

**To:** *Interested Parties*  
**From:** *Hart Research*  
**Date:** *April 10, 2025*  
**Re:** *Message Findings for Defending Basic Needs Programs*

Hart Research conducted a national survey of 2,430 voters from March 24 to 28, 2025 for the Kitchen Cabinet, exploring different message strategies for supporting Medicaid, SNAP, housing programs, and other federal low-income programs in the face of proposed cutbacks. This memorandum presents the survey's key message findings.

**Americans strongly support basic needs programs in general and oppose any cuts to them. We should focus attention especially on two types of support: nutrition and healthcare.**

- The three most highly-rated programs in the survey are all nutrition programs -- school lunches and breakfasts, Meals on Wheels, and WIC -- and SNAP is also viewed very favorably. Voters strongly oppose cutting nutrition programs.
- Voters not only view SNAP favorably, they also have a positive view of “food stamps.”
- Voters also value healthcare programs very highly. They embrace Medicaid in overwhelming numbers and strongly oppose cutting the program, and also support ACA subsidies in large numbers.

**We should refer to this set of programs as basic needs programs.**

The most positive language for describing this set of programs to persuadable voters, and which is also short and clear, is basic needs programs. Voters supported funding for this category of program more than any other (out of 8 phrases tested), and this was especially true with key persuasion audiences.

- Emphasize that these programs help Americans to meet their basic needs, especially for nutrition and healthcare, and provide essential services -- there is nothing extravagant or excessive about this assistance.
- Surprisingly, describing these as “safety net programs” elicits a much less positive response, and we recommended avoiding that language. “Anti-poverty programs” are also seen as less important, and this language produces sharp polarization along partisan lines.



---

**Basic needs programs help the most vulnerable Americans, like children and people with disabilities.**

Voters say the single most important priority for these basic needs programs is to “help the most vulnerable people, like children and people with disabilities.” Language specifying that programs are supporting people who actually need the help is critically important. Similarly, helping Americans “who need support” is strong language.

This assurance is important because it addresses voters’ biggest concern about these programs: that fraud and abuse often result in giving help to people who do not actually need it. While only 34% of voters say that reducing the cost of these programs is a very high priority, fully 65% say that reducing “fraud and abuse” is very important. This is a particularly salient concern for voters who are persuadable on these issues.

- In the context of the budget fight, emphasize that the Republican bill will cut the heart out of basic needs programs, not the fat. It will be important to challenge and refute opponents’ claims that their budget cuts only “waste” or “fraud.”
- In contrast, language suggesting that these programs help a broader and less clearly targeted population reduces their importance in voters’ eyes. For example, making sure that people generally have “economic security,” or “the opportunity to succeed,” are considered much lower priorities than helping the vulnerable.
- In an open-ended question, voters make clear that they understand these programs primarily serve low-income Americans. The fact that beneficiaries are people in need is a strength for us, not something that needs to be downplayed. Describing recipients as “vulnerable” or “low-income” generates somewhat broader support than “poor” or “people in poverty.”
- Messages describing recipients as “Americans” generally elicit more support than those simply using “people,” especially among persuasion audiences.
- Children and people with disabilities, as well as low-income seniors, are particularly powerful examples of vulnerable populations.

**A powerful way to oppose the Republican budget bill is linking tax breaks for the wealthy to proposed cuts in programs, while making clear that basic needs programs can and should work better than they do today.**

The large majority of voters believe that making the wealthy pay their fair share of taxes is a much better way to address any budget problems the country faces than cutting basic needs programs for vulnerable Americans. At the same time, pushing for federal programs to be improved is a more credible posture than simply defending the status quo.

---

*We don't need to cut services--we need to make them work better. Instead of gutting healthcare, food assistance, and public schools, Congress should fix them by making the wealthy pay what they owe in taxes. That would help everyone afford the basics like healthcare, groceries, and housing.*

While contrasting program cuts to high-end tax cuts is effective, the research also reveals that very sharp populist language can actually reduce the effectiveness of our messaging. The weakest messages tested describe the budget bill as “corrupt,” helping “powerful insiders,” and giving tax breaks to “billionaires.” Too much focus on “wealthy interests” likely diverts voters’ attention away from the vulnerable populations who will be devastated by these cuts, and that is who we want to keep centered in this debate.

**Defend basic needs programs against proposed cutbacks by placing them in the context of existing harms and unaffordable prices for essentials facing Americans today.**

Messages that remind voters of today’s high prices for essentials helps to highlight the severe challenges facing low-income Americans who depend on these programs. It also helps put this issue in a context that non-poor voters can relate to, increasing their empathy. A large majority feel it is very important that programs “help families afford the high cost of essentials, like food, healthcare, and housing.”

*The cost of living is hurting everyone, and any of us could be just one paycheck away from a crisis. These programs provide economic assistance when Americans fall on hard times. We must protect and strengthen them so they're always there when we or our loved ones need them.*

**Emphasize that cuts to basic needs programs will hit children the hardest.**

As we have seen, low-income kids are understood to be vulnerable and clearly deserving of support. In addition, voters understand that cutting services to needy children will impose many long-term costs on the country, not just on program beneficiaries.

*These cuts will hit children the hardest and we will pay a steep price for them down the road. Less school support means more kids fall behind. Less food assistance for families means more kids go hungry. Less housing assistance means more families get evicted, leaving more children homeless. We can't afford to bankrupt our future.*

**Our most compelling messengers are those who help provide essential services to Americans in need and those who depend on these programs.**

The two most trusted sources of information about the budget bill and its consequences identified in the survey are those who work to meet the needs of vulnerable people: 1) nurses and other medical professionals and 2) people who run non-profits or service organizations.

Also very credible are “Americans who rely on these programs.” Communications that elevate these voices should be especially convincing for persuasion audience, as well as motivating for our base supporters.

In contrast, voters have very little confidence in Donald Trump, Republican members of Congress, or Elon Musk to have the right views and positions when dealing with basic needs programs.

**Methodology:**

The survey was conducted online among 2,430 registered U.S. voters matched to the voter file, including oversamples of Black voters, Latino voters, AAPI voters, voters in 66 key House districts, and low-income White voters (household incomes below \$40,000). Interviewing was conducted March 24 – 28, 2025, and the credibility interval is  $\pm 1.99$  percentage points for the full sample, with higher tolerances for subgroups.