

Ben Carson: “Poverty, to a large extent, is also a state of mind”

US housing secretary proposes tripling rent for poorest households

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Housing and Urban Development (HUD) Secretary Ben Carson proposed sweeping changes to federal housing subsidies Wednesday, which would triple rent for the poorest households while making it easier for local housing authorities to impose work requirements on assistance recipients.

The move by the multi-millionaire HUD secretary comes following a Republican proposal in the 2018 farm bill now going through Congress to impose work requirements on recipients of Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), better known as food stamps.

At the same time, the Trump administration is approving waivers for states to impose work requirements on recipients of Medicaid, the health insurance program for the poor jointly administered by the federal government and the states.

Earlier this month, Trump signed an executive order directing federal agencies to expand work requirements for people receiving food stamps, public housing benefits and welfare. Agency heads were ordered to issue recommendations to the White House within 90 days, whether for administration changes or new legislation.

This concerted attack on the most vulnerable segments of society is part of a deliberate ruling class policy to drive already impoverished people further into poverty, forcing them into competition with other workers for low-wage employment at new centers of capitalist exploitation set up by automakers, electronics producers and other manufacturers.

Carson’s Making Affordable Housing Work Act proposal comes amidst a housing crisis that is forcing millions to live in squalid and unsafe conditions and driving increasing numbers of people into homelessness.

While the HUD press release announcing Carson’s proposal declares it will “provide meaningful, dignified assistance to those we serve without hurting them at the same time,” it is clear that it will plunge people deeper into poverty or out of the housing market altogether. This is by design.

The cruelest component of the plan would raise the existing cap on rent for the poorest families from the existing \$50-a-month ceiling to about \$150 a month. HUD officials say this would affect some 712,000 households.

The Carson initiative would also raise the rent for tenants in subsidized housing to 35 percent of gross income, or 35 percent of earnings working 15 hours a week at the federal minimum of wage of \$7.25 an hour. The current standard is 30 percent of adjusted income, a smaller percentage of a lower base. About half of the 4.7 million households receiving housing benefits would be affected, according to HUD.

The proposed bill would also allow local public housing authorities to impose work requirements on those receiving benefits. Currently only 15 of about 3,100 housing authorities across the country require some type of work or job training in return for receiving assistance.

Rules allowing deductions for medical and childcare costs in determining rent would be scrapped. In a call with the media Wednesday, Carson made the charge that some tenants were gaming the system. “They know how to include certain deductions that other people may not be aware of,” he said. “We really want to level the playing field and make it much more even for everyone.”

Seniors over the age of 65 and those with disabilities would be exempt from work requirements and the rent increases would not take effect for six years. This population currently makes up more than half of the households receiving housing assistance.

All of these proposals will exacerbate the crisis in public housing in America. There are currently about 1.1 million public housing units located across the 50 states, according to the Center on Budget and Policy Priorities (CBPP). According to a HUD study, inadequate funding from the Public Housing Capital Fund has contributed to a backlog of unmet needs for renovation of housing developments and replacement of items such as appliances and heating and cooling equipment.

The number of public housing units has fallen by more than 350,000 since the mid-1990s, as buildings have been allowed to deteriorate and either stand idle or be demolished to make way for “mixed-use” communities with little to no affordable housing. Since 2013, housing agencies have converted about 60,000 public housing units to those supporting Section 8 vouchers and other assistance, according to CBPP.

Trump's Fiscal Year 2019 budget proposal would slash funding for HUD by \$4.8 billion and completely axe the Public House Capital Fund, as well as eliminate the Community Development Block Grant, which local governments use for a variety of infrastructure needs.

HUD's own analysis of homelessness revealed that homelessness increased in 2017 for the first time in seven years, driven by a 9 percent increase of those experiencing homelessness on the streets. On a single night in 2017, 553,742 people were homeless in the US. Of these, approximately two-thirds were staying in emergency shelters or transitional housing programs, and about one-third were entirely unsheltered.

In 2017, those under the age of 25, so-called unaccompanied youth, accounted for 40,799 of the homeless population. The number of homeless veterans increased for the first time since 2010. All of these figures are undoubtedly underestimates, due to underreporting and to the homeless doubling up with family members or friends in overcrowded and substandard housing.

Carson's proposal—as part of the Trump administration's aims—is to ultimately dismantle the agency he was appointed to head. His contempt for workers and the poor and the provision of any sort of social safety net to lift them out of poverty was made clear in comments he made during his unsuccessful bid for the 2016 Republican presidential nomination.

In October 2015, he said that those Americans “who take the disadvantaged people in our country and say, ‘You poor little thing, I’m going to give you everything that you possibly need.’ That’s not helping those people and all that you have to do is look what’s happened since the Great Society programs of Lyndon Johnson.

“We’ve spent \$19 trillion and we have 10 times more people on food stamps, more people in poverty, more broken homes, out of wedlock births, crime, incarceration. Everything is not only worse, it’s much worse.”

Commenting last year on the Trump administration's budget proposal, Carson said in a radio interview that “poverty, to a large extent, is also a state mind.” Carson, who grew up in poverty in Detroit and went on to become an acclaimed neurosurgeon, said that people with “the right mindset” can have everything taken away from them, but they can pull themselves up by their own bootstraps.

Conversely, he said, “You take somebody with the wrong mindset, you can give them everything in the world [and] they’ll work their way right back down to the bottom.” In other words, the best way to help people living in public housing is to raise their rents, require them to work for poverty wages, and when they either don't find a job or can't pay the rent, throw them out onto the streets.

Carson, of course, has no such worries of being homeless or destitute. The former neurosurgeon is worth an estimated \$26 million, according to *Forbes*. While he likely stashed away assets from his medical endeavors, he has made a fortune on a

lucrative second career as a writer and public speaker, earning more than \$4 million from 141 speeches from January 2014 to May 2015, according to the *Wall Street Journal*. He also raked in between \$1.1 million and \$6 million in book royalties, as well as millions more from serving on the corporate boards of companies such as Costco.

Carson and his wife Candy closed in early 2017 on a single-family home in Vienna, Virginia, paying \$1.22 million for the five-bedroom, four-and-a-half bathroom property. Zillow notes that the 6,380-square-foot residence sports a swinging staircase, decorative columns, marble flooring, a butler's closet, an in-law suite, as well as a two-story great room with a wet bar.

His Fairfax County home is about a 40-minute drive east to the Barry Farm public housing complex in the District of Columbia. On Thursday, the DC Court of Appeals vacated an order issued by the District's zoning commission that had approved the redevelopment of Barry Farm, to transform the Southeast DC public housing enclave into a “mixed-income” community, threatening the low-income housing of current residents.

Barry Farm holds special significance in the consciousness of DC residents. After the Civil War it was purchased by a Union general on behalf of the Freedman's Bureau so that former slaves could purchase lots where they could build homes. Although the final decision on Barry Farm has yet to be made, President Trump's entourage, including Ben Carson, would have such developments demolished to make way for gentrification and homes for the rich, with no provisions made for its low-income residents.



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