Statement of Kenia Alcocer, Co-Director and Organizer of Union de Vecinos
and Co-Chair of the California Poor People's Campaign

before the
Budget Committee
United States House of Representatives

"Poverty in America: Economic Realities of Struggling Families"

June 19, 2019

Thank you, members of the committee for this opportunity. My name is Kenia Alcocer.

I came to this country from Acapulco, Mexico as a small child because my mother was escaping poverty and wanted to give me and my sisters a better life. She worked hard to make sure we had food on our table and a roof over our heads, often doing two and three jobs at a time. She was a cook at two restaurants and a caretaker for an elderly couple. When she would lose a job she would do any kind of work, even as a street vendor.

Families like ours are very common and we face many challenges. Because of poverty and systemic racism, families who are undocumented must work multiple jobs and get paid under the table, and that often comes with discrimination on the job and mistreatment. To get by, people in our community also create survival methods, such as getting together with neighbors to share meals or take care of each other's kids.

Today I've come here from my home in Los Angeles because I must fight and advocate for my daughter, all children, and my community. No parent should live in fear, like I do sometimes, of immigration officials one day coming and ripping my child from my arms. And I dream of a day when no child has to worry about having clean water, a good education, or health care.

As members of the Budget Committee, you have tremendous power to shift U.S. priorities in ways that would help 140 million poor and low-income people to have better lives.

You could decide, for example, that it's more important to put children into Head Start than into detention centers. Last year, one of the corporations that operate detention centers got $234 million to buy beds for children.[8] With that money, you could fund Head Start for more than 26,000 children.[9] One policy gives children lifelong benefits. The other destroys lives. In fact, five migrant children have died in detention this year.[10] Thousands more will be traumatized.

You could decide that it's more important to send kids to college than to send more ICE agents to raid workplaces. Many poor people like me would like to go to college but there's not enough

[8] Deniz Cam, "One in Six Migrant Children in the U.S. are Staying at a Shelter Operated By a Private Equity Tycoon," Forbes, April 10, 2019, https://www.forbes.com/sites/denizcam/2019/04/10/one-in-six-migrant-children-inthe-us-are-staying-at-a-shelter-operated-by-a-private-equity-tycoon/#722d081e687e

[9] National Priorities Project, https://www.nationalpriorities.org/interactive-data/trade-offs/

[10] Associated Press, https://www.apnews.com/5a49d65213b54043825acc282830b139

financial support – even though the benefits of public investment in higher education far outweigh the costs.[11]

Meanwhile, the government has had no trouble finding money to stop people from pursuing their right to live with dignity and humanity. The United States spends more than eight times as much on immigration, deportation, and border policies per year now as it did in 1976.[12]

President Trump would like to spend tens of billions more on a border wall.[13] He claims immigrants are an economic a burden — that we steal jobs and public assistance money. The exact opposite is true. The Congressional Budget Office found that if the United States accepted more immigrants and created a path for more undocumented people to get legal status, the benefits would outweigh the costs by nearly $20 billion per year.[14]

Immigrants contribute every day to this society, whether it is the gardener mowing your lawn, the cook, like my mother, preparing your meal, the farmworker who picks your fruits and vegetables, or the nanny who is raising your children.

Many of us, like myself, have become leaders in movements that unite poor people of all kinds to fight not just to survive another day but for the right to live a full and vibrant life. I am now the Co-Director and Organizer of Union de Vecinos, a network of neighborhood groups in LA, and a Co-Chair of the California Poor People's Campaign. We are a community that chants loudly and proudly: "We are the Poor People's Campaign: a National Call for Moral Revival."

You have been elected to guide this nation and today I'm here to tell you to re-think this war economy. You hold in your hands not just power but the lives of millions of poor people.

My mother crossed a desert to give me a life with dignity and basic human needs — a home, food, and education. I will continue to fight to make sure everybody lives without poverty, systemic racism, ecological devastation, and violent militarism. I hope you will too.

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[11] Jon Stiles, Michael Hout, and Henry Brady, "California's Economic Payoff, Investing in College Access & Completion," Institute for the Study of Societal Issues, UC Berkeley, April 24, 2012, https://alumni.berkeley.edu/ sites/default/files/Californias_Economic_Payoff_Executive_Summary.pdf.

[12] Institute for Policy Studies and the Poor People's Campaign, "Poor People's Moral Budget: Everybody Has the Right to Live," June 17, 2019. This figure calculated by the Institute for Policy Studies in 2017 dollars. ips-dc.org/report-moral-budget

[13] Andrew DePietro, "The Real Cost of the Border Wall as the Senate Votes to Kill Trump's National State of Emergency," Yahoo! Finance, March 14, 2019. https://finance.yahoo.com/news/real-cost-trump-borderwall-195830968.html.

[14] Congressional Budget Office, "S. 744: Border Security, Economic Opportunity, and Immigration Modernization Act," June 18, 2013. https://www.cbo.gov/sites/default/files/113th-congress-2013-2014/costestimate/s7444.pdf.