



Twelve Questions on How Anti-Poverty Proposals Affect People with Disabilities and Their Families

Our nation's 57 million Americans with disabilities and their families have a major stake in ongoing conversations about increasing opportunity and reducing poverty. Disability and poverty intersect in many ways: you're more likely to experience poverty if you have a disability, and if you live in poverty, you're more likely to experience a disability of your own or in your family. Any proposal to reduce poverty and its effects must take into account the lives and realities of people with disabilities and their families.

Here are 12 questions that Congress, the media, and the public should consider when evaluating anti-poverty proposals:

1. Does the proposal set up cuts to services and benefits?

Historically, initiatives to consolidate federal programs and transition them to block grants typically lead to funding declines over time, often dramatically – setting up cuts to effective, essential services and benefits. Flat funding under block grants erodes purchasing power over time, and flexibility often means that states use block grant dollars to plug gaps in state budgets rather than continue necessary investments. Effective federal programs such as Medicaid, the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), public housing and Section 8 housing assistance, and the Low Income Home Energy Assistance Program (LIHEAP) play a critical role in leveling the playing field by helping low-income Americans meet their basic needs. Any cuts to services and benefits under these essential programs could have devastating effects, particularly for people with disabilities and their families.

2. How does the proposal define “people with disabilities”?

People with disabilities are incredibly diverse, including people with typically "visible" disabilities – such as people who use wheelchairs or mobility devices – as well as people with often “invisible” disabilities, such as mental illness, epilepsy, or diabetes. For people with "invisible" disabilities, misconceptions persist that because a person appears “able-bodied” they should not be eligible for needed services and supports. Proposals that define the disability population narrowly will be drastically under-inclusive. Examples of overly-narrow definitions include those that look only at people who are not “able-bodied adults without disabilities”, or that look only at Social Security or Supplemental Security Income (SSI) disability beneficiaries. These definitions also fail to include families –

including spouses, children, and parents – of the majority of people with disabilities.

3. Does the proposal include work requirements?

Our nation’s anti-poverty programs seek to increase opportunity while meeting peoples’ basic needs, such as housing, food, and health care. Without these services and supports, many people with disabilities and their families would not be able to work. For example, Medicaid specifically covers services, such as attendant care, that are critical to enable people with significant disabilities to have basic needs met, to get to and from work, and to do their jobs. Requiring individuals to work in order to qualify for these programs would create a situation in which people cannot access the services they need to work without working—setting up a completely contradictory policy. Any policy proposal with the goal of increasing work must ensure that a person’s basic needs are met and that people with disabilities have access to the services and supports they need, including employment-related services.

4. Does the proposal strengthen, preserve, or narrow eligibility pathways, including for people with disabilities and their families?

People with disabilities access essential programs such as Medicaid, SNAP, public housing and Section 8 housing assistance, and LIHEAP through diverse eligibility pathways. Many of these programs provide categorical eligibility, such as eligibility for people who receive SSI. Categorical eligibility must be maintained; it reduces unnecessary, burdensome administrative hurdles for both individuals and the state. Additionally, many people with disabilities access these programs through other pathways, such as income-based eligibility. For example, only 6.1 million people receive SSI on the basis of a disability, while an estimated 57 million Americans have a disability. Both categorical and non-categorical eligibility pathways must be maintained.

5. Does the proposal strengthen, preserve, or erode federal assurances and standards for the types and amounts of services provided?

All too often, proposals that seek to increase flexibility at the state or local level encourage states to serve more people, but with less adequate services or benefits. Services and benefits must be adequate to meet individual needs. This includes people with disabilities who in some cases may require intense supports and services to meet their basic needs for food, shelter, health, income, and employment and to prevent dire and even life-threatening consequences if those needs go unmet. Additionally, federal assurances and standards help ensure basic consistency across states. Consistency is critical for people with disabilities and their families – such as frequently-transferred military families raising children with disabilities, or people with disabilities who need to move to a different state for employment – to be able to maintain services if they have to move for work or family reasons.

6. Does the proposal strengthen, preserve, or erode federal quality standards?

When housing is substandard, all tenants suffer. For some people with disabilities – such as individuals with severe asthma or advanced lung cancer – substandard housing can be life-threatening. This is just one example of why federal quality standards play an important role in ensuring that programs like Section 8 and SNAP continue to foster opportunity, and not put people at risk.

7. Does the proposal strengthen, preserve, or erode federal due process rights for people who are denied benefits or services?

Removing or limiting the right to appeal a denial of benefits or services would set up obstacles that could be particularly harmful for people with disabilities and their families. People with disabilities often face unique barriers to accessing benefits and services – for example, when web sites are not accessible to people who are blind or have visual impairments, when telephone help lines are not accessible to people who are deaf, or when service offices are in remote areas that are inaccessible or difficult to travel to for people with physical disabilities. Adding new hurdles would only harm people with disabilities who are eligible for, but find themselves unable to access, essential benefits and services.

8. If the proposal affects Medicaid, does it protect benefits for people with disabilities and older adults?

People with disabilities have the right to live in the community like all Americans. Medicaid services and supports are critical to the health, independence, and well-being of people with disabilities and chronic conditions. Medicaid provides comprehensive, affordable coverage to 68 million Americans, including 10 million Americans with disabilities. Cuts to Medicaid benefits that help people with disabilities to live at home and work in the community would put people at risk of harmful, costly, and unnecessary institutionalization.

9. Does the proposal include protections for children with disabilities?

Despite significant strides in public policy, people with disabilities continue to experience high levels of poverty, unemployment, and underemployment and to face significant barriers accessing pathways to opportunity such as education. To reverse this trend, proposals must focus on ensuring that children with disabilities receive the services, education, and job training needed to increase opportunity and reduce poverty. A crucial first step is ensuring that children who receive Medicaid have access to the full array of Early and Periodic Screening, Diagnosis and Treatment (EPSDT) services. Without EPSDT services, children with disabilities often cannot live up to their potential, succeed in school, and be part of the inclusive society we all wish to build. These services also help ensure families with children with disabilities have the supports and services they need to become more financially stable.

10. Does the proposal offer people with disabilities opportunities to achieve competitive, integrated employment?

People with disabilities need and want opportunities to work in the community with competitive wages and benefits. The Bureau of Labor Statistics regularly reports that the percentage of working-age people with disabilities in the labor force is about one-third that of people with no disability. On average, workers with disabilities face significant gaps in pay and compensation, compared to workers with no disability. Additionally, about one in three employment discrimination charges filed with the U.S. Equal Employment Opportunity Commission allege discrimination on the basis of disability. At the same time, many employment programs for people with disabilities, as well as basic services and supports that many people with disabilities need to work, are underfunded, resulting in waiting lists and/or inadequate levels of service. Many programs also include policy and program barriers. Proposals must ensure adequate funding and access to service, and should reduce any policy or program barriers.

11. Does the proposal strengthen, preserve, or erode opportunities for people with disabilities and their families to plan responsibly for the security of their economic futures?

People with disabilities must be afforded adequate supports to enable them to pursue opportunities to gain and maintain competitive integrated employment. In addition, people with disabilities and their families should have the opportunity to save for the future without risk of losing the benefits that allow them to live independently in the communities alongside “typically abled” peers. Any proposal aimed at reducing poverty among people with disabilities and their families must encourage, not prohibit, their ability and opportunity to save reasonable resources to assist in the security of their economic futures.

12. Does the proposal strengthen, preserve, or erode opportunities for youth with disabilities?

Guideposts for success for youth with disabilities include adequate school preparation, youth development and leadership, career preparation, connections to opportunity and resources, and positive family involvement. Proposals that reduce access to these necessary supports, and to basic needs, will only impede the positive development of youth with disabilities.

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