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The GOP poverty agenda, decoded

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President Trump, in a recent address to the Conservative Political Action Conference, said it was time for Americans to “get off welfare and get back to work.” Ben Carson, whom the Senate confirmed Thursday as Trump’s secretary of housing and urban development, speaks about poverty as a trap.

And Republicans in Congress, notably House Speaker Paul D. Ryan, have been pushing a poverty agenda that includes giving states more “flexibility,” “streamlining” federal assistance programs and “leveraging private sector dollars.”

But what the heck does all this jargon actually mean?

We ran these phrases and more through a GOP decoder. Translations are below:

‘Welfare to work’

“It’s time for all Americans to get off of welfare and get back to work — you’re going to love it, you’re going to love it, you’re going to love it.” -- Trump at CPAC, Feb. 24

“For the last several decades, federal policies to combat poverty have been based on more programs, increased spending, and bigger benefits — not on a shared responsibility to move from welfare to work.” -- Ryan’s 2016 “Poverty, Opportunity, and Upward Mobility” plan

Trump and Ryan paint a picture of those who turn to income assistance as Americans who do not work or don’t want to work, when in fact President Bill Clinton’s 1996 welfare reform law required many who receive federal benefits to work or look for a job. Many are working two or three jobs, but don’t make a living wage.

“They are trying to evoke two categories of people: those on welfare and those who work,” said Melissa Boteach, vice president of the poverty to prosperity program at the Center for American Progress, a liberal think tank in Washington. “The reality is much more complex.”

Seventy percent of Americans turn to a government benefit for people in financial need at some point in their working years, said Boteach, citing a 2014 White House economic report.

Strengthening work requirements would further restrict access to programs that are already hard to get, she said.

Conservatives, naturally, beg to differ.

“We’re not trying to cut anyone off,” said Robert Rector, senior fellow who focuses on welfare at the Heritage Foundation, another Washington-based think tank. “Efficient welfare gives aid, but it also tries to stimulate positive behavior. We’re not rewarding non-work, which is what traditional welfare does.”

‘State flexibility,’ otherwise known as ‘block grants,’ ‘local control’ or ‘streamlining’

“If states had more flexibility to design customized packages of benefits, that could help make sure anyone who works more ends up better off.” — Ryan’s 2016 “Poverty, Opportunity, and Upward Mobility” plan

This means turning over federal programs to be run by states as they see fit, and thus, Boteach said, ending the federal guarantee of assistance. It’s not just Republicans who have employed such terms. President Clinton’s welfare reform law, formally called the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act, overhauled the nation’s cash assistance system under traditional welfare and created the Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) block grant.

The result: cash assistance shrank over time as states funneled the money into filling state budget gaps or replacing existing state spending, according to a 2015 report by the left-leaning Center on Budget and Policy Priorities. Only a quarter of the money is now spent on basic assistance for poor families, compared to 70 percent when the TANF block grants began.

The average monthly caseload for the national TANF program has also fallen over the past 20 years, from 4.4 million families in 1996 to 1.6 million in 2014 even as poverty has worsened, according a 2016 report by the center. Since 1996, the number of families receiving assistance has fallen from 68 out of every 100 families in poverty to just 23.

“You have wildly different access to safety net regimes depending on where you live,” Boteach said. “Some states have essentially turned it into a slush fund to use for things it wasn’t intended for.”

Michael Tanner, a senior fellow who focuses on social welfare issues at the Cato Institute, a libertarian think tank in Washington, said block grants were meant to encourage states to experiment.

Tanner said the United States spends more than \$688 billion a year running more than 100 federal anti-poverty programs, with little to show for it. The goal of poverty programs should be to get more people out of poverty, he said, not just to “make poverty less uncomfortable than it is.”

Block grants allow "50 states to try it 50 different ways," he said. States should both be allowed to move money around in any way they see fit, he said, as well as be held accountable for whether they are actually moving people out of poverty.

"I want to see 50 flowers bloom," Tanner said. "If Mississippi screws up, that's unfortunate for Mississippi, but at least it doesn't hurt New York."

"Leverage private sector dollars"

"The point is to do this in conjunction with the private sector, the public sector, the charitable sector. Leverage other dollars that are already out there that are working at odds with the federal government to work alongside so that we are all pulling together." — Ryan at a 2014 Christian Science Monitor breakfast

In short, this means to privatize public assistance, Boteach said. She said many Republican leaders think charities, churches and other nonprofits will pick up the slack when public investments in poverty programs diminish over time. Private charities have more flexibility to intervene in individuals' circumstances because they don't work under the constraints of federal rules, said Tanner.

But Boteach characterizes this as wishful thinking. She points out, for example, that food pantries typically experience a spike during the last week of the month when food stamp benefits have often run out. During the recession, she said, the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), as food stamps are now called, automatically adjusted to the increase in need, whereas donations to food pantries decreased because many families could no longer afford to donate.

The bottom line: "All of these terms are pretty much code for C-U-T," Boteach said.

The House speaker's office disagrees with that assessment. "Programmatic changes that change how money is spent have nothing to do with budgetary levels," said AshLee Strong, Ryan's spokeswoman.

The current welfare system has failed poor people, Tanner said, but Republicans may differ in their perspectives. "Trump sees welfare as people taking advantage of the system," Tanner said, "whereas Ryan sees welfare as people trapped in the system."

Trump has not provided details into how his administration would reform federal anti-poverty programs. But Tanner said it's clear the president distinguishes between welfare, "where he sees a lot of fraud and abuse," and Social Security and Medicare, which Tanner said "is basically welfare for old white people. Trump doesn't seem to get upset about that spending."