

THE BUFFALO NEWS

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THURSDAY, FEBRUARY 13, 2020

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FINAL EDITION

Budget plan cuts items important to WNYers

Trump's 2021 proposal targets social safety nets

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NEWS WASHINGTON BUREAU CHIEF

WASHINGTON – President Trump released his proposed fiscal 2021 budget earlier this week, and it offered what his earlier budgets suggested, only more so.

It proposes slashing or ending programs that are hugely important to Western New York – from Medicare and Medicaid to home heating assistance and urban development programs.

And while Trump has reversed course and vowed to fully fund the Great Lakes Restoration Initiative, plenty of other environmental programs would suffer deep cuts.

Trump's \$4.8 trillion spending plan is just that: a plan. Again and again, Congress has rejected Trump's spending proposals out of hand.

"My hope is that this will occur again this year," said Rep. Brian Higgins, a Buffalo Democrat who serves on the House Budget Committee. Dismissing the Trump spending plan as "a wish list," Higgins added: "This is a budget that lacks the big ideas critical to advancing the economy for everyone while increasing the debt."

But Rep. Tom Reed, a Corning Republican, indicated the budget, while flawed, is a useful document.

"I think the president has demonstrated that he'll put a marker down, and he forces us as legislators to defend what we believe are appropriate investments of the taxpayer dollars and the prioritization of those dollars," Reed said. "To me, that's not a bad outcome of this type of approach because we now have to go and defend these programs and services."

Here's an item-by-item look at what Trump proposes for programs that are important to Western New Yorkers:

Medicare

One of the few new items in Trump's proposed 2021 budget is the first round of cuts in Medicare's expected growth that would total \$756 billion. Most of that money would come out of the reimbursements that the government pays to doctors and other Medicare providers.

Over time, the federal government wants to pay less money to the doctors and hospitals who serve the nearly 200,000 Medicare recipients in Erie County and millions more nationwide.

Would that force doctors to stop taking Medicare patients or force hospitals to make changes that affect patients? Advocates of the Medicare program fear that it would.

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“One would hope that in an election year when politicians like to put forward their most popular ideas, the president would understand the benefits of protecting our most cherished income and health security programs,” said Max Richtman, president and CEO of the National Committee to Preserve Social Security and Medicare.

The president appears to think he’s doing just that. Two days before releasing his budget, Trump tweeted: “We will not be touching your Social Security and Medicare in Fiscal 2021 Budget.”

Medicaid

Trump is also looking for big cuts in Medicaid, the federal/state health plan for lower-income Americans. His spending plan calls for \$920 billion less in federal Medicaid spending over the next 10 years.

The proposal revives a block-grant proposal that would shift more of Medicaid’s cost to the states. In addition, the spending plan ends federal funding for the expansion of Medicaid under the Affordable Care Act, and forces those enrolled in the program to requalify more often. Advocates for low-income Americans worry that the cuts would have a dramatic impact on people enrolled in Medicaid, which total about 280,000 people in Erie County.

Nationwide, “the proposed cuts would cause millions of people to lose coverage,” Aviva Aron-Dine, vice president for health policy at the left-leaning Center for Budget and Policy Priorities, said in a blog post.

But Trump administration officials contend the cuts in future Medicaid spending merely aim to cut waste rather than patient services.

“Reducing the cost of health care is not a cut,” said Russ Vought, acting director of the Office of Management and Budget. “Medicaid will grow more than 3% on average, which is much higher than the rate of inflation.”

Aid to families

The Trump budget once again proposes eliminating the Low Income Home Energy Assistance Program, which serves about 70,000 Erie County families.

In addition, his spending plan would cut funding for the Children’s Health Insurance Program – Child Health Plus in New York – by about 10%, while reducing the cost of the Social Security disability program by tightening eligibility and work requirements. Trump also recycles his proposal to tighten food stamp eligibility requirements, a move that could trim 700,000 people from the rolls nationwide.

Those items are likely nonstarters in the Democratic House, and the Democratic minority in the Senate will be sure to fight them, too.

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“They’re poor, take it away.’ – Is that what this country stands for?” Senate Minority Leader Charles E. Schumer, a New York Democrat, said earlier this week. “Is that what our Judeo-Christian tradition stands for? Absolutely not.”

But in the budget proposal, the Trump administration said there was a good reason for all of those cuts.

“The president has laid out a vision to drive down deficits and debt through spending restraint in every budget he has submitted to the Congress,” said Trump’s spending plan, which nonetheless includes a deficit of nearly \$1 trillion.

Aid to communities

Once again, the president suggested eliminating the Community Development Block Grant program, Buffalo’s single largest source of direct federal aid, bringing about \$14 million to the city annually.

The HOME Investment Partnerships program, which brought more than \$5 million to the Buffalo area last year for housing development, would be eliminated, too. So would the Heritage Partnership Program, which funds the Niagara Falls National Heritage Area.

Meantime, agencies important to the Buffalo Niagara Medical Campus – the National Institutes of Health and the National Cancer Institute – would suffer budget cuts of 7% and 9%, respectively.

Environmental programs

For the first time in the Trump era, his annual budget proposes no cut in funding for the Great Lakes Restoration Initiative, the program responsible for the cleanup of the Buffalo River and other onetime environmental wastelands. What’s more, the budget increases funding for the **West Valley Demonstration Project**, the Cattaraugus County nuclear waste site, to \$88 million – a 17% increase.

But the spending plan cuts funding for the Army Corps of Engineers – which maintains Buffalo’s waterways – by nearly half. The Trump budget also cuts federal funding for improvements to local sewage and drinking water systems, and trims back environmental enforcement through a 27% budget cut at the Environmental Protection Agency.

Adding it all up, Laura Rubin, director of the Healing Our Waters – Great Lakes Coalition, said: “This budget is one step forward and three steps backward.”

Unveiling the cuts, EPA Administrator Andrew Wheeler took a much different view.

“Under President Trump’s leadership, I am certain that we will inspire the next generation of environmental leaders to continue building on our progress for the next 50 years,” he said.

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Copies of President Trump's 2021 budget are shown Monday in Washington. Once again, the president suggested eliminating the Community Development Block Grant program, Buffalo's single largest source of direct federal aid, bringing about \$14 million to the city annually. Getty Images