundtable that these three agreements will create 250,000 jobs. How can we not pass these agreements that will create jobs and not cost the taxpayers?

Today I want to talk about the benefits of the Panama Free Trade Agreement. In 2010, U.S. exports to Panama accounted for \$6.1 billion, creating \$5.7 billion in trade surpluses with Panama. The United States is Panama's largest trading partner. And once the agreement goes into effect, 88 percent of U.S. goods will enter Panama duty free.

What are some of the products that we export to Panama that could benefit from this agreement? Well, our top exports to Panama now are aircraft, machinery, and agricultural products. In the 23rd District of Texas, which I have the privilege of representing in the United States House of Representatives, agriculture is an important source of economic activity. The Panama Free Trade Agreement will help agricultural products in my district and those districts across the United States. This agreement is helping level the playing field for American agricultural producers.

In 2009, the U.S. exported \$362 million in agricultural exports to Panama. Less than 40 percent of those exports received duty-free status, while more than 99 percent of Panama's agricultural exports to the United States received duty-free status. Upon implementation of the agreement, 56 percent of U.S. agricultural exports will enter Panama duty free, and the remaining tariffs will phase out within 15 years.

While there are benefits to passing this agreement, there are also consequences for failing to pass it. American jobs are at stake as our competitors, notably Canada and the European Union, have their own trade deals with Panama. And once these deals are implemented, their exports will have an advantage over U.S. exports currently going into Panama. This will lead to a loss of market share for the United States exporters and a loss of jobs here at home.

Mr. Speaker, we have the ability to create jobs without spending taxpayer money. With over 14 million Americans unemployed, we must stop waiting. It's time to pass the Panama Free Trade Agreement.

POVERTY CRISIS IN AMERICA

The SPEAKER pro tempore. The Chair recognizes the gentlewoman from California (Ms. LEE) for 5 minutes.

Ms. LEE. I rise today as the founding cochair of the Congressional Out of Poverty Caucus to join my colleagues to discuss the urgent crisis of poverty and to provide a voice for those people

living in poverty and who we feel that could get disproportionately hurt by any negotiations that take place that cut too deeply.

I want to thank our leadership, especially our whip, Mr. HOYER, for his powerful words this morning and for his leadership; Leader PELOSI and our Assistant Leader, Mr. CLYBURN, for each and every day standing and working for the least of these.

Mr. Speaker, a daunting statistic speaks for itself: One in 5 million children in America are growing up in poverty, and nearly 45 million Americans are living in poverty today. Our national unemployment rate is 9.2 percent, but for African Americans it is 16.2 percent and for Latinos it is 11.6 percent. And we know it's twice these statistics, given the millions of people who have lost hope in looking for jobs.

Given these heart-wrenching statistics, the Congressional Out of Poverty Caucus, our cochairs—Representatives BACA, BUTTERFIELD, CONYERS, HONDA, and I—sent a letter to the President, the Vice President, and the congressional leadership on both sides of the aisle asking them to protect those programs that support those facing or living in poverty in the debt ceiling negotiations.

My colleagues and I are here on the floor today to remind every Member that it was not American families or children or the working poor that forced Congress to run a deficit, and it definitely was not America's seniors on Social Security or Medicare or people on Medicaid that forced Republicans to turn the first budget surplus into decades of record deficits. Two wars, massive tax breaks for millionaires and billionaires, Big Oil, and Wall Street running wild caused these deficits. The American people are willing to work, they want to work and pay their fair share, but they should not be asked to fill a hole that they did not dig.

We should quickly pass clean legislation to raise our debt ceiling to end this default crisis so that we can move on doing the critical work of creating jobs and responsibly addressing the national debt. Making heartless cuts on the backs of hungry children and struggling American families will not balance the budget. Every Member of Congress should consider the millions of Americans who are struggling—struggling to find work, struggling to pay for health care if they have health care, struggling to stay in their homes, and struggling to feed their children.

Mr. Speaker, more and more Americans are facing poverty every day, and the Congressional Out of Poverty Caucus is on the floor once again to be the voice for these Americans struggling day in and day out just to survive, demanding that we protect these vital safety net programs and help support the poor, especially in this Great Recession.

We are here today to share some stories from people who have benefited from those programs. I have a story

from Veronica, who lives in northern California, who has turned her life around under these vital safety net programs. Her story is one of hardship and survival. It's a story of getting back up when life knocks you down. It's a story of America. She is the American Dream. But she and her spouse were teenage parents. They relied on public assistance to bring up their children. They were able to get good jobs and they got off of Federal assistance.

Well, in 1995, the bottom fell out. Their son was diagnosed with diabetes. Her world imploded. She tried to go back to work full time. Her son needed more care at home. She was given child care assistance so she could support her family and her son. She was offered counseling and job training and, in the fall of 2009, the opportunity to work at Second Harvest Food Bank as an administrative assistant through the Federal stimulus program. She said she's still married to her husband. They have three beautiful children. And there's no way she could have kept her family together without the help of such programs such as SNAP food stamps, Medi-Cal, and job training. She said, "We found unknown strength, faith, and resilience in our downfall. We'll do everything that we can do to stay self-sufficient but cannot say enough about the blessed safety net."

Mr. Speaker, we understand that even when you work hard and do things right, sometimes everyone needs a helping hand, especially when there are no jobs. I personally needed this helping hand in years past when I was forced during many hardships that I was faced with that I had to rely on for many years public assistance and food stamps and Medi-Cal just to get through school, to take care of my kids, to get a job. And if it weren't for that safety net, I would not be here today.

And so let me just ask all of you to remember the poor, remember those struggling to survive, and to support those people who have exhausted their benefits, their unemployment benefits. They hit the wall in 99 weeks. We need to add more weeks of unemployment compensation for individuals who deserve this help. The 99ers need help. We need to do this. We need to do more to create jobs. We need to help people survive until we have the vision and the backbone to do that here.

HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES,
Washington, DC, July 5, 2011.

Hon. BARACK OBAMA,
President of the United States, The White House, Washington, DC.

Hon. JOSEPH R. BIDEN, Jr.,
Vice President of the United States, The White House, Washington, DC.

Hon. HARRY REID,
Senate Majority Leader, Washington, DC.

Hon. MITCH MCCONNELL,
Senate Minority Leader, Washington, DC.

Hon. JOHN BOEHNER,
Speaker of the House, Washington, DC.

Hon. NANCY PELOSI,
House Minority Leader, Washington, DC.

DEAR MR. PRESIDENT; MR. VICE PRESIDENT;
SPEAKER BOEHNER; MINORITY LEADER PELOSI;

MAJORITY LEADER REID; MINORITY LEADER MCCONNELL: As you and your colleagues work to consider solutions to our nation's fiscal challenges, we urge you to ensure the protection of social service programs that serve as a life line for our nation's low income and poor communities who continue to feel the detrimental impact of the economic downturn.

As co-chairs of the Congressional Out of Poverty Caucus (COPC) working to eradicate poverty, it has always been our goal to ensure critical programs protecting the impoverished remain viable while also keeping poverty at the forefront of debate and action here in Washington. Programs such as Medicare and Medicaid, low-income housing benefits, and earned income tax credit benefits must not be put in jeopardy in the name of deficit reduction, which will only create a greater cost burden to us in the future.

Poverty has taken on an entirely new face as a result of the financial crisis, the recession, and our nation's slow economic recovery. The latest statistics estimate 14.3 percent or 43.6 million Americans living in poverty as of 2009, up from 39.8 million in 2008. Furthermore, the poverty rate for Blacks is 25.8 percent, for Hispanics is 25.3 percent, and for children under age 18 is 20.7 percent. According to the U.S. Census, "the number of people in poverty in 2009 (43.6 million) is the largest number in the 51 years for which poverty estimates have been published." The recession has also left 13.9 million people unemployed, thereby putting another population at risk of falling into poverty.

We simply cannot afford to balance the budget on the backs of the poor. The COPC shares the concerns of an earlier letter sent to you in late June 27, 2011 by a list of think tank and nonprofit organizations advocating that deficit reduction efforts do not result in an increase in poverty. While we understand the need for fiscal responsibility, we also recognize the need to invest in programs that protect poor and vulnerable communities, especially in the face of economic hardship. Therefore, staying committed to safety net programs in health, education, housing, and employment is both a moral and economic responsibility that we cannot afford to ignore in the midst of deficit reduction efforts.

Sincerely,

BARBARA LEE,
Co-Chair, COPC.

JOE BACA,
Co-Chair, COPC.

G.K. BUTTERFIELD,
Co-Chair, COPC.

JOHN CONYERS,
Co-Chair, COPC.

MIKE HONDA,
Co-Chair, COPC.

VERONICA'S STORY ABOUT SNAP, MEDI-CAL
AND JOB TRAINING, CALIFORNIA
(By Veronica of San Jose, CA)

I am the American Dream!

My name is Veronica, and I have such an immense gratitude for federal programs such as SNAP/Food Stamps and Medi-Cal.* I am ESPECIALLY grateful for the Federal Stimulus programs that finally got my family off welfare.

My spouse and I were teenage parents in 1990 and relied on welfare to bring up our daughter until 1993, when we were able to get good jobs and get off federal assistance.

We had our son in 1995 and thought we would never need welfare again. We were wrong. I cannot pinpoint an exact time when we crumbled, because we cracked slowly. My husband's two closest cousins were murdered and he began abusing drugs to cope. I pretended it wasn't happening and kept working harder.

The bottom fell out when my son was diagnosed with Diabetes (type 1) in 2001. My world imploded. I was on leave from work through the Family and Medical Leave Act because both of my parents had been diagnosed with diabetes earlier that year—and then my son. So I went back on welfare, because I could not go back to work.

Thank God I was given the opportunity to help myself and my family through the assistance of different federal programs. When I tried to go back to work full-time and my son needed more care at home, I was given child care assistance so I could support my family and help my son. I was offered counseling, job training, and in the fall of 2009, the opportunity to work at Second Harvest Food Bank as an administrative assistant through the Federal Stimulus program.

I knew I was a hard worker but needed an opportunity to show it. When the program ended I was offered employment permanently at the food bank. I was one of 2010's Client Success Stories for Santa Clara County.

I am still married to my husband Ray. We have three beautiful children, Danielle, Raymond Jr., and Albert. There is NO WAY I could have kept my family together without the help of the programs such as SNAP/food stamps, Medi-Cal, and job training.

I will not say I will never need federal assistance again, but my husband and I know things happen for a reason. We found unknown strength, faith, and resilience in our downfall. We will do everything we can to stay self-sufficient, but cannot say enough about the blessed safety net.

THE PROMISE OF AMERICA

The SPEAKER pro tempore. The Chair recognizes the gentleman from Georgia (Mr. WOODALL) for 5 minutes.

Mr. WOODALL. I'm conflicted as I come to the floor today, Mr. Speaker. I'd actually planned to talk about tax reforms this morning. The Ways and Means Committee for the first time in 10 years is holding a hearing on the Fair Tax next Tuesday, July 26. The Fair Tax is a proposal that abolishes the income tax system in this country that punishes people based on what they earn and creates a consumption tax that rewards people based on how much they save. And as we talk about poverty here this morning, as we talk about how to get folks back on their feet, the problem in this country, Mr. Speaker, is not that we don't bring in enough revenue. It's that we spend too much money. There is a bias in our culture now towards consumption as opposed to thrift.

Now, when did that happen? I wish I were a better student of history. I know that Ben Franklin shared with us that "a penny saved is a penny earned." I know that our colleagues in the past said if we talk about a million here and a million there, pretty soon we're talking about real money.

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My grandfather was a United Methodist minister in the South Georgia Conference. He was a Navy chaplain during World War II, and went down and worked the South Georgia circuit after the war. They'd get together and get all the little nubs of the candles