

The Birmingham News

Can't cut programs with proven success

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In Washington, Congress started the New Year with a clean slate. But in trying to weed out questionable spending from that budget, the newly elected Democratic majority has stripped away funding for many proven programs that help the truly disadvantaged.

The old problems of poverty and inequality still linger. Last month, the FBI released its crime statistics concluding that violent crime is up. Less than two-thirds of this state's students graduate from high school. These problems are interrelated, but many programs are addressing them effectively.

At a time when effective solutions are so needed, Congress has decided to cut funding to programs that have been proven to reduce crime, develop youths, improve school performance and improve the lives of our young people in cities across the country and here in Alabama.

The Birmingham Urban League, in partnership with the Eisenhower Foundation in Washington, D.C., runs two such programs in Birmingham - the Youth Safe Haven-Police Ministation and the Quantum Opportunities Program.

The Quantum Opportunities Program at the Birmingham Urban League takes high school youths who are struggling academically in the ninth grade. Quantum associates are actively involved in academic enrichment and youth development activities.

The key to Quantum's success is an individualized, computer-based learning system that allows students to begin at their current reading or math level and catch up quickly. Staff mentor the students and help them resolve issues that teachers may not have the time or resources to tackle. Quantum participants know that high school achievement leads to college and better jobs. They are developing both the community and their own skills as future leaders.

By the end of their freshman year, the Birmingham Quantum youths had significantly improved their attendance, when compared to an evaluation control group. If past patterns hold, we should begin to see significantly higher grades beginning with the next report card. Quantum youths are followed through all four years of high school, so Birmingham youths, now in their second year, will be devastated if Congress eliminates funding and the program closes.

One of the great attributes of the Quantum Program is the use of Quantum teenage youths as near-peers to the younger kids in the Youth Safe Haven-Police Ministation. The Urban League Southtown Youth Safe Haven-Police Ministation keeps two police officers consistently in place to work with youths, as well as keep the community safe. This is particularly satisfying for one

of the officers who grew up in the same community and has taken great pride in his efforts to give back to his neighborhood. The officers have enlisted the help of their community resource office to provide onsite programming to ensure a more safe and productive community.

The staff of the Youth Safe Haven-Police Ministration has seen an increase in parent participation. The participation is through Parent Teacher Association meetings at the schools of the program participants. Each staff person, police officer and dedicated volunteer has been matched with a child for group mentoring. The mentoring component of the Youth Safe Haven-Police Ministration allows us a 1-to-5 mentor-to-student ratio.

The near-peer volunteering by the Quantum youths is part of the youth leadership component of the program. Quantum youths come together in a meaningful mentorship role with the 6- to 12-year-old participants of the Safe Haven-Police Ministration.

As a result of these programs, the parents of program youths now value education more highly. The Urban League has also intensified efforts to get parents connected to the educational resources offered by the league.

We know these programs and others like them work. Let us promise these young men and women we will not give up on them. Elaine S. Jackson is president and CEO of the Birmingham Urban League.