

Statement of Callie Greer
Community Organizer

before the
Budget Committee
United States House of Representatives

“Poverty in America: Economic Realities of Struggling Families”

June 19, 2019

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National Spokesperson for the Poor People’s Campaign

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Thank you to the members of the committee for having me here today. My name is Callie Greer, I’m a mother of five, and I’ve lost two of my children for unnecessary reasons. I’m here today to talk about my daughter, Venus, who should still be here with us today.

So Venus started out complaining about a little knot in her breast. She was unemployed and didn’t have insurance. So what we did what we do in our community when we are sick and don’t have health insurance, we go to the emergency room. They kept giving her medicine and sending her out. They wouldn’t give her a referral for a mammogram.

After several ER visits, a doctor asked: “What’s that smell?” Venus replied, “It’s my breast – it’s rotting.” That’s when they finally sent her to the cancer center.

She was diagnosed with Stage 4 breast cancer, and had a radical mastectomy, chemo, and radiation.

For about six months it seemed like it was better but soon she had spots on her lungs, her liver, and her bones. It was just everywhere.

Every time the doctor ordered something for her treatment, Venus had to wait weeks or months to get approval – even though she was in the fourth stage of cancer. When she started getting really bad headaches, she asked for a CAT scan. But they told her to wait, even though she was in the late stages of her life. She kept having to wait.

The worst time was when she had to wait for the oxygen tank. My husband would carry her back and forth from the bedroom to the bathroom. She was trying to breathe and she just panicked.

One day, her head hurt so badly she couldn't see. We rushed her to the emergency room, where she lapsed into a coma. It took that coma for Venus to get the CAT scan she had been asking for. It revealed two tumors in her head, and one had ruptured. Venus died in my arms.

Venus should not be dead. Willful and deliberate policy violence killed Venus. Breast cancer has a high survival rate if it's caught early.¹⁵ But Alabama is one of the 14 states that refused to expand Medicaid under the Affordable Care Act. That kept Venus without insurance, and kept her cancer undetected.

How much would you spend to save your baby? The federal cost of expanding Medicaid in those 14 states would be about \$25 billion in the first year.¹⁶ That's about the same amount the Pentagon hands Boeing every year.

The military contracts for just one company could be funding insurance for poor and low-income people in 14 states. You could change millions of lives. We could save as much as \$310 billion a year and still cover every American with single-payer healthcare.¹⁷

But I know that those billions will never bring Venus back. The numbers are important, but they're not important to me. What's more important are the other folks who are dying for the lack of something humans should have without fighting for. And if I don't fight for the living, what's the use?

There's nothing else I can do for Venus. I'll fight for other people's children because she's already gone. I can tell her story. But I won't waste my pain. I'm transforming it to build a moral movement with my sisters and brothers in this Poor People's Campaign. We've all got something that we've got to fight against, and we're united together to take on the interlocking injustices that hurt us all.

I'm joining the poor people in Lowndes County, Alabama, where a lack of public sewage infrastructure caused hookworm to reappear. I'm joining the people in Grays Harbor County, Washington, who say incarceration shouldn't be the industry fueling their economy. I'm joining the people across the country fighting for the right to affordable housing and a living wage.

I'm fighting alongside a group of people in this all-inclusive fusion movement, because when one of us wins, we all win.

¹⁵ "Survival Rates for Breast Cancer," American Cancer Society, accessed June 11, 2019, <https://www.cancer.org/cancer/breast-cancer/understanding-a-breast-cancer-diagnosis/breast-cancer-survival-rates.html>.

¹⁶ "Spending by Transaction," USA Spending, accessed May 22, 2019, https://www.usaspending.gov/#/keyword_search/Boeing.

¹⁷ Robert Pollin et al., "Economic Analysis of Medicare for All," Political Economy Research Institute, November 30, 2018, <https://www.peri.umass.edu/publication/item/1127-economic-analysis-of-medicare-for-all>.