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It's time to get serious about welfare reform

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Following the critical passage of tax reform, congressional Republicans and President Trump might now turn their attention to reforming at least some of the nation's vast, too often ineffective social safety net.

In 1964, President Lyndon Johnson declared an "unconditional war on poverty in America." Since then, the United States has spent \$23 trillion on anti-poverty programs, including nearly \$1 trillion annually in recent years. Adjusted for inflation, according to the Heritage Foundation, this spending, which doesn't include programs such as Social Security or Medicare, amounts to "three times the cost of all military wars in U.S. history since the American Revolution."

Yet, despite this spending, we are far from eradicating poverty. After years of hovering around 15 percent following the Great Recession, the national poverty rate in 2016 reported by the Census was 12.7 percent. When accounting for factors like the price of housing, the national poverty rate under the Census Bureau's Supplemental Poverty Measure rises to 14.7 percent, while in places like California it surpasses 20 percent.

More than \$23 trillion and over half a century later, these are not the sort of results anyone who values a social safety net should be contented with. Before continuing down this road of pouring vast sums of money on programs that aren't necessarily producing results, there ought to be greater study of federal anti-poverty programs, their efficiency and effectiveness.

One problem, as Michael Tanner of the Cato Institute recently noted in *National Review*, is that our current welfare system "is a bureaucratic nightmare." With over 100 different programs with distinct requirements, management and oversight, "the system increasingly provides payments not to the poor themselves, but to an industry of landlords, doctors, grocers and others who serve the poor."

Given the often complicated set of rules around the numerous programs, welfare beneficiaries sometimes find themselves losing out more in benefits than they'd gain from working, among the many incentive problems that traps many from being able to move forward with their lives.

These are among the many issues that the White House and Congress can and should seek solutions to. Of course, with many rural Republican voters reliant on public assistance, even Republican members of Congress can be vulnerable to political backlash if they go too far in curtailing welfare spending.

But the goal shouldn't be to cut for the sake of cutting. While President Trump has lamented that "people are taking advantage of the system," most people receiving benefits from America's social safety net actually are in need. Ensuring our social safety net is effective and encourages able-bodied people to work and support themselves as soon and as much as they can is something that should be able to yield bipartisan support.

Ultimately, of course, the best way to combat poverty is to ensure America's economy continues to grow and jobs remain accessible to as many Americans as possible. Tax reform and Trump's halt on excessive new regulations are important steps toward that. But the White House and Congress shouldn't be content with that. Other areas are ripe for improvement as well, like occupational licensing reform to remove artificial barriers to work.

Former President Barack Obama said during his 2015 State of the Union address that "When what you're doing doesn't work for 50 years, it's time to try something new." He was talking about the embargo with Cuba, but what is true of relations with Cuba is true of the way we deliver aid to the neediest among us as well. It's time to get serious about welfare reform.