Economic Security as National Security

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Panelists: Moderated panel discussion with Mandy Smithberger, Director Center for Defense Information, Project On Government Oversight (POGO); Taylor Jo Isenberg, Executive Director, Economic Security Project; and Sarah Hassmer, Senior Counsel for Income Security, National Women’s Law Center (NWLC). Rikkia Ramsey, WiLL Director moderated the discussion.

Problem: Our nation’s economic prosperity is vitally important to national security, yet Congress continues to allocate more discretionary spending to defense rather than to non defense discretionary spending accounts that would address urgent needs and systemic economic inequities. Since 1998, Congress has appropriated well over half of the discretionary budget to the Department of Defense, nuclear weapons programs, and war. The dollars that fund crucial investments in programs like Head Start, food safety, veterans’ benefits, environmental protection, repairing roads and bridges and much more have been cut over the years while funding for the Pentagon continues to increase. With more resources for domestic priorities we could fully fund these initiatives and create critical infrastructure for women and families such as affordable childcare and paid family leave. The goal of national security cannot be fully met without ensuring that the 372 million people living in the U.S. are secure in their home and health. Moreover, Congress continues to dole out money for defense spending without debate – despite the fact that the Pentagon has failed all four audits it has conducted – while battling over whether or not to increase funding for programs that would address urgent community needs.

Based on the conversation, our panelists had the following policy recommendations:

- **Support efforts to reduce federal defense and nuclear spending and challenge concepts of endless war.** The department of defense was largely irrelevant when we were going through the pandemic. Increased defense spending didn’t make us safer, it didn’t enhance our national security, and when Congress gave the Department of Defense $1 billion to increase our capacity for personal protective equipment (PPE), that money went to defense contractors for other purposes.

- **Push Congress to reduce wasteful Pentagon spending.** Reigning in the federal deficit and saving taxpayer dollars requires that we reduce wasteful pentagon spending, focus on corruption within the defense industrial complex, and reduce the defense budget top line, especially as the Pentagon has failed all four audits it has conducted. We need to make sure we have resources that are serving everyone, and we aren’t putting defense corporations at the front of the line.
• **Support policies that establish or expand social safety net programs.** Achieving true national security means ensuring that everyone living in the U.S. is secure in their home and health. By supporting domestic programs like guaranteed income, affordable childcare, and paid family leave, we could help women and families meet critical needs required for the safety and prosperity of working families here at home.

• **Establish guaranteed income and direct cash assistance programs.** To provide financial stability for families, we need to give people what they need: money. The federal government provided direct cash assistance through the American Rescue plan and it worked well. That money kept people in their homes and put food on the table. For the first time in years the poverty rate actually dropped because of this intervention.

• **Eliminate policies that require proof of worthiness before receiving assistance.** When you look at the history of the social safety net in the United States it is built on deeply racist, classist, and sexist views of who is deserving. There is evidence that if you're trying to build a society where everyone can thrive, don't make them jump through hoops, just give them the basics. The heart of this issue is building a system built on dignity and giving people what they need.

• **Structure tax policies to be fairer for women.** Tax benefits that accrue to the top households leave women out. Only the wealthy can make a living from dividends. Women are more likely to have income from work than wealth. We need to double down on tax benefits that we know work for women and families. The temporary version of the Child Tax Credit (CTC) put in place through the American Rescue Plan cut child poverty in half.

• **Expand state level Earned Income Tax Credits (EITCs).** Earned Income Tax Credits can be transformed and improved to include more people who are currently left out such as caregivers and students.

• **Address the heightened eviction crisis by keeping people housed and rehousing individuals that have already been evicted, while also creating long term solutions.** The COVID-19 pandemic exacerbated pre-existing inequalities in housing access. States and localities have only spent 17% of the emergency rental assistance that was provided. In addition, women of color face the highest rates of being behind on rent.