

Congressman Cohen's Budget Committee Testimony

Chairman Yarmuth, Ranking Member Womack, I want to thank you for allowing members to testify about what we think Congress' priorities should be in Fiscal Year 2020.

People like to say, "show me your budget and I'll tell you what you value." I believe that it is finally time for our budget to align with our values. I believe that Congress needs to significantly increase non-defense discretionary spending and reduce defense spending.

Defense spending is important but there are compelling needs at home that need funding as much if not more. We must deal with our failing infrastructure, our poor health outcomes, and embrace diplomacy.

Congress should be doing more to end the school to prison pipeline, reduce recidivism, end the rape kit backlog and support people who are trying to get clean from drugs. We can do that by supporting the key programs in the Commerce, Justice, and Science appropriations bill.

Americans are far more likely to die from a heart attack, cancer, dementia, diabetes, and other diseases than from a terrorist attack or an active conflict.¹ We need to invest more in our real first line of defense, the National Institutes of Health and other health programs.

Congress needs to maintain and strengthen the social safety net. We must strengthen Medicaid, Medicare, and food assistance programs.

In 2017, 11.6% or 15 million American households were food insecure at some time during 2017. That means that 40 million people including 6.5 million children live in food-insecure households.² The wealthiest country on earth should not be letting people, especially children, go hungry.

Congress also needs to invest in diplomacy and foreign aid. As former Secretary of Defense Jim Mattis said during testimony before the Senate Armed Services Committee, "If you don't fund the State Department fully, then I need to buy more ammunition ultimately. So, I think it's a cost benefit ratio. The more that we put into the State Department's diplomacy, the less we have to put into a military budget as we deal with the outcome of an apparent American withdrawal from the international scene."³

Diplomacy and foreign assistance saves the United States government money, saves servicemembers' lives by not putting them in harms way, and is the right thing to do.

I believe that it is contrary to what our priorities should be when the Department of Defense receives over half of our discretionary spending and every other department and agency has to fight over the scraps of whatever is left.

I strongly urge the Budget Committee to increase the non-defense discretionary cap so that we can finally align our budget with our values.

¹ <https://ourworldindata.org/causes-of-death>

² <https://www.ers.usda.gov/topics/food-nutrition-assistance/food-security-in-the-us/key-statistics-graphics.aspx>

³ <https://www.usglc.org/blog/the-military-understands-smart-power/>