

The Dignity of Work
Senator Susan Collins
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Mr. President, the debate on President Biden’s massive plan to expand social programs has focused primarily on its enormous cost. Remarkably little attention has been paid to the content of those policy changes. Yet, the expensive entitlement programs the Administration is proposing would have profound implications for people’s lives and for the values that are among the pillars of our society, for they would break the connection between work and a brighter future.

Mr. President, from antiquity to our time, great thinkers have observed that work is about more than just putting food on the table – important though that is – it has a profound value that enables people to build lives of self-reliance and meaning. As Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., said: “No work is insignificant. All labor that uplifts humanity has dignity.”

Under the President’s plan, assistance checks sent from Washington would have no requirement that the recipient work, or pursue education or training, or participate in programs to remove barriers that prevent him or her from working. These unconditioned checks would sever the link between government assistance and work, education, or other requirements. No one would help a family identify obstacles to a better life. In essence, the Biden Administration would reverse the pledge and reality of President Clinton’s reforms when he promised to “end welfare as we know it.”

Robert Doar, who oversaw assistance programs both for New York Governor George Pataki and New York City Mayor Michael Bloomberg, described what has long been a bipartisan consensus. He said:

“...the way to help people escape poverty is through a combination of work and government aid – not work alone and not government aid alone. But the two together.”

Why is that combination so powerful and so successful? Government assistance provides a hand up and aids families that are struggling to overcome barriers to a better life. Work not only provides the economic pathway out of poverty but also—and equally important—imparts dignity, self-reliance, and confidence. It allows people to provide for their own families. It instills a sense of belonging and pride. It strengthens our communities.

Let me give you two examples, Mr. President. I first met Adais when she was enrolled in the federal Job Corps program in Limestone, Maine. As a teenager, she had been homeless and wanted to get as far away from the terrible circumstances in her life as possible, thus her choice of the Job Corps in Northern Maine. After completing this program in Limestone, Adais earned her degree in nursing from Husson University in Bangor. Today, due to her own perseverance, hard work, and government support at a very difficult time, she has a good life working as a nurse and providing for her three sons. She can take much pride in the life that she has built for herself and her family.

The second example involves women I met at the Aroostook County Community Action Program. They have benefited from a holistic approach to poverty, one that focuses on the needs of both children and their parents – a “2-Generation Together Approach” – in order to end intergenerational poverty. This “2-Generation” approach identifies obstacles to work and financial independence and then provides the necessary coaching and supports to help parents succeed in their goals while also meeting the needs of their children.

Mr. President, these mothers recounted to me with great pride their very moving stories of climbing the economic ladder out of poverty and into the workforce, providing a much better life for themselves and their children.

Mr. President, what these stories have in common is the dignity of work. As Stephen Hawking observed, “Work gives you meaning and purpose....” Securing the skills and support to get good jobs changed the lives of these parents – and the lives of their children.

Now, let me be clear that I have supported providing additional help to assist low-income, working families. For example, I worked with Senator Rubio to successfully double the Child Tax Credit and expand its refundable portion as part of the 2017 tax reform act. But this credit was tied to work – until the Biden Administration changed the rules in the American Rescue Plan earlier this year. Given the pandemic, that may well have been justified as a temporary measure, but now the Administration wants to jettison the work requirement permanently, and the House Democrats’ bill removes all means-testing for a new child care entitlement program so even very wealthy families would qualify.

Mr. President, shouldn't we look carefully at the consequences of sending checks from Washington untethered to any work or other requirements? Shouldn't assistance prioritize those with the greatest needs, but in ways that position them to achieve self-reliance?

Mr. President, there are certainly times when it is appropriate for government to step in, and nobody is arguing that people who cannot work, who may have disabilities for example, should not receive government assistance. Of course they should. And in a time of crisis, certainly we should do all we can to help those who are in need through no fault of their own. And that is what happened during the pandemic.

There were many temporary programs that were instituted to help as our economy shut down and people were laid off. I, along with three of my colleagues, authored one of them: the Paycheck Protection Program. The rationale was to allow employers to receive funding so that they could continue to pay their employees and keep intact that bond between employers and their employees so that workers could return to the workplace once the economy reopened. That program was successful – and temporary.

But that is not what this Administration is proposing. Rather, it is creating entitlement programs untethered to work that would fundamentally change incentives for our families, our communities, our society, and our economy, depriving people of their dignity and eroding their ability to provide for themselves and their families. Absent a pandemic or other crisis, Washington should not simply write monthly checks, creating dependency among those who

could have a better life. The federal government's obligation is not fulfilled by simply sending a check, washing its hands of any responsibility to actually help people achieve self-sufficiency.

It appears that this Administration is moving toward the left's proposal for a guaranteed minimum income regardless of one's ability to work. Never forget that the first version of the Green New Deal included a guaranteed income for those "unable or unwilling to work." Mr. President, we must not go down that path.

We will not build a more prosperous, just, and equitable society characterized by opportunity, dignity, and meaning just by issuing government checks. The time-tested way to achieve those goals for American families is by supporting and rewarding work. It is by recognizing the dignity of work. And that is the tradition that we must continue to embrace. Thank you, Mr. President.