

FORUM

OTHER VOICES

Deficit-funded stimulus checks? No thanks.

Washington Post

There is reason to be skeptical that Elon Musk's U.S. DOGE Service will hit its goal of cutting a trillion or so dollars of wasteful spending.

Yes, the federal government has plenty of inefficiencies and boondoggles, and some civil servants have retired in place. But the boondoggles are often mandated by Congress, and compensation for federal civilian employees cost only about \$271 billion in fiscal 2022. That's less than 5 percent of the \$6.3 trillion the government spent that year, mostly on federal programs that President Donald Trump has said he won't touch, such as Social Security and Medicare.

To the extent that Musk's efforts do generate substantial savings, however, there is only one responsible use for them: reducing the national debt.

Given the gravity of the nation's fiscal situation, that shouldn't be a question. Yet at a recent gathering in Miami, Trump said he was considering a plan to disburse 20% of any DOGE savings as checks to American citizens.

The idea was originally floated by James Fishback, CEO of an investment firm called Azoria, who posted on X that the administration should mail out a \$5,000 "DOGE dividend" to every taxpaying household. Musk replied to Fishback's proposal: "Will check with the President."

Fishback's argument is that sending out checks would compensate Americans "for the egregious misuse and abuse of their hard-earned tax dollars." This, he said, would restore public trust in the government; incentivize taxpayers to report instances of waste, fraud and abuse; and, because the rebates would only go to households that paid taxes, encourage labor force participation.

Some might indeed ask why U.S. taxpayers shouldn't see the supposedly wasteful spending uncovered by DOGE in their own pockets. After all, it's their money.

There are a few issues with this proposal. First, the president doesn't have the authority to repurpose congressionally appropriated funds by executive fiat.

Second, the economy doesn't need this sort of stimulus package. Inflation, at 3% as of January, remains a problem, and further deficit spending will only worsen inflationary pressures. Plus, other economic indicators are generally strong, with unemployment at 4% and real GDP growth of 2.8% in 2024.

Then there's the nation's fiscal health. Despite its strong economy, America ran a deficit of \$1.8 trillion last year, adding to a mountain of debt that is nearing 100% of

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GDP Next year, interest payments to service the federal government's debts alone will probably exceed \$1 trillion.

Using DOGE's savings to write checks would be doubly reckless given that the massive baby boom generation is retiring, placing unprecedented demands on U.S. entitlement programs. The Social Security trust funds are projected to be exhausted in less than 10 years, while Medicare's Hospital Insurance Trust Fund is on course to run out of money in 2036.

More important, the programs are already draining resources from the general fund. Past surpluses were "invested" not in market securities but in a special class of government bonds, the proceeds from which have already been used to fund past spending. Now the trust funds are redeeming those bonds for cash to pay out benefits, widening our budget deficits.

It's cliché to say that America needs to put its fiscal house in order, but it's also inadequate. America's fiscal house needs not just a deep cleaning, but some major renovations. Decluttering the budget of some unnecessary spending would be a nice start, but only if we used that money to address the other problems.

Such fixes, however, are not politically popular — and certainly not as popular as receiving checks from the government. Trump understands that, too; during the pandemic, he sent out relief checks emblazoned with his name. But he also ought to understand that the budget math would make such checks imprudent.

As long as the government is running big deficits, those checks will be financed with borrowed money. Over the long run, you can't make yourself better off by charging another \$5,000 on the credit card — whether you're an individual or a nation.

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A mural on a wall in Lakewood in 2022 when the city's antiracism task force was working to create a racial equity plan. John Benson, special to cleveland.com

COMMENTARY FROM THE COMMUNITY

DEI's demise offers the opportunity for a fresh approach to antiracism

Mark L. Joseph

The shock and awe of the Trump administration's wanton dismantling of federal government agencies has our heads and hearts reeling. The wiping out of diversity, equity and inclusion efforts, both directly by the federal government and proactively by many private companies and organizations, has been stunningly swift.

Here in Ohio, Senate Bill 1, which among many controversial provisions would ban DEI programs, offices and practices at state institutions of higher education, passed the Ohio Senate on Feb. 12.

While many of us are grimly bracing for an extended period of retrenchment in our nation's progress combatting racism, I also see a compelling opportunity for a fresh and, perhaps, ultimately more effective approach.

At their best, DEI initiatives help educate us about the root causes of decades-long social disparities and inspire intentionality about expanding opportunity to a much broader segment of our increasingly multiracial society. Millions of Americans of color and women of all races have benefited from efforts to cultivate and support more diverse workplaces and schools.

However, the DEI industry has also helped sow the seeds of its own demise.

Far too often, DEI programs are overly preachy, influence through guilt, and pit social groups against each other. Pledges and commitments to DEI are often more performative than substantive.

Many DEI workshops are steeped in facts about historical and current disparities while offering little practical guidance about the day-to-day application of that knowledge. One-off workshops generate momentary awareness with limited long-term impact.

Many of us aspire to a world where there would be no need for DEI positions, offices or programs because our boardrooms, executive suites, workforces, and institutions of higher education would reflect societal diversity, and we all would have the opportunity, through merit and personal effort, to access those spaces.

The conundrum is how to ensure a fair playing field on which all can succeed without a DEI process that can stigmatize its beneficiaries as unworthy and alienate those in the majority who feel unfairly impeded.

What if there were an approach to antiracism that relied more on inspiring a shift in mindsets and behavior than on legislating or shaming it? What if this approach made social inclusion efforts harder to attack and disrupt because they are active in organic ways throughout our personal and professional lives and not centralized in DEI offices and programs?

"Everyday antiracism" is one antidote to DEI retrenchment for those of us seeking a way to continue progress in this devastating moment.

To continue to promote fairness and equalize access and opportunity, I recommend focusing on curiosity, structure, perception and belonging. This means approaching daily conversations about race with a greater willingness to learn, keeping attention on root causes of inequities, being vigilant about our unconscious biases, and avoiding unintentional othering.

And to continue to seek racial reconciliation, I recommend a focus on truth, healing, restitution and power. This means finding ways each day to be honest about ugly past and present realities, acknowledging the pain caused by racism, making up with those who have been wronged, and working to share influence more broadly.

Consider these approaches when designing a program, recruiting a new employee, prepping for a meeting, managing a workplace dispute, meeting a new neighbor, or anticipating a family gathering. As we grapple with the rollback of formalized efforts to generate greater opportunity and fairness, let each of us commit to the daily work of everyday antiracism to advance racial progress within our own spheres of influence.

Joseph, Ph.D., is the Leona Bevis and Marguerite Haynam Professor of Community Development at Case Western Reserve University and Founding Director of the National Initiative on Mixed-Income Communities.

COMMENTARY FROM THE COMMUNITY

Amid the political turbulence, we need social workers more than ever

Richard L. Jones

Social workers are on the front lines of our communities, witnessing firsthand the deep and often painful impact of shifting political landscapes.

Policy changes aren't just headlines, they are realities that affect housing, health care, education and social services. Widespread federal funding cuts undermine the behavioral health industry, leaving countless Americans at risk of inadequate care.

At the same time, sweeping changes throughout the federal government can trigger feelings of instability and depression. As communities across the nation navigate these troubling times, one thing is clear: America needs committed social workers now more than ever.

Social workers are tasked with helping clients deal with the challenges of everyday life — a role that is central to our communities' resilience and hope. Their training and experience help individuals and families

work through difficult, uncertain situations.

Whether addressing economic hardship, mental health challenges or social injustices, social workers are a vital link between individuals and the services that help them regain stability. Their work is never more essential than during times of crisis.

Effective social work is informed social work. Social workers are often the first point of contact for people seeking clarity about the impact of new policies on their benefits and other resources.

As discouraging as some changes can be, social workers must stay up-to-date by collaborating with trusted organizations and nonprofits to sift through misinformation and ensure their clients receive accurate guidance.

Clients depend on social workers to help them through their lowest moments. Staying knowledgeable allows social workers to empower those they serve and guide them through uncertain times with confidence.

Social workers have the power — and

responsibility — to advocate for policies that help all of society. Their role gives them firsthand insight into the real-world effects of legislation on local communities.

Social workers should contact their congressional representatives to share their expertise and experience on the front lines of mitigating the damage done by bad policies. Both as social workers and community members, they can use their voice to advocate for policies that foster a healthier, more just society. Social workers are needed in more than times of crisis; they are essential agents of change every day.

However, this work cannot be done in isolation. The emotional toll of supporting and advocating for others can become overwhelming. Social workers must protect their own well-being to continue serving others. Cultivating a strong community of support, building self-care routines and setting boundaries are essential to avoiding burnout in an intense field.

While it can be tempting to continue

serving without regard for self, burning out hurts both social workers and the people who rely on them.

Social workers are more indispensable than ever. In times of uncertainty, such as today, people seek stability, guidance and hope — qualities that social workers embody every day. This difficult moment presents an incredible opportunity to make a lasting impact by shaping not only individual lives but also the broader social landscape.

Even as political transitions cause widespread change, social workers can exemplify the resilience, justice and continuity that our nation so desperately needs.

Social work pioneer Jones, Ph.D., is board president at Preferra Insurance Co. RRG, a behavioral health liability insurance company overseen by social workers. He previously served as CEO of The Centers for Families and Children in Cleveland and is an alumnus of Leadership Cleveland.

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