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“Ending Poverty and Building Equity in the Federal Budget”

TRANSCRIPT: *(Featuring Angela Glover Blackwell, Founder and CEO of PolicyLink; Jim Wallis, CEO of Sojourners and Editor-in-Chief of Sojourners Magazine; and Debbie Weinstein, Executive Director of the Coalition for Human Needs)*

RON STIEF: Good morning, everybody in the West, and good afternoon in the East. I would like to welcome you to the first call of our PolicyLink call-in series. And a call really which is biweekly for advocates, elected officials and staff, foundations. It's here to help us track progress on equity in the recovery to all join in the conversation and to do what we do best, is to advocate and find out ways that we can advocate on a number of issues. So this recovery briefing series, I just wanted to say a little bit. In two weeks, on Friday, April 24th, we're going to be covering transparency and accountability in the recovery at the same time. In fact, we've already gotten a couple of questions on that for this one. But that's the topic for two weeks from now. You can go to PolicyLink.org to sign up for that call. So after I introduce each speaker, they'll have seven minutes, and then we'll have ample time for questions. As our host said, callers, you are on mute. But you can submit questions at any time. Email them to:

conferencecall@policylink.org. And a reminder again that this will be recorded and there will be a transcript posted up on Monday. So let's begin. We've got three amazing speakers that are doing a lot of work on our topic, “Ending Poverty and Building Equity in the Federal Budget”. We have Angela Glover Blackwell who's Founder and CEO of PolicyLink in Oakland, California. PolicyLink is a national research and action institute, advancing economic and social equity by lifting up what works. We've got Jim Wallis, CEO of Sojourners and Editor-in-Chief,

Sojourners Magazine in Washington, D.C. Sojourners is an organization that was founded in 1971, rooted in the biblical call to social justice, and is hard at work out there building a movement and inspiring hope on a range of issues where faith intersects with public life. And then our last speaker will be Debbie Weinstein, who is Executive Director of the Coalition for Human Needs in Washington, D.C. They've just been doing an incredible lift here in Washington on this federal budget. Coalition for Human Needs is an alliance of national organizations working to promote public policies addressing the needs of low income and vulnerable people. And again, this is Ron Stief. I'm the Equity, now Senior Associate at PolicyLink. And I want to set a little bit of context before we move it on and Angela gets us started. As most of us know, I think, both the House and the Senate have passed versions of the budget. And the final decisions will be made when they return the week of April 20th from the Congressional Recess. At that point, they'll be coming up with their conference report, and then we'll be needing to head to a final vote, maybe before the end of April or early May. The budget is really where the nation articulates the priorities of the President and the Congress. It sets the blueprint for appropriations that will be voted later on, and appropriations as you'll hear I think from Debbie and others. This is where the real money gets attached to the guidelines that we're talking about now for the federal budget. We have an incredible opportunity, and we couldn't be doing this call at a better time, to really weigh on on these priorities. Then let me say from the outset, we are in deep trouble as a nation and we're trying to dig ourselves out. The Congressional Budget Office is expecting this to be the most severe recession since World War II. So I think for those of us who go back for years working on the federal budget issues, this really raises the stake in the federal budget conversation this year, possibly like no other year. And the lives of millions literally do hang in the balance on the decisions that are going to be

made on the budget. One final thing is, about this federal budget which is for Fiscal Year 2010, I do believe that what we've seen so far -- and I know there's a lot of work left to do and a lot of advocacy to do -- but this budget really does represent a major shift in the spending priorities of the country, and really I hope is the start of a new national conversation on how we restore equity, rebuild our country, and reestablish a new American presence at home and in the world. And so with that backdrop about why we're here talking about the budget, I would like to turn it over to our first speaker, Glover Blackwell. Angela, please?

ANGELA GLOVER BLACKWELL: Hello, everybody. I am so pleased that you've joined the call. And I know who many of you are on this call. And we have been excited and honored by the hard work you have been doing on the ground, starting with making sure that we got the Recovery Package, then that the recovery package now is being translated on the ground to achieve the equity results that we want. As Ron said, this is an unprecedented moment. And we actually began to see what we could do as government and communities working together with the Recovery Package. This budget builds on much that was there. In the recovery, we actually had a focus on making sure that we actually begin to restore the safety net, expanding Food Stamps and Unemployment Insurance. We also deepened our commitment to making sure that people who go to work every day can keep their families out of poverty, expanding the earned income tax credit and child care. And then through the infrastructure and green technology investments in the Recovery Package we began to invest in communities that have physically been left behind, and create an opportunity for people to be able to get jobs that prepare them and their communities for the 21st century. All this is happening because we're working hard at home. As we now look at the budget, we have an opportunity to build on these things. Equity is what we are committed to at PolicyLink. When we use that term we are talking about nothing

less than just and fair inclusion, building a society in which everybody can participate and everybody can prosper. And the budget, setting the guidelines for how we begin to get there, really is the most progressive budget that I'm sure we've seen in our lifetimes, just as this is the most progressive administration that we have seen. And it happens in an unprecedented time of economic crisis and suffering. And so the focus on education, on health care reform, on building a green technology -- they're absolutely essential. And what really inspires me is that, at this time, many people who come from many different perspectives -- political as well as people who work at the grassroots level and people who are in corporate America -- are saying that we have to create a different environment. I've had the honor to serve as a Commissioner on the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, Commission to Build a Healthier America. The report from them that just came out last week, the recommendations, [housed?] in a report called "Beyond Health Care: New Directions for a Healthier America" -- and there, even though talking about health and wellbeing, the biggest recommendation has to do with increasing early childhood development. That one of the recommendations is, insure that all children have high-quality, early development support: child care, education and other services. The budget asks that we ought to be focusing on and really are very consistent with this recommendation -- child care and early education. We need to expand access to child care, early Head Start, Head Start. For starters, this budget should include \$4.2 billion in additional spending in that arena. Also, in the commissioned report, we called for being able to support children, making sure that anything, any place where they are, that we support the nutritional requirements that have been well established. This really gets directly at something that we need to focus on in the budget -- support funding for the Women, Infants and Children Nutrition Program, and make sure that we spend at least a billion a year over ten years for the upcoming Trial Nutrition Reauthorization,

that much in terms of increase. And so the point that I want to make is that the budget has within it the things that the larger society knows that we need to do in order to advance equity. On the green jobs issue, there is no question that we need to become green. But we need to become green and equitable. We need green jobs, and these green jobs need to reach the people who need employment, who need to have opportunities to enter the work force in jobs that we know are going to be there for the future. And so I want to conclude my opening remark [things?].

One, these are unprecedented times and unprecedented times call for unprecedented actions. Two, we have leadership coming out of the White House that is aligned with our goals for building an equitable society. Three, it will not happen unless we activate our networks, make sure they understand that this moment is our moment, and it is up to us to be able to send the messages to all, including members of Congress, members of the Senate, to make sure that they understand that we have to act now. We have to take the principles embodied in this budget; we have to translate it into real dollar figures that allows us to be able to build a society in which everybody can participate and everybody can prosper.

RON STIEF: Angela, thank you very much. We now turn to Jim Wallis of Sojourners. Jim?

JIM WALLIS: Hello, everybody. It's a week of religious holidays for a number of us, so this is an appropriate conversation, because these are religious issues. I've often said that a budget is a moral issue, a moral document. And I want to tell a couple of stories to make that point. A couple of years ago a number of faith community leaders who, actually who work with the poor every day in their neighborhoods around the country, came to Washington [about?] a different budget, an earlier budget. And we went to the Cannon Office Building of the House, and on the steps we had a, we had a vigil; we had a preaching service and we prayed. And as we knelt on those steps and prayed about a budget that wasn't responsive to the needs of low-income people,

we were arrested and put in jail. And then two years later we have a different kind of budget. Then I went back to the Senate this time to give thanks for a budget that really does respond to the interests of low-income people. In fact, I was on a White House phone call right after the budget came out, and here were [officially?] the Obama team going through the budget, agency by agency. And then on the line were a bunch of us from the faith community and poverty activists around the country. And the focus of the call was how this budget really does impact, benefit low-income families and vulnerable people. Now that's the first time in my life that I've been on a government phone call where that was even the question. Peter Orszag was at a seder I was at a couple of nights ago, and I told him the story. And I said, Peter, I'm sitting there in this conference room by myself, and the talk is all wonky policy talk. You had to know policy to even follow the conversation. It wasn't inspirational preaching by any means. But as people went through the budget, department by department, I found myself peering up. I was kind of sitting there weeping in a budget talk. Because here were things in the budget that many of us have been arrested for in the past, and now they're there. But as Angela said, the budget being passed was the beginning of a process and not the end. We have conference now and then a final vote. But then after that, we have...months of appropriations. People think because a budget passes the things that an Administration put in are in the pipeline now. And of course that isn't true. I was talking to Martha Coven of the Domestic Policy Team -- she's the poverty point person there at the White House -- and she said, there's going to be big fights over nutrition, child nutrition; over the refundable child tax credit; over housing; over education; over energy; over these big ticket items that are in the budget she says we're going to have big fights. And we have to make sure that's true. We have to make sure there are big fights over these critical issues that, unless they pass, there won't be any change for low-income people. So I want to echo what

Angela said. I want to first of all thank her for this call and for your whole network and all the work that you all do. [I knew?] they were [talking?] the call, and I said, our network, the faith community and Sojourners and all of that, we want to make a real partnership with all of you over these next few months. We have a big mobilization at the end of April, April 26th to 29th, about a thousand, two thousand faith leaders and activists that come from all across the country. And you're all welcome to come, by the way. The President we hope will be speaking to us on Monday. Tuesday we go to the capital for a prayer vigil. This time though we're, I'm calling it "Watch and Pray" -- two biblical terms where the Senators and the Congress are told that we're watching, we're watching these votes, watching what happens; and we're praying for them -- praying they have the courage to defend low-income people and push back all the arguments and special interests and all the deficit reduction on the backs of poor people we've seen for so long, [and?] that won't occur. And so we're going to watch and pray. Jim [Claiborne's?] going to welcome us; a lot of the members [or the?] leaders are coming; and I think we're going to train people, not just for that...day on that Tuesday, but for going back to their communities over these weeks and months, and make sure we're there. Melody Barnes told me in a meeting a few weeks ago, she said, you know, we trust the faith community's commitment on poverty. We know you care. But at critical moments of advocacy and key choices, there's no one there. And that's why in the past we haven't won. So we have to translate our passion, our conviction, our moral obligations into action. And so we have to be very shrewd, strategic and focused on where the big decisions are going to be made, when they're going to come, and then make sure that we're there. And so I called several Senators before they voted on the budget. And I called them, and I said, call me during the vote. And they called me. And I said, we are watching and praying. I'm praying for you. An army of prayer -- a prayer warrior army is out there praying

for you that you'll do the right thing. And they kind of gulped and said, thank you for your prayers; keep praying. I said, don't worry, we will. [laughs] So that kind of watching and praying is what we're going to do. And we want to link with people across the country, [even?] outside the faith community, to make sure that we're present and focused on these appropriations as they come. So we're thrilled to be working with Policy Links and all of you, and look forward to our collaboration. Thank you.

RON STIEF: Thanks so much, Jim. And next we have Debbie Weinstein, Coalition for Human Needs. And Debbie, I mean, you've been in the heated battle here in Washington too. And I just want to hear from your perspective, where are we with this budget and what do we need to be doing about it?

DEBBIE WEINSTEIN: Well, thanks very much, Ron. And thank you so much for the ... this year, this time, with Angela and Jim. I shared other time with Jim, having been one of those people that got arrested that time.

JIM WALLIS: Yeah.

DEBBIE WEINSTEIN: And that was memorable for me. And I completely share your feeling that we are in a momentous, changing time. But even moreso, that we're just poised on the brink here. And Angela got at this too, that we could make real change or, if we are silent, we could allow Congress to slip back into the old ways of doing things and not have the change that we need. And that's what we're working on at the Coalition on Human Needs and a broader coalition that we've joined with that's called Rebuild and Renew America Now. And I'll talk a little more about that at the end. But I do want to reiterate what has been said so far, that the President's budget and also the Congressional Budget Resolutions that are, we're in the midst of forming now, they're frameworks that redirect federal policy. And in particular, as has been

said, the President's budget that he submitted in February is a framework that redirects policy to be more in tune with our needs and values. And so it's calling for investments in health care, education, renewable energy, and sustaining a shared recovery into the future. Not only does it call for those investments, but it pays for those investments through a combination of revenues from fair sources and reducing wasteful spending in the military and in other areas. So some of the value base that many of you have cared about and worked for for years are represented in the kind of choices that are made in that budget. And it would raise enough from the revenues and those savings to be able to reduce the deficit over time. And that's important. Both the fact that they do move in the direction of reducing the deficit, which is so large that it really couldn't be sustained at this level forever, but they also gradually reduce that deficit because some of those who would just try to reduce the deficit right away, right while we're in the midst of a recession, would do grave damage to the economy. So this is a balanced approach. And if I can just talk for a bit about the revenue part of this. Many of us, we've come together not so much because we want to talk about tax policy, but because we do want to talk about how we can invest in our shared recovery and shared future. But if we're going to pay for it in a fair way, we do have to come to grips with how we are going to pay for it. And the President did propose some specifics. He talked about, talks about reducing the value of income tax deductions for the very wealthiest among us. And that would raise a lot of money -- about \$317 billion dollars over ten years. And he would use that towards paying for health insurance, the Health Reform expansion. He also includes fees to companies that pollute, with the aim being that that will reduce carbon emissions and help us move in the direction of a greener economy, energy independence and combating global warming. Well, those fees would both raise enough money to pay for certain lower and middle class tax cuts, also have money for making the investments in renewable

energy, creating jobs and also help low income people pay for the inevitable increased cost of energy. So these are all tough choices. And the President is up front in saying, these are some of the tough choices we have to make. Well, immediately in Congress there has been considerable opposition to those choices. And not only in Congress. When the issue of reducing the value of income tax deductions for the wealthiest came up, there were non-profits and charities who were concerned about that. They thought that there would be a reduction in charitable giving if the value of the deduction wasn't so great. And there probably would be some reduction. But the analyses show that it would only be less than two percent reduction. Now, would we all prefer not to see any reduction in charitable giving? Sure. But this is where the tough choices come in. If that source of revenue is going to allow us to have the expansion of health care so that low income people can have health insurance who don't have it now, and so that so many of us whose insurance is getting shrunken and shrunken and not covering our needs can do better, you know, should we be considering that choice? Now Congress, at least the Senate, has already said, we don't want to do that. They put that in their budget resolution. Do we have to find the revenues from that source? No. But from our perspective, we ought to be keeping that on the table until we've really looked at everything to know that we have the revenues we need to pay for the health care needs, the education needs, the other needs. So there are equitable choices that the President makes in revenues, and opposition is certainly coming up already to those choices. The kinds of fees for the permits having to do with the carbon emissions -- absolutely businesses are objecting to those too. This is a pitched battle that we are getting into. So be aware of that in terms of your need as people of conscience trying to fight for equitable solutions. Let me say just a word or two about health care reform -- what the budget does and doesn't do. The President's budget and the Congressional Budget Resolutions does not -- none of them spell

out a specific plan for how we're going to achieve expansion of health coverage, improvement of health coverage. The President does say a couple of things. He sets out a set of principles that I think we would all applaud in terms of quality of care, equity, expansion of the reach of the care. And he also spells out, as I've mentioned, a source of revenues to pay for about two thirds of a health care for all plan. But he doesn't say exactly what the plan is. Congress is even less specific. It sets up reserve funds and says, we're going to do health care, but we don't, we're not saying in our budget how we're going to do it, and we're not saying exactly what we're going to do. So you might say, why am I caring about this if we don't have these specifics? And I would say that the real reason is, this is the first opportunity to spell out the priority that so many of us have worked and dreamed of for years: health care for everyone in this country. So we have a choice. At the point where the priority is articulated in these budgets -- that is the first step, as Angela and Jim have said, not the last step -- we've got some choices. We can beat the drum of advocacy and use it as an opportunity to say, we applaud these budgets for moving the process forward, for taking that step, because this is what we believe the country needs, and we agree there ought to be fair ways of paying for it. We can do all that, or there can be dead silence. And Congress can read from that, I guess people don't care that much about making these major changes, these tough changes, the powerful vested interests will be interested in avoiding. So we can either make the big transformative changes by seizing every opportunity to shape public opinion, or we can be silent and think that maybe somebody else will do it. We're hoping that you will join us in not being silent, in calling for those big changes. And that's why we're involved in this Rebuild and Renew America Now Campaign. And I know that Ron is going to send an email around to you with a series of actions that you can take, ranging from calling your members of Congress -- and there's a toll-free number that you'll get in the email but I can say is

866-544-7573, if you want to call your members of Congress to articulate the goals that you've heard about today. And you can go to either the Coalition on Human Needs web site, CHN.org, or RebuildandRenew.org, in order to contact your members of Congress by email, learn about events that are happening all around the country. So we hope you'll be part of this, because this is not a time for silence; this is a time for us all to work together for these groundbreaking changes. Thanks.

RON STIEF: Thank you, Debbie, so much. And this is Ron again. And just to remind you, if you have questions, you can submit them to conferencecall@policylink.org and put "question" in the subject line if you wouldn't mind and we'll pull it off. We have a question that's come in from New York. And this may have more to do with implementation, but I think it's important as people are trying to understand how budgets work. The questioner asked, we're hearing that there's federal funding going to states, and states can have broad latitude in the use of funds and may choose to plug general budget deficits instead. I think this is about the health of the states, which is not good either. How do we insure that what is eventually funded by Congress in this budget gets to the people and the programs that most need them? And I don't know if anybody wants to start by tackling that one.

DEBBIE WEINSTEIN: Well, I can take a start. I think some of what that is reacting to is the recovery legislation, Economic Recovery legislation that has already been passed. And of course the point of that was to put money out there in states in the hands of people, keeping people in jobs, creating jobs, and not just to reduce the deficits of states. Because to have the recovery, we've got to have money out there in the economy. And most states are choosing to spend that money. South Carolina was a state where the Governor said, I don't want to spend it; I think we should just be reducing the deficit. Even he has changed his mind after getting a lot of pressure

and looking terrible because of this very wrong-headed approach to the economy. But in terms of looking forward in the budget, in the appropriations decisions that get made after the budget sets out a total for appropriations, then appropriations committees will divide that total up and spend it on jobs programs and education programs and housing programs and many other programs. And we need to be vigilant in insuring that money goes where it needs to go, both to sustain the recovery and give people a chance who haven't had that chance.

ANGELA GLOVER BLACKWELL: Ron, I'd like to comment on that question too.

Particularly, I agree with Debbie that part of the question referred to the recovery dollars, recovery dollars that are going into states without a lot of criteria attached to them to insure that they would get to low income people and low income communities of color. Many advocates were very concerned about that, particularly on the infrastructure and the energy parts of the recovery, and have been spending time in Washington, in the White House, with OMB, saying that the States need to get more guidance about what's intended, in terms of getting these dollars to those who need the most. Two things: one, advocates have to be vigilant, have to really be on this case. They have to make sure they know who's in control of those dollars. They have to make sure that they have ways to make their voices heard. But we've also got a little help from the White House, OMB. OMB, actually responding to this pressure from advocates, put out Recovery Act guidance. This went out just last week. And it encouraged and said that the federal agencies should take additional policy considerations into account to the extent permitted, and make sure that recovery funds are achieving the Act's objective, such as compliance with Equal Opportunity laws; support for small businesses; engaging in sound labor practices -- this is very important for all of you out there -- promoting local hiring and engaging with community-based organizations. PolicyLink is going to put out a blast on Monday -- all of

you on the call will get it -- where we will talk more in depth about this guidance and the kind of questions that you can ask. Those of you who want to find it on your own can find it at www.recovery.gov/sites/default/files. But don't -- that's all too complicated to write down. On Monday you'll get a blast from PolicyLink telling you more about it. But I agree with everything else that Debbie said. But this money does not create the results that we want unless we are tough advocates to make sure that it will.

JIM WALLIS: I can add to that, Ron, too -- agree with everything that's been said -- but the Office on Faith-Based and Neighborhood Partnerships had a conference call just a week ago with the same question: How do faith-based and other secular community organizations really access this money? 'Cause the sense is that they're really, it's getting people who need it more than if it just goes to states. And two things. One is, that faith-based office is on the case as well, and they're putting up their web site I think this week with concrete ways to find out what Angela's saying: who's in your state; where do, you know, who to talk to and how to make that case. And the President actually met with Joshua Dubois and [Melly?] Barnes in the White House. And Melody told the story last, or this week. She said, he said, you two need to bird dog where this recovery money goes and make sure it gets to the most vulnerable people. So that was directly from the President. Melody, you know, who runs [the DPC?] and then, then [you have?] the faith-based office... So Joshua and Melody are on this case. And I think Angela's right. We have to be vigilant, really vigilant, because the states, some of them will just kind of take the money because they have their own deficits. But there's an interest in the White House in getting the money to the people that need it most. So we're going to have to take that encouragement and go after it locally.

ANGELA GLOVER BLACKWELL: Well, one more thing from Angela. On the home page of PolicyLink, policylink.org, there are two documents. One is "Bringing Home Green Recovery", and the other, "An Engine of Opportunity". And they are all about, in the Recovery Package, how advocates can make sure that the possibilities in the recovery are realized for the people who need it most: low-income communities, communities of color. Please, go on the PolicyLink web site and get those documents.

RON STIEF: The next question is -- I don't want us to get into a debate on whether or not, how big the deficit is, the budget deficit or the budget debt; I mean, we could go all day on that -- but it is an interesting question, because the politics of budget deficits do come in whenever you're talking about spending money at the federal level. But here's a question from Oakland. And I don't know, Jim, you've referred to speaking to folks on the Hill, so you might even start this off. As you have all spent time on Capitol Hill in Washington, D.C., given the economic collapse that we're seeing all around us, and especially things like the increase in long-term unemployment and poverty, how can anybody in Congress be making a credible case right now that we need to be reducing budget deficit, which is essentially saving our money for a rainy day? How could it possibly get any worse than this?

JIM WALLIS: Well, just so we all know what we're facing, the job loss is [now?] averaging \$657,000 a month over the last five months. So the net job loss since the beginning of this recession is about \$5 billion. And so official unemployment has risen from 4.9 percent at the start to about 8.5 now, and those numbers don't even begin to capture what's happening in communities of color -- with black unemployment 13.3, Hispanic at 11.4. So the color's [right?]. But the big -- as Debbie knows well, here in Washington, D.C. -- the biggest obstacle we have in the budget was what they call sticker shock, right, Debbie? Sticker shock.

DEBBIE WEINSTEIN: Yeah.

JIM WALLIS: Just, it's too big, it's too big, and look at -- the OMB (sp?) numbers came out...

Debbie and I were at a Senate panel and we got to speak to these Senators. And the OMB numbers came out the next, two days later. Senator Kent Conrad is the deficit hawk, and he was pushing hard on, we got to cut this back, it's too much. And so, I actually sat down with him after the meeting and I said, Senator, you know, I will agree that, you know, that that debt and all the, and deficits are, those are religious issues too, but so is ignoring the needs of poor people. And I would say -- I did a column on the...this -- there's good debt and bad debt. And bad debt is, you know, buying a lot of stuff that you don't need and paying for it later, perhaps. Good debt is like buying a house or investing in education for your kids or a small business. I mean, investment and spending money now that will have benefits later is good debt. So the priorities here -- energy, health care, education -- this is indeed spending money that will, in the short term, increase the deficit. But the end result ... of more kids having a chance for higher education, for early childhood development, for finally dealing with this health care that's so out of control, this is good debt, good investment that will result in long-term benefits. So I think when you're talking to people, acknowledge that bad debt and spending more than we have, long-term, that's something to be concerned with. But in the short term, as the caller implied, you've got to spend some money to get out of this recession. And if the money is spent in ways that provide the good debt that makes investment possible, I think that's something you can argue with most people and it makes sense.

DEBBIE WEINSTEIN: I just completely agree. This is Debbie. And the caller is certainly right. Right now is the time to have a deficit in order to make the investments that Jim is talking about. And one of the things that's frustrating to me, of course, is that when people start to get

pious about the deficit, they often have a very one-sided view of what to do about it. And so one of the things that we observed in Congress was when people were talking about the deficit, they really weren't talking about, let's redress the imbalances in the tax system now in which we have over the Bush years, frankly, allowed a tremendous widening of the gap between the rich and poor by, and making that worse by tax breaks to the very richest that offered them tens of thousands of dollars each year on average while low-income people were doing worse. And when people talk about the deficit, they do not very often talk about redressing that, but they talk about changes in the annual appropriations for domestic programs. And that is a very small contributor to the deficit, very modest, and yet those are some of the investments -- like housing, like child care, like job training and things like that -- that help us to grow. So right now is the time to be investing in those things, recognizing that over time, if you have an approach that is similar to what the President has put forward, you can reduce the deficit substantially without sacrificing the needs of people in this country.

RON STIEF: Thank you, thank you, Debbie. And let's go now to a question that comes in from Detroit. And Angela, you might want to pick this one up to get it started. And it has to do with somebody who's, they're doing all the great place-based work that so many of us are engaged in around the country. It says, how do we interpret the budget place? Are there ways to get a sense of how all these programs will impact a particular community?

ANGELA GLOVER BLACKWELL: Thank you, Detroit, and Ron for sending it to me. This is such an important way for us to think. One of the things that has become a reality in America is that where you live has become a proxy for opportunity. It determines whether or not you get to go to a good school; whether there are grocery stores in your area where you can get nutritious foods; whether the streets are safe enough to get physical activity; whether health is being and

asthma is being triggered because of your proximity to bus depots and freeways. And so we need to take that framework, as we think about how to be effective advocates for recovery dollars and how to analyze what the budget is doing. One thing that we need to make sure is that as we're investing in education that we're investing in schools where poor children live. Are we investing in urban education? We've invested a lot of money in education over the years that disproportionately helps people in suburban areas. Now we also have a lot of poor people in the suburbs, so I'm not saying that that is not a place to invest. But we have to make sure that we're doing equitable investments in education so that all people have access to the best quality schools. One of the things that came out of the report I referred to earlier, the Robert Wood Johnson Commission to Build a Healthier America, is that we really need to promote public/private investments to get more grocery stores in underserved communities. This is one of the things that the Department of Agriculture could focus on. This is one of the things that HUD could focus on, that we really need to make sure that nutrition dollars and community development dollars are getting to the places where we need things like more grocery stores. In this whole area of building a green economy and green technology, in the Recovery Package, we have money for retrofitting buildings, we have money for weatherization. And we need to make sure that those dollars get to the communities that could benefit most, and that they translate for jobs who live in that -- jobs for people who live in those communities. Investing in place is not just investing in a physical place. It means investing in people in the context of place so they improve their circumstance, and the place becomes a foundation that they can build on. Another thing in the budget is Promise Neighborhoods, inspired by the Harlem Children's Zone. President Obama has said that the Harlem Children's Zone is one of the most exciting initiatives he has ever seen that takes all children in a geographic area in Harlem and makes sure, from birth

through college, that they have all the supports that are needed. Promise Neighborhoods, inspired by Harlem Children's Zone could, if this budget reinforces it and the final decisions about spending money, we could begin to have an experiment of Promise Neighborhoods all over the country. That is a classic example of taking what we know about the best supports that children need, concentrating those supports in places where children in need are living, and then making sure that they have everything that will allow them to reach their full potential. So bringing this type of investing in place is very important for health, for education, for jobs and for general wellbeing. I thank the caller for the question.

RON STIEF: Good. We have one that's come in from Seattle. And this is another one of those big questions. They say, what are the kinds of messages are Representatives in Congress needing to hear that are most effective in influencing their choices for what we're talking about, especially in the face of the special interests? Can our voices from the ground really trump big money? I know we've talked around that quite a bit actually, but there are some items whenever you're shifting direction in, at the federal level, which is what this budget attempts to do, that really do have some pretty powerful interests lined up to try to keep things as business as usual, if you will. So I wonder if somebody wants to start by tackling that one.

JIM WALLIS: Well, I can start with that one. The caller is right to identify the problem. I mean, there are interests at stake in this budget and these appropriations that are very organized, very focused. They know exactly when a vote on something is coming. They know where the leverage points are. They know who is wavering; they know who is, who to ignore that you can't win their vote, and who might you get. And they know all that. And they've got an army of people here. Focus on the question... Meanwhile, most of us, most of our folks are so busy doing the work day by day of living with, working with alongside people who are struggling,

fighting for survival, it's difficult even to focus on policy. That's why PolicyLink is so important. It's often difficult to focus on what's happening in Washington that's going to really impact the people you live and work with every day. So there's a real imbalance here to start with; it is substantial. But I think our side is getting better at what we do. I think we're beginning to understand that and to mobilize, organize ourselves to focus. That's why it's important that we're talking to you today. Because I think the people who are used to hearing from the special interests, they know they're going to hear from them and they expect it; they're ready for it. But when they hear from people who really are on the ground and can tell them what something means on the ground... When Debbie and I got arrested two years ago, I remember we had this sort of press conference. It was more like a preaching service that became a press conference. And Mary Nelson, who works on the west side of Chicago at Bethel [New Life?] -- she's kind of a one-woman faith-based organization -- and she got up to speak. And she said... Now there's members of Congress looking out their window at us, and staffers, 'cause the police are there and it's very dramatic and they're going to watch us get arrested. And Mary says, come walk with us; come meet the children whose nutrition you're about to cut. Come walk with us, and come, come -- let me introduce you to the families who won't be able to pay health care premiums anymore because of what you're about to do. Come walk with us, and I want you to meet the young people who are really excited about going to college, but now are not going to be able to. Come walk with us, and meet the people who you never meet on the other end. Now that to me articulates an advocacy strategy for people like us who have, well, first, have the expertise of knowing what works and what doesn't at the local level; how families can lift themselves out of poverty, what investments make that possible; and what doesn't work. Plus, who have the moral authority to say, I'm there, I know the kids, I know the streets, and I

want to tell you what you're about to do would really help, or what you're about to do would really hurt. And so I think if we can bring our voice to bear in some ways it could have a kind of authority and impact that begins to counter the predictable but powerful voices of those special interests.

RON STIEF: Good, thanks, Jim. We have a question on -- and I think we'll have time for maybe, this will have to be the last question and then we'll let each speaker say a couple of words in closing... I've heard that there's this procedure called "budget reconciliation". It essentially passes the budget in a way that the sixty vote rule in the Senate gets waived and can pass with a simple majority vote. Is that still in play? Is that still -- I guess the caller is asking, is that something that is, could still happen or will happen? Or is that, have the decisions already been made on the budget and now it's time for them to reconcile it?

DEBBIE WEINSTEIN: It's definitely still in play. In fact, the caller very astutely sizes up one of the big distinctions between the House and Senate budget. Reconciliation is a very multi-syllabic word that does not sound, is not what it sounds like. It sounds like we're all going to hold hands together and resolve our differences. Really what it means is a way of, well, it is a way of getting to our differences, to get to a decision by, on the Senate side, saying that a filibuster is not possible, limiting debate. And since there is no filibuster, a simple majority passes the provision. Now, the Senate is very resistant to ever getting rid of its ability to have unlimited debate. So the Senate version of the budget resolution does not include the directions, the ability to have directions on health care and on education issues, to pass them with a limited debate which means no filibuster which means a simple majority. On the House side, they have allowed for that. And so when they come together in conference, they'll decide whether or not they want to do it. So in particular, it really is of importance in deciding about how we're going

to get to health care reform. And it's, there are pluses and minuses to doing it this way that I don't want to take too long to go into. But we believe that preserving it as an option is important. If nothing else, it kind of is a back stop to persuade people who might otherwise just stand in the way to say, you know, we have a way of passing this. If you want to be engaged in the shape of it, then do so, instead of just standing in the way. So it is one of the key decisions Congress will make.

RON STIEF: Well, that's something that the budget watchers on the call need to keep an eye on as this moves on through the next couple of weeks and into the eventual vote. So I want to turn it over to last comments from the speakers. And we'll just go in the same order and start with you, Angela.

ANGELA GLOVER BLACKWELL: This has been a good call. And what I hope that everybody who's on it will take away is that it is up to us. We have seen last November an example of how democracy works. Part of democracy is getting in there and voting. But continuing democracy has to do with holding people accountable, all of our elected officials, and holding ourselves accountable. We need to do both of those now. We need to hold ourselves accountable. All of the people in our network need to be with us in making sure that this is our moment to be able to get through the budget the things that we need for the nation. For poor people, yes, but for the nation. And so don't be afraid to talk to people who you think might not be on your side. Because once you tell them that the future of America depends on us moving into the 21st century on energy, that the future of America depends on us reforming health care, the future of America depends on us educating all of our children, it is an issue that will help the entire country by allowing everybody to participate. So we need to make our voices heard. We need to call our Congressional representatives; we need to call our Senators and make them

know that we are watching, that this is a continuation of our democratic participation. We need to make sure that we step up and show what we can do. We did it once; we can do it again; we need to keep on doing it. Thank you for your attention, and I look forward to continuing to talk to you.

RON STIEF: Thank you. Jim?

JIM WALLIS: Well, I guess I would just say that, for a long time, many of us were used to losing battles. We would fight hard, we'd organize, mobilize, and we'd come up -- I remember that time we went to the...we just lost by a couple of votes that time, but we are used to being on the losing side. The change here is that I think we have an Administration that is really, in terms of trying to include struggling families and people in this country, I think their heart is really in the right place. No budget is perfect, and we all would have our differences here and there. But this is a budget that really, when I say a budget is a moral document, this one is, in my view, and it's worth the fight. And so I told Peter the other night, Orszag, that he's going to get a real fight from the outside people standing with them and trying to fight for this. So I think we have a chance of winning here, is what I'm trying to say -- really winning some things that are very important, as Debbie and Angela are saying, very important to the whole country. So I think this is not the time to sort of lay back or take things for granted or just hope somebody else does it or somebody else speaks out. It's time to really mobilize our best energy and resources and constituencies at the right time and concerted kinds of ways? So I think in the next few months we're going to have that chance to really pull big alliances and coalitions together, and to speak with a very strong and common voice about what kind of future we want for this country. And budgets are moral documents because they show who we think is important and who we think's not, and what's important and what's not. They reveal our priorities. And so I know what the

priorities of people on this call are. And I applaud you for those. And I think it's time to make our priorities felt in this nation. And I think we can win.

RON STIEF: Thanks, Jim. And we just have a couple minutes left, so Debbie, and then I want to say a word at the end.

DEBBIE WEINSTEIN: Well, just a fast mention that there are some practical ways that the Rebuild and Renew America Now Campaign has put together to make it easy for you to make your voice heard. And as we mentioned, Ron is going to send an email around to you on Monday that will give you lots of resources. How to send emailable letters to your Rep and Senators; how to use the toll-free number to call; how to check both Health Care for America Now events in your area and other events that are happening on tax day perhaps in your area, to make these points -- lots and lots of different ways. If you want to write a letter to the editor, we can help you with a draft text that you can adapt for yourself. There are lots of ways to speak out. You need to use those ways, because so much is at stake right now.

RON STIEF: There's lots of items to clip and put in front of your computer as the next couple of weeks of this unfold. And I want to thank everybody for being on the call, and especially for all the great work you're doing through your organizations and the hours you're spending logging to do webinars, conference calls, speaking to folks, to the media, to really make sure that people understand how critical this budget work is. If you have any questions post call, go ahead and send them, and we might be able to forward them to one of the speakers, to conferencecall@policylink.org. I want to remind you that on April 24th, two weeks from today on Friday, we are going to go on to the Recovery Act specifically and look at accountability and transparency. I know we talked a little bit about it today. But from the local level, how do we make sure that we're monitoring that this money is getting spent the way it was intended, to

build equity in our communities? So you can sign up for that at policylink.org; sojo.net, sojo.net, if you want to find out more about the big convening that Sojourners is doing at the end of the month here in Washington, D.C.; and chn.org if you want to find out more about what the Campaign for Human Needs is doing. So thanks again to all the callers, everyone who took an hour out on your day to find out more about this. And we have plenty to do. Thanks.