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Fighting the War That Never Ends

by Naureen Khan

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RICHARD A. BLOOM

Mathis: Bracing for cuts.

Don Mathis thought he had steeled himself for the worst when he sat down to watch President Obama’s State of the Union address less than a month ago.

As president and CEO of the Community Action Partnership, Mathis has spent three tough years trying to get 1,065 local assistance agencies through the economic downturn. Some help arrived in 2009 when the stimulus boosted federal spending on Community Services Block Grants from \$700 million to \$1 billion. Now, with stimulus funds winding down, Mathis was bracing for the budget to go back to pre-stimulus levels.

“We said, ‘Okay, we can tighten our belts, we can make the sacrifice, we’ll do what we need to do and try to serve more people with less.’” Mathis said. “I’m sitting there with my wife and watching the State of the Union wondering how we’re going to get through this whole mess, and then the president says, ‘I’m going to have to cut programs that really mean a lot to me, like community action programs.’

“Gulp.”

The community action program, started 47 years ago under the tutelage of the late Sargent Shriver during President Johnson’s “war on poverty,” offers a variety of services and programs aimed at low-income Americans and other disadvantaged populations.

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75 million American families. And counting.

Community action agencies do everything from operating food banks and homeless shelters to administering the Head Start program to assisting military veterans.

On the heels of the recession, the demand for those services has never been greater as the number of Americans living in poverty has reached an all-time high. Community action agencies served 20.7 million low-income people in 2009, and Mathis expects the number for 2010 to be even higher.

“Housing sales are up, the stock market’s over 1,300, and gee, isn’t life wonderful?” Mathis said. “It’s not for the bottom half of the American population that we work for and with.”

Still, with political debate centered on bringing down the deficit, Mathis wasn’t expecting to get a free pass for his program from the president, famously a former community organizer himself.

When Obama’s proposed budget was released on Monday, Mathis’s worst fears were confirmed. The Community Services Block Grant faces the prospect of being cut in half, from \$700 million to \$350 million. Although the funds are a tiny fraction of the \$3.73 trillion budget proposal, the cut would deal a devastating blow to the program, Mathis said. Because every federal dollar going to each agency is generally matched by \$2 to \$3 from local donors, the cut will actually represent closer to a 65 to 70 percent reduction, he said.

These issues hit close to home for Mathis. The product of a single-parent home, who was in foster care for a time as a child and had a ticket for free meals in high school. He started his career as a Head Start volunteer for a community action agency in Wilmington, Del., and has been part of the anti-poverty crusade ever since.

Mathis gets emotional talking about the small businesses that were able to open because of loans from community action agencies, the preschool kids who were fed through Head Start, and most of all, the hundreds of thousands of employees around the country who keep the agencies open.

“The food bank lines that were starting at 9:00 in the morning are starting at 5:00 in the morning, the people who were coming in at 7:00 in the morning to help are coming in at 6:00,” Mathis said. “They’re tired and they’re saints.... And I couldn’t work for a better bunch of people. They are just the soul of America and they help people every day.”

Many of those working for community action agencies were also involved in the Obama campaign in 2008, and, they are the supporters the president risks alienating as he aims to make concessions to congressional Republicans. Mathis himself knocked on doors and hosted house parties for Obama’s Organizing for America in 2008 and has supported some of his most controversial policies.

Now, he's baffled and disappointed by Obama's budget, and is hoping the cut will be reconsidered. Already, he's marshaled local and state elected officials and others involved in community action to write to Congress. Many members of the Congressional Black Caucus are irate as well, Mathis said.

"We're not going to get ugly. We're not going to have people show up and picket. We're not going to have people booing," he said.

"We think we can make the case that we're critically important to the economic viability of the people who have been left out.

"We're not looking for a battle. We're looking for a discussion."

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