

## Pastor Rob Weinstein's Speech at the 2017 Congressional Reception

Good afternoon! It is an honor to be here today to speak on behalf of the homeless, hungry, disabled, and poor of New Jersey's Second Congressional District. There is no greater responsibility that we have then to show up, stand up, and speak up for those who are forgotten or discarded by the policy makers and power brokers in our political system.

As one who grew up in the third poorest city in New Jersey within the poorest county in the State, and who now serves as a pastor in that same community, I have personally witnessed the daily struggles of our poorest brothers and sisters. And, as a recovering government bureaucrat, I am consistently amazed at the brokenness and ineffectiveness of our nation's social safety net systems, which many times create additional burdens to those who are already in crisis. And, as an Associate Professor of Business Studies and social scientist, I am keenly aware that many times the best fiscal policies are also the most righteous ones. Responsible and compassion public policy protects the most vulnerable and makes investments in our nation's most valuable resource: "We, the People."

Our nation was founded upon a simple, and yet profound concept, that all people are created equal, and that they are "endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty, and the Pursuit of Happiness." For these rights to be fully realized it requires that every person have housing, education, food, and healthcare. Our failure as a society to not provide these essentials elements for living is a choice and choices always have consequences.

In the vile, shallow, and ridiculous public discourse of our day, we have forgotten the values and hope that truly make America great. Under the guise of "fiscal responsibility" the President and congressional leadership are attempting to balance the budget on the backs of the poor, giving tax breaks to the wealthy, while ignoring the injustices that are morally and fiscally bankrupting this nation.

We have all witnessed the debates on the Affordable Care Act, otherwise known as ObamaCare. I am grateful to Congressman LoBiondo's opposition to the current "Repeal and Replace" measures that would devastate the vulnerable relying on the Medicaid expansion. But true leadership requires a plan to "Repair and Expand," so that everyone has good healthcare.

However, let's examine this further. For people to be healthy, they also need a home! In 2016, over a 500,000 people were homeless, with one quarter of that group being children. The effects of homelessness harms those experiencing it, but it also costs taxpayers a great deal of money. With 77,486 chronically homeless in the United States, it is estimated that this population alones costs our social service and public safety systems \$2.7 billion dollars—and these people are still homeless. If we utilize proven best practices, such as Housing First, we can save these lives and save money at the same time.

The sad news is that the draft House budget bill that was released from Committee only provides flat funding for homelessness assistance, while also putting an additional 140,000 households in risk of homelessness by not providing enough funds for Housing Vouchers. These

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vouchers keep people in their homes and jobs and children in the classroom. As the cost of housing continues to rise throughout our nation, these vouchers are an essential tool in preventing homelessness.

In New Jersey's Second Congressional District, 28% of the residents are renters and one third of the renters spend more than 50% of their income on housing. This is an unsustainable and dangerous reality for our region. This compounds the fact that poverty increased in the district by over 40%. Any cut to housing assistance will send more people to the streets, the hospitals, and our jails.

I don't believe in stating a problem without a proposed solution. So, here is my radical idea. We know that Congress needs to add \$1.5 billion to the Housing Voucher program just to maintain program levels and cover inflationary costs to ensure that every household currently receiving housing assistance can remain in their homes. However, ending homelessness and keeping people secure in their housing will only cost our nation \$20-\$23 billion, which happens to be roughly the amount spent on Christmas gifts each year. So, how do we pay for it?

According to the Brennan Center for Justice at NYU School of Law, 39% of the 2.2 million people in prison are there with little public safety rationale. They are either non-violent, lower-level offenders, or people who have already served long sentences for more serious crimes and can be safely set free. Releasing these inmates would save \$20 billion annually.

The money used to eliminate homelessness will save the \$2.7 billion spent annually on the chronically homeless to keep them in jails, hospitals, and shelters.

By investing in affordable housing for everyone and keeping people out of prison, we can actually save money annually that can be used to improve education, provide access to jobs, and ensure that everyone has healthcare.

As I stated before, good fiscal policy is many times the righteous policy. America's greatness lies in her people and when we invest in people, we will always come out ahead. I understand the system is broken, but we need public policy that builds bridges to a better future and does not make people walk the plank into hopelessness and despair.

We should all be reminded of the words by Alexis de Tocqueville, "*America is great because she is good, and if America ever ceases to be good, she will cease to be great.*" Goodness requires that we recognize that we are truly in this together and that we are our brother and sister's keeper.

So, let's not just increase the Housing Voucher program to the level it needs to sustain itself, let's focus our energies on ensuring that everyone has a place to call home! An investment in the people of the United States of America will always yield dividends for generations to come.

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Allow me to end with the timeless words of Nelson Mandela: “Overcoming poverty is not a task of charity, it is an act of justice. Like Slavery and Apartheid, poverty is not natural. It is man-made and it can be overcome and eradicated by the actions of human beings. Sometimes it falls on a generation to be great. YOU can be that great generation. Let your greatness blossom.”