On July 24, 2014, U.S. House Budget Committee Chairman Paul Ryan released a discussion draft entitled Expanding Opportunity in America. That report observed, “Poverty is too high, unemployment is too high, labor-force participation is too low, and wage growth is too slow.” The report’s proposals for expansion of the Earned Income Tax Credit, education reform, and criminal justice reform merit careful consideration. However, the draft’s first chapter—“reforming the safety net”—rehashes ideas that will worsen poverty and erode what remains of the safety net.

At the heart of this “reform” is a pilot program in certain states called the Opportunity Grant (OG) “to coordinate aid for families in need” by allowing states and community groups “to test different ways of fighting poverty that will “help people not just avoid hardship—but build a successful career.”

Flexibility in exchange for more accountability.”

The report ignores the record since 2000. This precedent between 1992, when it was 55 percent, to 39 percent reducing poverty among children of single mothers between 1992 and 1996. OG contains multiple problems, including its flat funding which guarantees that more and concentrated services provided to some people mean fewer dollars for a safety net for others. Moreover, we should look carefully at the entire history of 1996’s welfare reform—the rationale for OG. Proponents proudly cite outcomes attributed to the law during its first years: more low-income mothers at work, fewer children in poverty, and a reduction in the number and percentage of poor families receiving TANF benefits. But that picture fades upon a longer and closer look.

In August 2014, The Center for Budget and Policy Priorities (CBPP) summarized the impacts of the 1996 law:

- **Temporary Assistance for Needy Families**
  - Families with children in “deep poverty” (with incomes below half of the poverty line) dropped to a low of about $2 million in 2000. Now it is above 3 million, although TANF caseloads continued to drop.
  - With states shifting funding, individual TANF family benefits also declined. CBPP continues, “In the median state in 2013, a family of three received $428 per month; in 14 states, such a family lost 2 million in 2000. Now it is above 3 million, although TANF caseloads continued to drop.
  - With states shifting funding, individual TANF family benefits also declined. CBPP continues, “In the median state in 2013, a family of three received $428 per month; in 14 states, such a family received less than $300. TANF benefits are below 50 percent of the federal poverty line in 50 states and below 20 percent of the poverty line in 26 states.”
  - AFDC average grants were notoriously low for decades; after 1996, the OG block grant, benefits in 48 states eroded further, so that TANF cash benefits today are worth at least 20 percent less than in 1996.

Chairman Ryan’s proposal would continue serious block grant flaws—devastating poor families—and expand them to the SNAP program, which currently is the one almost-universal safety net program that meets the changing needs of the eligible poor in a timely fashion and has significantly improved child and family nutrition in this country.

ENDNOTES

2. Ibid., p. 7.
3. Ibid., p. 15.
4. Ibid., p. 16.
5. Ibid., p. 12.
7. Ibid.
8. Ibid.
ANOTHER MISLEADING PROPOSAL: U.S. House Budget Committee Opportunity Opportunity Proposal

BY FRED KAMMER, S.J.

On July 24, 2014, U.S. House Budget Committee Chairman Paul Ryan released a discussion draft entitled Expanding Opportunities in America. That report observed, “Poverty is too high, unemployment is too high, labor-force participation is too low, and wage growth is too slow.” The report’s proposals for expansion of the Earned Income Tax Credit, education reform, and criminal justice reform merit careful consideration. However, the draft’s first chapter—”reforming the safety net”—rehashes ideas that will worsen poverty and erode what remains of the safety net. At the heart of this “reform” is a pilot program in certain states called the Opportunity Grant (OG) “to coordinate aid for families in need” by allowing states and community groups “to test different ways of fighting poverty that will “help people not just avoid hardship—but build a successful career.” Fighting poverty that will “help people not just avoid hardship—but build a successful career” will require a pilot program in certain states called the Opportunity Grant (OG) “to coordinate aid for families in need” by allowing states and community groups “to test different ways of fighting poverty that will “help people not just avoid hardship—but build a successful career.” At the heart of this “reform” is a pilot program in certain states called the Opportunity Grant (OG) “to coordinate aid for families in need” by allowing states and community groups “to test different ways of fighting poverty that will “help people not just avoid hardship—but build a successful career.” At the heart of this “reform” is a pilot program in certain states called the Opportunity Grant (OG) “to coordinate aid for families in need” by allowing states and community groups “to test different ways of fighting poverty that will “help people not just avoid hardship—but build a successful career.”

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