

Ben Carson reckons with proposed HUD budget cuts

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BALTIMORE - It's 8 a.m. on Thursday morning and Housing and Urban Development Secretary Ben Carson stands in the living room of a century-old home in northwest Baltimore.

A combination of federal and state funding covered the \$19,000 cost to strip the house of lead-based paint to make it safe for the three young girls who live there, improvements Carson is highlighting on his tour of Baltimore housing.

"I wish we had unlimited money so we could do this for all of these houses," Carson said, as the girls' mother expressed gratitude for the federal assistance that made her home livable.

That's where the tension lies for Carson, the former GOP presidential candidate whose ideas about the scope of government worry the left.

Carson believes government assistance should be short-term, limited and designed to prod recipients to achieve something greater. He's called poverty a "state of mind" and argued that "a comfortable setting" might be an incentive for people to stay on welfare.

In a Thursday interview, Carson said that it's in the interests of the government to "develop the populace" because "everybody is either going to be part of the load or part of the engine."

"The more people we can get to be part of the engine, the better off we are," Carson said. "The faster and further we'll go."

Carson's views on government assistance were shaped by his dramatic rise from poverty as a child in Detroit. Carson's mother had only a third-grade education and couldn't read but pushed him to excel academically. He became one of the world's foremost neurosurgeons, practicing at Baltimore's Johns Hopkins Hospital for nearly four decades.

Now, as HUD secretary, Carson controls the \$46 billion government agency that oversees housing for the poor. President Trump's proposed 2018 budget would cut HUD spending by \$6 billion.

"We will use whatever resources we have very efficiently," Carson said.

"The other thing to keep in mind is that the traditional view of HUD and government is we ride in on a white horse with a bucket of money ... and go off to the next thing," he continued. "That particular model has led us to the point where we have three to four times as many people in need of affordable housing and it's getting worse."

Carson, who had no experience in government before becoming HUD secretary, is grappling with decisions about which programs to keep, which to shutter, and how to improve the ones that remain.

Those questions sent Carson on a cross-country listening tour to mostly urban areas, including Detroit, Dallas, Miami, Columbus and back to Baltimore.

Carson is open about his inexperience running a bureaucracy. Between two stops in Baltimore, Carson peppered his hosts with questions about the work they had done, how it came about, what their experience was like dealing with the government and what the consequences would have been if the programs they used had not been available.

Carson said that what he has heard back from those using HUD programs has only cemented in his mind what the role of government should be.

"[My ideas about government] have been solidified," Carson said. "My view of the role of government is to promote life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness for our citizens. The role of government is not to be involved with every aspect of everyone's lives from cradle to grave. ... We need to enhance the ability of people to advance in our society."

At the same time, Carson acknowledged that it may not have been possible for the homeowners he visited to rid their houses of lead - a dangerous neurotoxin - without government assistance.

"It's going to be very tough because a house like this is going to be about \$14,000," Carson said, standing on the back porch of another Baltimore home. "I don't think the average family will be able to afford \$14,000, so it does require that we all get involved."

Carson means that the federal government should not be shouldering the entire load for community services. He wants to see churches, nonprofits, local businesses and other entities take on a greater role in promoting the health of a community.

Some housing advocates agree that this confluence of forces would be ideal. But they say in many cases the federal dollars are needed as a starting point to provide a floor for those in need and ultimately to attract further investment from those with a stake in the community.

"The cities and places where we work, the low-income communities, are desperate for capital," said Ruth Ann Norton, the president and CEO of Green & Healthy Homes Initiative. Carson attended a community fair Thursday hosted by Norton's group.

The White House's proposed \$6 billion in cuts to HUD's budget alarmed affordable housing advocates. Half of those cuts would come from the Community Development Block Grant, a 42-year-old program that provides money for everything from rental assistance to Meals on Wheels for seniors and after-school educational programs that provide food to poor children.

"If you took that away we'd have cities around the country whose poor housing programs would crumble," Norton said.

Office of Management and Budget Director Mick Mulvaney has defended the cuts, saying there is no demonstrable evidence the programs have improved the lives of those they are supposed to benefit.

Carson said he would look for ways to prioritize those programs that impact the most vulnerable, but did not say whether he supports the proposed cuts to the block-grant program.

"I would support looking at our primary goals and prioritizing what needs to be done," he said. "We have vulnerable portions of our population - the elderly, the disabled, children - we need to make sure that we take care of their housing needs and development needs."

Carson has bolstered HUD's budget in at least one area. The agency's lead-abatement program, driven by his past work as a pediatric neurosurgeon, has become a passion project.

"I used to operate on a lot of kids from neighborhoods like this, and we put in a tremendous amount of effort to get them well just to send them into an environment that was harmful," Carson said. "That used to trouble me quite a bit, and now we have the opportunity to do something about that."

But the notion that able-bodied people who don't need government help are abusing federal programs, coupled with his desire to be a responsible steward of taxpayer funds, continues to drive his decision making.

"A lot of times [people are] just not comfortable with the idea that they've been in a dependent situation for a long time and aren't quite ready to come out of the nest," Carson said. "We need to work with those individuals to help them do the transition."

But Carson insists he's being strategic in his approach and is frustrated by the characterization that HUD is being gutted under his watch.

"You obviously have to recognize that the decisions you make not only impact all of those people, but all of those people have tentacles that go out and affect millions of other people, so obviously you have to be very cognizant of that," Carson said.

"I'm not a bureaucrat," he added. "Bureaucrats tend to emphasize the rules. I'm a pragmatist. Pragmatists tend to emphasize the goals and results. I'd rather focus on those."