

# Faith groups question whether Bush Budget 'compassionate'\_22105

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WASHINGTON (ABP)—President Bush is proposing a \$2.57 trillion federal budget for fiscal year 2006 that would substantially cut or eliminate many domestic social programs while creating or boosting funding for a handful of others that would be open to religious groups.

As presidents are required by law to do on the first Monday in February, Bush presented his proposal to Congress Feb. 7. It includes the elimination of, or significant cuts in, about 150 different domestic programs that Bush said either are not working or are redundant.

He referred to the budget proposal as “a disciplined budget” in remarks to the Detroit Economic Club. He noted that the budget increases spending on defense and homeland security while cutting spending on other domestic agencies and programs aside from entitlements such as Social Security.

“My budget reduces spending ... on non-security discretionary programs by

one percent, the most disciplined proposal since Ronald Reagan was in office,” he said.

The budget includes significant reductions in the budgets of the Department of Education as well as the Department of Housing and Urban Development. A major HUD program—the Community Development Block Grants—would be removed from that agency and folded into a new program in the Department of Commerce. However, funding for that program would be more than \$1 billion lower than the previous year’s funding level for the block grants.

Bush’s proposal also includes significant increases in funding for some programs that are open to religious social-service providers, including programs that encourage sexual abstinence among teenagers and programs for mentoring the children of prisoners.

“When I look at the overall budget, and look at it in the context of previous submissions, I think it’s a compassionate budget, in light of tight budgetary times,” said Jim Towey, director of the White House Office of Faith-Based and Community Initiatives, in a conference call with reporters shortly after the budget was released.

“All budgets reflect priorities, as well as prioritizing programs that are effective,” he added. “And (we need) to look at ways in which we can meet the needs of the American people, especially those in need.”

But many supporters of government-funded social services disagreed.

“The president said this is a budget that sets priorities, and we just don’t agree with any of the priorities in there,” said Yonce Shelton, policy director for the Christian anti-poverty group Call to Renewal. “You know, what kind of values and priorities are ones that present a rosy picture of additional support and funding and ask faith-based groups to do more of that, but then at the same time they really are cutting support mechanisms

that help support working families?”

Shelton pointed out Call to Renewal has long been a supporter of Bush’s faith-based plan to expand government’s ability to fund social services through religious groups, but the group has become increasingly critical of Bush for offering little new money for such programs.

“I think when you talk about cutting community programs, which on the other hand the administration is saying we’re trying to support with community and faith-based initiatives, you’ve got to question the integrity and honesty of that approach,” he said.

Shelton also noted that the budget proposal includes further cuts in Medicaid funding, which means cash-strapped states will have to absorb the expenses or cut some benefits of the program, which mainly helps poor and elderly people.

“Practically speaking, if you’re not helping low-income people with their healthcare, ... in the long run, that’s just going to present more of a burden to society,” he said.

But Bush said many of the cuts were in programs that were ineffective or redundant.

“The important question that needs to be asked for all constituencies is whether or not the programs achieve a certain result,” Bush told reporters. “Have you set goals, and are those goals being met? And the poor and disadvantaged absolutely ought to be asking that question too. In other words, what is the goal of a particular program? And if that goal isn’t being met, the question ought to be asked, ‘Why isn’t the goal being met?’”

Bush’s budget is likely to face major hurdles in Congress, where many of the domestic programs scheduled for cuts enjoy strong support.

Several congressional Democrats lambasted the budget , including House Minority Leader Nancy Pelosi (D-Calif.), who labeled it “immoral.” Meanwhile, key Republicans offered only tepid support, with at least three members of Congress’ Republican leadership issuing statements calling Bush’s proposal a “starting point” for the 2006 budget.

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