

Sixteen years ago, a Democrat president and a Republican Congress did what, frankly, very few ever expected. They reached across the political gulf and worked together to tackle the thorny issue of welfare dependence. Faced with a flawed system that actually discouraged people from seeking a better life, politicians found a solution that most Americans agreed was the right path. Unfortunately, a decade and a half later, President Obama has chosen to reverse the progress of bipartisan welfare reform.

President Bill Clinton and House Speaker Newt Gingrich didn't often agree on matters of policy. Yet, significant accomplishments were inked during their tenure. One such remarkable moment came in 1996 when Congress passed and President Clinton signed into law the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Act, also known as welfare reform.

Although originally designed as a safety net of last resort, our nation's welfare system had over time become a trap, snaring many in a web of government dependency. Up until the reforms of the mid-90s, 65 percent of families receiving welfare remained on its rolls for eight or more years, and individuals received benefits an average of 13 years over their lifetimes. Without an incentive to seek employment, families were captured by a system that actually made it less attractive to leave. Clearly, a decade or more of dependency was a track record of failure.

Realizing the need for change, President Clinton – reluctantly at first - eventually joined with a conservative Congress to undo the damage of the broken welfare system and pledged to "end welfare as we know it" to better serve those in need of a hand up. The reform law replaced the Aid to Families with Dependent Children program with the Temporary Assistance for Needy Families block grant program. Rather than simply providing assistance, the reformed program emphasized returning to work as its long-term goal, encouraging low-income families to support themselves. Those receiving benefits were required to either look for work or train for a job with the objective of leaving the program.

The bipartisan welfare reform law made a positive difference. Welfare rolls dropped by 57 percent. Poverty among single mothers declined by 30 percent. Furthermore, single mothers saw their employment and earnings increase. Despite the prolonged recession currently gripping the nation, the number of poor children living in female-headed households is still less than in 1996. It is, therefore, disappointing that the Obama administration has chosen to reverse course.

On July 12, 2012, the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services issued a memorandum allowing states to seek a waiver from the welfare reform law's work requirements. This move is ill advised and should be overruled by Congress.

The Government Accountability Office recently concluded that the Obama administration's welfare work requirement waiver policy is subject to Congressional review. Accordingly, last Thursday, the House passed – and I voted for – H.J. Res. 118, a resolution that expresses Congress's disapproval of the Obama administration's unilateral action to gut the bipartisan welfare reform law. The resolution also prevents the White House from implementing its controversial new waiver policy without the consent of Congress. The resolution passed the House by a 250 to 164 vote margin, but now awaits an uncertain future in the Senate.

While it is disturbing that the president has chosen to once again to go around Congress in order to accomplish his political goals, it is even more disappointing that he seeks to undo the progress of a bipartisan reform program that has worked and is supported by a majority of Americans. Most regrettably, if unchallenged, the administration's new policy will ultimately diminish the effectiveness of the welfare program.

Honor Flight Lands in DC:

The eighth Honor Flight South Alabama landed in Washington last Wednesday morning to find a warm welcome at the National World War II Memorial.

It is always a special privilege to personally greet each and every one of our hometown heroes as they make – in many cases – their first visit to see the national memorial dedicated in their honor.

Male and female veterans from the "greatest generation" – some in wheelchairs – were moved at the display of gratitude by park personnel and the general public. To be sure, we cannot thank our World War II veterans enough.

Bonner-Sewell Town Meeting:

I am pleased to announce a joint Clarke County congressional town meeting with Congresswoman Terri Sewell this Thursday, September 27, 2012, from 10 to 11:00 a.m. at the Jackson City Hall, 400 Commerce Street in Jackson. Come join us.

My staff and I work for you. If we can ever be of service, do not hesitate to call my office toll free at 1-800-288-8721.

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