

As the Cuts Hit Home

Editorial

House Republicans were elated this week when their leader, John Boehner, made it clear that deep, automatic spending cuts would begin as scheduled on Friday. Incredibly, some consider the decision a victory.

As the cuts take effect, they will inflict widespread hardship. But some Americans will be hurt more than others, and the people who will be hurt the most are those who are already struggling. In the months ahead, an estimated 3.8 million Americans who have been unemployed for more than six months face a cut in federal jobless benefits of nearly 11 percent — or about \$32 a week — all from the recent average weekly benefit of \$292. And an estimated 600,000 low-income women and toddlers will be turned away from the federal nutrition program for women, infants and children, known as WIC.

It should not be this way. Deficit reduction should not occur on the backs of the poor and vulnerable. At the insistence of Democrats, most major programs that help the needy have been exempted from the cuts, including food stamps and Medicaid. Democrats also won exemptions for beneficiaries of programs that are not explicitly aimed at low-income Americans but that are crucial to keeping many retirees out of poverty or near-poverty, notably veterans' pensions, Social Security and Medicare. Still, smaller, vital programs will fall under the knife, in part because they are in spending categories deemed dispensable under the unthinking rules for across-the-board cuts.

FEDERAL UNEMPLOYMENT BENEFITS By the end of the fiscal year, on Sept. 30, the Labor Department estimates that \$2.3 billion will be cut from federal jobless benefits. Those benefits provide 14 to 47 weeks of aid after state-provided benefits run out, generally after 26 weeks. The support is critical. The share of unemployed workers who have been out of work for more than six months was 38.1 percent in January, with the worst levels of long-term unemployment occurring among workers 45 or older. That group is likely to have substantial family and financial obligations, even as it is often shunned by employers. According to an Urban Institute survey last year, workers in their 50s are about 20 percent less likely to be rehired than workers ages 25 to 34.

It will probably take the states, which administer the benefits, at least until April to make the program changes. While that will postpone the immediate pain, it means that the cuts, when they come, will be concentrated over an even shorter period.

NUTRITION AID The federal government has yet to issue specific guidance on how states should handle an estimated cut to the WIC program of \$340 million this fiscal year. Little will happen until April, but, after that, priority is likely to be given increasingly to pregnant and breast-feeding women and to infants, while women not breast-feeding are put on an indefinite wait list, along with many children over 1 year old. The cutbacks to mothers would affect African-Americans disproportionately, because their breast-feeding rates are lower than other groups'. The cuts in aid to children will fall disproportionately on Hispanic families, who tend to have more children.

Why are the Republicans so happy when they should be ashamed?