

Ending U.S. Child Hunger by 2012

How America Can Break the Political Logjam

by Joel Berg and Tom Freedman

In recent years, the partisan squabbles in Washington have taken on the qualities of World War I-style trench warfare: increasingly brutal and repetitive battles that bleed both sides dry but allow neither side to gain much ground. The American public, meanwhile, knows that societal problems are festering and is waiting for someone to stand up not with rhetoric, but with real solutions. Indeed, Americans are almost desperate for someone to put aside political fighting and solve the obvious problems our country faces. In an age of unparalleled innovation and technology, Americans wonder why the United States is not tackling some of its more obvious national problems.

There is perhaps no clearer example of the problem, or opportunity, than the debate about hunger programs in America. Astonishingly, one in seven children in the United States lives below the poverty line, more than 3 million live in families that suffer from hunger, and 13 million American families are described as food insecure. Last year, the numbers got worse—there are now 4 million *more* Americans living below the meager federal line than four years ago. Tens of millions of Americans are forced to use more than 40,000 soup kitchens and food pantries nationwide. The Great Society

programs have helped many Americans and have significantly decreased hunger, but for many reasons they have not been able to actually end it, even among children. It is past time to do better.

Not only is hunger in America morally shameful, it has devastating day-to-day impacts upon our nation's educational achievement, economic competitiveness, and social fabric. Children who are hungry can't properly learn and grow. Parents who are hungry have increased difficulty obtaining and keeping employment, and face even greater challenges in adequately raising their

children. Senior citizens who are hungry have real difficulty maintaining their health and independence, further increasing the costs to the nation for health care and long-term support for the elderly. Hunger often even has the ironic result of increasing obesity and diabetes by forcing families to obtain more filling but less nutritious food. In other words, beyond being morally wrong, the continued prevalence of hunger in America worsens many other vexing social problems.

The lack of policy progress on domestic hunger is not a result of voter apathy. Indeed, the desire of Americans to help hungry people in our country is about as close to consensus as it is on any issue. In a recent poll conducted by Republican pollster, Jim McLaughlin, more than 85 percent of Americans said that a candidate's position on reducing the hunger problem was important when deciding their vote for Congress.¹ Despite this overwhelming public support, conservatives and progressives have remained locked in an ideological debate that has stalemated the issue and solidified the status quo.

Here's the debate: Conservative politicians threaten to cut back on funding for food stamps and other nutrition programs, claiming they are a waste of money. These cuts are rebuffed by Democrats and advocates who point out the real pain they would inflict on the poor. Having mostly failed, conservative leaders then enact cumbersome new rules to trim the number of people who participate in the programs, in the process often creating the very inefficiency and waste they claim to deplore. In New York City, for example, food stamp applicants must fill out a paper form, have their finger images taken, and often make multiple visits to government offices in order to receive benefits. Similar barriers exist nationwide. As a result, millions of eligible Americans—particularly working people and

families with children in real need—do not apply because of the prohibitive time required and the possibility of bureaucratic rejection.

Progressives, on the other hand, are often unwilling to seek real reform because they fear the legislation will be hijacked by conservatives and used to cut the programs. Instead, many Democrats back initiatives that simply seek more resources, defending existing programs without ever calling for reform. Voters are caught in a bind. Public opinion research shows that most Americans would be willing to allocate more resources to government programs that did a better job of fostering self-sufficiency.

Given the choice between calls for more resources but little reform, and cutting funds to crucial programs, voters have endorsed neither with much fervor. The result is an odd sort of political paralysis that is becoming increasingly common in American politics today: A majority of Americans reject the current approaches of both sides, and Congress passes resolutions but does little to solve problems. The lack of a solution on the issue of hunger is not due to a deep division along party lines—most of the country agrees what should be done—but a refusal by our political leaders to offer the right fix: more reform and real resources.

Ending hunger in America is an achievable goal. A new bipartisan agenda based on commonsense ideas rooted in mainstream values, would both win middle-class support from across the political spectrum and empower low-income Americans to take charge of their lives. Such an approach would recall the great strides made in past decades by leaders like Sens. George McGovern (D-S.D.) and Bob Dole (R-Kan.), who worked together building and defending nutrition programs like school lunches. We can do it again. Not only would ending hunger obviously be an important accomplishment in and

of itself, it would provide a roadmap for how the nation can bridge its ideological divisions to solve other pressing national problems.

In order to end hunger in America, however, it will not be enough simply to make incremental changes in the status quo, as the government routinely does every five years or so with new USDA farm bills (in which the largest anti-hunger programs are housed). The current patchwork of programs is not as efficient as it should be and is dauntingly complicated for recipients. We need a smart improvement of federal nutrition assistance programs. We need to understand how they interact with each other, with other federal anti-poverty programs, and with faith-based and community nonprofit groups at the grass-roots level.

A plan to end hunger in America should be based on three main principles.

- ❑ *First*, the best way to measure the success of the program is not how much money is spent on it, but how many people reach a point where they no longer need the program.
- ❑ *Second*, the federal government has a key role to play as a catalyst in the process, but individual anti-hunger programs should be run, as much as possible, in partnership with faith-based organizations, community nonprofit groups, and local governments.
- ❑ *Third*, all nutrition programs should be designed so their rules honor work, reward ambition, and empower low-income families to take control of their futures. We need a safety net for those suddenly down on their luck, and a trampoline for those trying to regain self-sufficiency.

These principles embody what Americans want to see in their country's hunger

programs and transcend the ideological divisions of Washington. They also have the advantage of working. Policies built on these principles will increase support for anti-hunger efforts by improving efficiency and accountability. Most importantly, they will reduce the number of hungry Americans.

Improving Efficiency and Accountability

A top priority for any plan to end hunger in America should be to simplify and coordinate federal nutrition assistance programs. We should combine the existing Food Stamp Program with most of the existing other federal nutrition assistance programs. The new program would be called the "American Family Food, Opportunity, and Responsibility" (AFFORd) program. More low-income Americans would be eligible for this program than the existing programs, and eligibility determination and application processes would be dramatically simplified.

Under current federal law, families must earn below 130 percent of the poverty line to get food stamp benefits and free school meals, but they must live below 185 percent of the poverty line to obtain WIC benefits and reduced-price school meals. These conflicting guidelines result in both increased government bureaucracy at the federal, state, and local levels and decreased access to food. Eligibility for all these programs under the new AFFORd program should be set at 185 percent of the poverty line. There should be one short, universal federal application for AFFORd benefits, which Americans can complete easily online or during an office visit. Not only would this reduce government paperwork and bureaucracy, it would dramatically increase the amount of nutrition provided to low-income families, particularly working families.

The next President should formally charge

the U.S. Secretary of Agriculture with the task of ending childhood hunger in America by 2012 (which would be the end of his or her first term)—and providing an accounting of how we are doing as we try to get there. With a national focus, expanded access, improved efficiency, and the necessary resources, we can reach that goal.

Expanding Participation

This simplification process should be part of a concerted effort to expand use of the existing federal nutrition safety net among working families, children, and people with disabilities. The federal government should do much more to increase participation in existing anti-hunger and anti-poverty programs, including the Food Stamp, WIC, School Meals, Summer Feeding, and Earned Income Tax Credit programs. By streamlining and combining applications, using available technology to help people sign up more efficiently, and partnering more aggressively with states and nonprofit groups on outreach, we can significantly increase participation in all these programs. Specifically, federal law should mandate 75 percent federal funding for any state administrative activity that would increase the total number of night and weekend hours that food stamp offices are open, or verifiably reduce the average wait time or average number of visits it takes to get them.

Sustain Children

A third key policy goal should be to end hunger among children first. A bold step would be to create a universal school breakfast program nationwide, which will reduce paperwork and stigma by enabling children from all backgrounds to get free breakfasts. By dramatically reducing the bureaucracy needed to track the meal

eligibility for children at various income levels, the country can increase program participation while decreasing overhead costs. Fully funding the WIC, School Lunch, Summer Meals, and After-School Snacks Programs would ensure that every child in the country has access to healthy, nutritious meals throughout the year. Moreover, a multitude of research shows hungry children have trouble learning in school. If education is the key to America's future, a breakfast a day for a hungry child is a good investment. In addition, we should expand the Farmers' Market Nutrition Program, which enables low-income women who are pregnant or who have small children to obtain fresh fruits and vegetables, while also helping family farmers stay on their land.

Support Working Families

One issue that almost all Americans agree on is the importance and dignity of work. The goal of nutrition programs should be to support work, not to replace it. In order for parents to feed their children, however, they need jobs that pay a living wage. Congress has not raised the minimum wage since 1996, when it was set at our current level of \$5.15—about \$10,000 a year for full-time work. While members of Congress have given themselves pay increases totaling 24 percent over the past decade, minimum-wage workers have actually had their pay cut, as inflation has eaten away at the value of their \$5.15 per hour. Senator Hillary Clinton recently introduced a bill that would gradually raise the minimum wage to \$7.25 per hour over the course of two years; thereafter it would require Congress to raise the minimum wage every time they give themselves a raise.² By tying the wallets of low-wage workers to their own, this bill would force Congress to address the needs of working

families. Increasing the EITC and supporting programs that help families build financial assets would also help alleviate financial strain on low-income families and allow them to rely less on government nutrition programs and more on their own bank accounts.

Reward Successful State

Another way to encourage innovation in fighting hunger is to reward states that succeed in reducing hunger rates. Currently, the federal government monetarily punishes states for food stamp “error rates,” or the number of paperwork mistakes states make. Rather than simply punishing states for errors, the federal government should better reward them for successes. Here is how it could work: Every three years, USDA would provide monetary bonuses of \$2 million to each of the five states that had the sharpest percentage reduction in the three-year average for the USDA measures of food insecurity and hunger. States would then be required to use those bonuses to expand and improve existing anti-hunger programs. Such incentives would draw attention to truly effective anti-hunger programs which would serve as models for other states. The program should focus on quantifying success with published numbers every year, and sharing research on what works. In addition, a special bonus should be awarded to states that demonstrate that they have ended child hunger.

Help Nonprofit Groups

Finally, the federal government should give real ammunition to what President George W. Bush calls “the armies of compassion.” Bush’s own first director of the White House Faith-Based and Community Initiative resigned in disgust, saying that Karl Rove had hijacked the initiative so that it

was nothing more than political window dressing. But the basic idea behind the initiative is a good one: enabling the federal government to work with the millions of Americans who volunteer through local faith-based and community groups. These Good Samaritans are not just political props they are essential allies in increasing the scope and quality of the country’s anti-hunger programs. To take advantage of their willingness to work on behalf of their fellow Americans, Congress should create a new grant program for nonprofits, both secular and faith-based. There are more than 1 million Americans who volunteer at food banks, soup kitchens, food pantries, and other direct service facilities around the country. They should be empowered to help the poor people they meet with more than just food. Volunteers could be trained to help those eligible with applications for children’s health care (via the ChiPs program), job training, and the EITC. Food is a necessity, but in the new technological age volunteers can help poor people get more than food—they can help those in need with work, health, and providing for their families. Just the kind of long-term self-sufficiency solution that American voters support.

Conclusion

In the almost 50 years since the Great Society programs were enacted, they have enjoyed a great deal of success. When Robert Kennedy took a poverty tour of America in 1968, there were still large swaths of the country with persistent, Third-World-like malnutrition. That is no longer the case. But we also have to be realistic about where government efforts have fallen short. Too many children in the United States still do not have enough food, a fact made more terrible by the truth that we know how to

solve the problem. Ending hunger in America is a real challenge, but it is a challenge that Americans are eager to confront. It is time to move beyond the stale political debate of left versus right and focus on improving efficiency, rewarding work, providing necessary resources, and enlisting the help

of more Americans. That is a formula that could win broad-based support, and more importantly, it could create an America where one day soon no child is hungry. It is a day that is within reach, if the nation has the will and leadership to seek it.

Endnotes

¹ A poll of 1,000 likely voters was conducted by McLaughlin and Associates and Freedman Consulting, between March 27 and 29, 2006, via telephone by professional interviewers. The sample included 1,000 likely voters with a margin of error of +/-3.1 percent at a 95 percent confidence interval. http://alliancetoendhunger.org/april_2006/poll.htm.

² <http://www.senate.gov/~clinton/news/statements/details.cfm?id=254251>.

Joel Berg is a nationally recognized expert on hunger, working closely with charitable food pantries and soup kitchens, most of which are faith-based. From 1993-2001, he served in the Clinton administration in senior executive service positions at the U.S. Department of Agriculture, working the launch of the AmeriCorps national service program and community-based anti-hunger initiatives. From 1989-1991, he was a policy analyst for the Progressive Policy Institute and Democratic Leadership Council. Tom Freedman is a consultant to leading political figures, Fortune 500 companies, foundations, and nonprofits. He served in the Clinton administration as senior advisor to the president, and prior to that as special assistant to the president for policy planning. His nonprofit work has had a particular focus on poverty and hunger issues. Mr. Freedman was awarded a 1985 Thomas J. Watson Fellowship to conduct a year-long study of how the media covered the African famine. More recently, he has served as a consultant to Bread for the World and the Alliance to End Hunger, and as a board member of Mazon. In the 1996 presidential campaign, Mr. Freedman was chief of staff for strategy helping to create the policy and communications plan for Clinton/Gore '96. Previously he was legislative director to then-Congressman Charles E. Schumer (D-NY).