WHAT MATTERS MOST

Gratitude for the helpers

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President, AFT

In this season of gratitude, I'm reminded of Mister Rogers' adage to look for the helpers.

I want to lift up the helpers, people across our nation standing up against the cruelty, fear and divisiveness we've seen these last 11 months of the Trump administration. Those fighting for the values and freedoms we hold dear as Americans, for our children, our communities, and a better life for all.

Most people who voted for President Trump wanted him to make their lives better. Instead, Trump broke his promise to make life more affordable, while waging an unprecedented assault on our immigrant neighbors and the rule of law, abandoning the federal role in education, gutting healthcare, targeting political rivals and helping the rich get richer.

Instead of buckling under these attacks, countless Americans stood up and declared: "Not on my watch."

These helpers have taken to the streets, with millions participating in the No Kings demonstrations. This was the largest protest in American history, making clear that the American people believe in democracy and the guiding principles of our nation: that we the people run America, not a wannabe king or a group of billionaires.

As much as President Trump may not like it, we are a nation of laws. And a vast network of lawyers have become helpers, challenging the administration's unlawful executive orders and actions, protecting immigrant families, helping other helpers understand their rights, defending peaceful protests, fighting the unlawful occupation of American cities, and protecting the rule of law. My union has been involved in many of these lawsuits, forcing the administration to provide the student debt relief millions are entitled to and halting efforts to condition funding on schools agreeing to Trump's undermining of our country's civil rights law.

There are helpers in our neighborhoods and communities, protecting immigrant families from unjust and illegal raids and deportations. Federal agents have detained more than 4,000 people in Chicago since September. In response, Chicagoans have organized a network of neighbors to track suspected Immigration and Customs Enforcement vehicles and alert neighborhoods of pending raids using whistles. The whistles have become one of the most effective tools to keep people from being ripped from their families and communities. And we believe schools should not just be drug free, gun free and cellphone free, they should be ICE free.

Then there are the affordability champions and helpers. No one wants a government shutdown. But seeing how the affordability crisis is crushing American families, congressional Democrats fought on an issue that Congress could immediately address: skyrocketing healthcare premiums. They tried, and are still trying, to extend the Affordable Care Act tax credits set to expire at the end of the year, thanks to Trump's big, ugly bill. Without a fix, 25 million Americans could see their out-of-pocket premium costs increase by 114 percent. And nearly 5 million people will lose their healthcare because they can no longer afford it. Senate Minority Leader Chuck Schumer and House Minority Leader Hakeem Jeffries took action to help American families by making this the central issue around funding the government.

Unfortunately, President Trump and congressional Republicans refused to solve this problem. They chose to take food away from children and inflict pain on American families instead of working with Democrats on a solution to save and strengthen healthcare. And while we appreciate the bipartisan discharge petitions to extend these crucial healthcare tax credits, Speaker Mike Johnson has not yet scheduled a vote. A shutdown, like a strike, is always a last resort. But congressional Democrats were able to put cost-of-living issues front and center, which is no small feat in this era of disinformation and distraction.

Now, people are asking the right question going into 2026: Who is on the side of helping working people get ahead?

And of course, there are our AFT members. The educators, from pre-K to college, who are protecting our students and helping them thrive despite the divisive climate and culture wars. The nurses and health professionals who heal and care for people, who are fighting for affordable and accessible care for all. The librarians who remind us of the importance of reading. The public employees keeping our communities running. These 1.8 million souls help every day.

Countless Americans declared: 'Not on my watch.'

This past year made clear that an overwhelming majority of people in our country believe in the promise of America, not the cruelty, corruption and instability of the Trump administration, with its excesses of power and disregard of rising costs. As we close out the year, I want to offer my immense gratitude to the helpers among us. No one can do everything, but we can all do something. You, the helpers, give me immense hope that together we can reclaim that promise of America and build a better future for everyone.

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Weingarten, second from right, at a Labor Day celebration in Chicago on Sept. 1.

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