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Tyler Morning Telegraph

Telling the whole story about spending cuts

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There's an approach to covering budgets that makes for interesting storytelling, but bad reporting. It's finding compelling beneficiaries of government programs, and portraying them as victims.

We saw that last week, when we were told President Donald Trump's proposed cuts to Meals on Wheels would leave senior citizens hungry, though the narrative was quickly debunked. Meals on Wheels is not a federal program and receives no direct federal funding, according to USA Today. And while states can use community development block grants to fund a portion of their Meals on Wheels programs, this is only a small percentage of the overall budget for Meals on Wheels.

The Cato Institute's Chris Edwards documents another example. He points to a Washington Post story from last week that claims, "Trump's budget targets rural development programs that provide a quiet lifeline."

It's about a program to help rural Appalachian communities pay for infrastructure programs, like one in Hagerhill, Kentucky.

"The Appalachian Regional Commission, an independent federal agency, helped jump-start it last year with a multiagency \$2.75 million grant to a state organization that developed it," the Post reports. "But after decades of work, the commission's future is in doubt, with the Trump administration's 2018 budget proposal threatening to eliminate funding for the commissions and other rural development endeavors. Voters in this part of the country, which overwhelmingly supports President Trump, could be disproportionately affected if that happens."

The Post focuses its lens and its reporting on a Kentucky man taking advantage of a job training program.

"I think it's horrible," the man said. "I think that maybe there are some things that don't need to be funded, but don't cut things that are working like the Appalachian Regional Commission and the work that they've done."

Edwards explains what's wrong with this approach to reporting on the Trump budget.

“The story presents individuals in Appalachia as victims, and federal money as the only savior,” he writes. “It does not focus on personal responsibility, local government policies, or federal program failures. The reporter does not mention any studies examining the ARC’s overall effectiveness, or whether auditors have done a benefit-cost analysis to see whether the program’s benefits outweigh the costs.”

There’s a laziness to this kind of reporting. It’s easy to tell sad stories about people who might be affected by budget cuts. It’s harder to do actual analysis.

Edwards cites this sentence from the Post story: “The federal funding [for ARC] often goes toward repairing essential services rural towns cannot afford on their own, such as fixing broken sewer systems.”

Edwards agrees that sewer systems are essential local services.

“As such, they should receive a high priority in state and local budgets,” he writes. “If sewers in Appalachia are not being fixed, then state and local governments are failing at a core responsibility. Reporters should ask why that is.”

But this doesn’t fit the narrative. Republican budget cutters are mean, and people will suffer if this program - or any other program - is cut.

Budgets are serious business. They deserve better reporting.