



Testimony to National Commission on Hunger

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Introduction

I am Joel Berg, executive director of the New York City Coalition Against Hunger. I thank the Commission for holding this hearing and for giving us the opportunity to testify. The New York City Coalition Against Hunger works to meet the immediate food needs of low-income Americans while fighting for policies to ensure long-term economic and food self-sufficiency for all Americans.

I am honored to testify along with Ms. Nermin Tadros, whose testimony demonstrates why food insecurity in America – particularly among working people – is both morally reprehensible and a drag on our entire economy. I think most Americans would agree that, when any people in this country can't afford enough food – and especially when people with jobs face hunger because they earn so little – the basic moral compass of the country is out of whack and we have lost our national soul.

When tens of millions of Americans like Nermin can't afford to purchase basic goods and services that this nation produces – including the healthiest food – our overall economy is harmed. And when tens of millions of additional Americans temporarily subsist in near-poverty and in the lower middle class – and can be pushed into poverty and food insecurity overnight by one illness, one lay-off, one divorce, one reduction in work hours, or one car malfunction – then the entire American enterprise is at risk.

My testimony will make a few basic points:

- 1) The U.S. has far higher levels of hunger, food insecurity, and poverty than any industrialized western nation, and these problems seriously threaten our nation's economic and military security. Fully 49 million – one in six Americans, including children, adults, and seniors – suffer from food insecurity. The fact that we have lower levels of deprivation than developing nations should be of small comfort to us.
- 2) All levels of food insecurity – not just the most severe level – have a devastating impact on personal and family physical and mental health, workplace productivity, educational performance, economic opportunity, and yes, the happiness of people who suffer from it. These impacts sap our economy of \$167.5 billion per year.
- 3) Just as Americans shift frequently between deep poverty, poverty, and non-poverty, they also shift frequently between very low food security, low food security, and food security. Because all levels of food insecurity harm people, families, and the entire nation, and because it is nearly impossible to target just families facing very low food security at any one particular time, it would be a serious mistake for this commission to focus on just fighting very low food security. Limiting the scope of the Commission's work would also seem to discard the broad mandate to fight food security as a whole given to the Commission by Congress.
- 4) Most U.S. hunger is caused by failings of our society, not by supposed failings of hungry Americans, therefore the main solutions should be focused on fixing our society, not further micromanaging the behavior of low-income families. The main causes of U.S. hunger are too few jobs, too low wages, and an inadequate safety net, so the main solutions should be more jobs, higher wages, and a stronger, modernized safety net.
- 5) The U.S. almost ended hunger entirely in the in 1970's with a more inclusive economy and a stronger safety net, which received strong bi-partisan support. We have such high levels of hunger now because the country abandoned those policies. We know exactly how to solve U.S. hunger, but our nation is doing precisely the opposite. The federal nutrition safety net programs work spectacularly well.
- 6) Recent Congressional actions would, if enacted into law, make hunger and poverty far worse.
- 7) The nation must move beyond the harmful myth that private charity alone can solve this massive problem. The New York City Coalition Against Hunger sponsors model programs such as our Farm Fresh CSA project – and we do think these should be funded for replication and expansion – but we want to be equally clear that the real solutions to the problem are massive, structural changes in our economy and social policies that must be implemented by government and the business community.
- 8) America should find ideological common ground again – based on the mainstream values of work, family, compassion, mutual responsibility, community, and enlightened self-interest – in order to join together to end U.S. hunger and food insecurity once and for all. But we should not be distracted by fake solutions or false equivalency, and we should not adopt 10 demonstrably harmful ideas as the price of enacting 10 demonstrably helpful ideas. We must have a massive national effort to create jobs, raise wages, reduce poverty, and ensure a

robust, modernized safety net. One example of wholesale change based on shared Americans values would be to scrap much of the nation's vast social services bureaucracy, and instead empower low income adults to become their own caseworkers, utilizing Hope Accounts and Action Plans to climb out of poverty and stay comfortably in the middle class.

The U.S. Has Far Higher Levels Hunger, Food Insecurity, and Poverty than Comparable Nations

The U.S. has far higher levels of hunger, food insecurity, and poverty than any industrialized western nation, and these problems seriously threaten our nation's economic and military security. Fully 49 million – one in six Americans, including children, adults, and seniors – suffer from food insecurity. The fact that we have lower levels of deprivation than developing nations should be of small comfort to us.

Let's be clear that hunger in modern America, and indeed, in much of the world, is not caused by a lack of food in the society as a whole. For example, the nation with the greatest number of hungry people, India, is also a vast food exporter. Last year, according to the Indian government's Agricultural and Processed Food Products Export Development Authority, India exported 30 million metric tons of food, worth \$23 billion in U.S. dollars. That included 11 million tons of rice, six million tons of wheat, four million tons of rice, and a million tons of onions.

Meanwhile, according to the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA), India's food-insecure population is 255 million people, constituting about 36 percent of the people who are hungry on the planet. By the government of India's own count, using a measure of poverty based primarily on the cost of a nutritionally adequate diet, 355 million Indians, or 30 percent of the population, lived in poverty in 2009-2010. That means that India exports about 270 pounds of food per year for every hungry Indian and 186 pounds of food per year for every Indian in poverty.

Why is this allowed? It is allowed because successive governments of India placed a higher priority on earning large sums of money for agribusinesses and exporters than on feeding their nation's own hungry populace.

According to *Forbes*, there are now more than 100 billionaires in India, with a combined wealth of US \$346 billion, up more than a third from US \$259 billion in 2013. Mass numbers of Indians literally starve in the streets just feet from gleaming luxury skyscrapers. Not surprisingly, it's the skyscraper owners, not the starving masses, who have the political power to decide how food stocks are utilized.

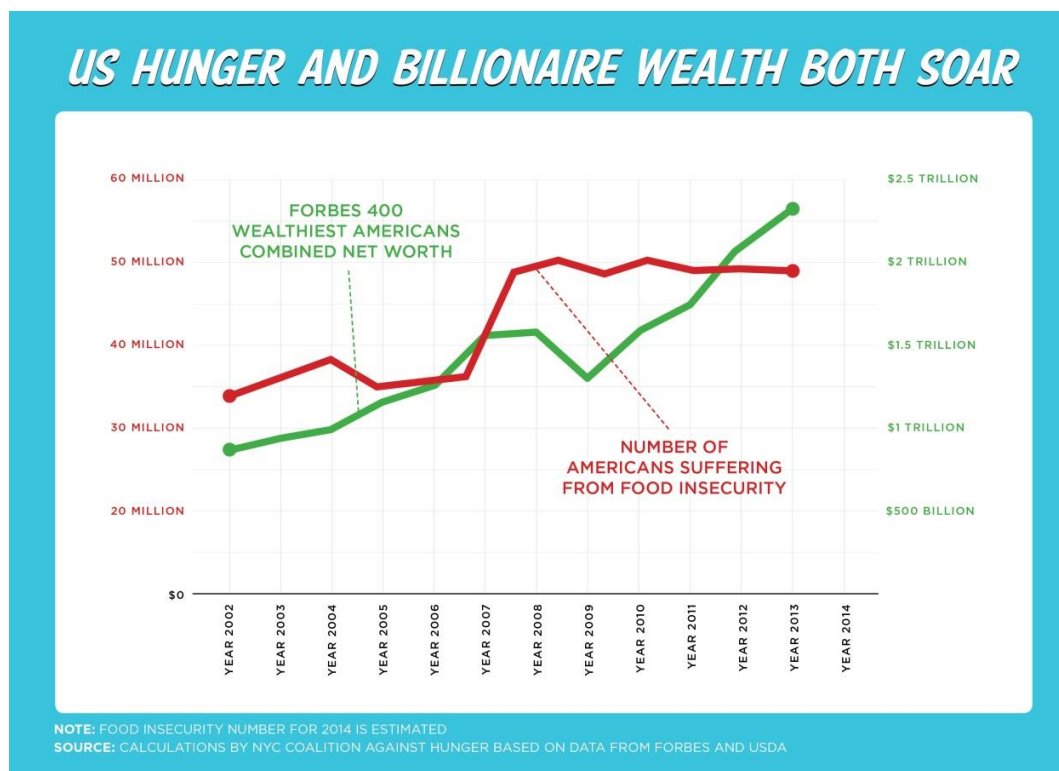
Because the U.S. has higher minimum wages and a more effective food safety net than in India, we have far less hunger. I do note that when leaders such as Congressman Darrell Issa brag that the U.S. has far less poverty than India, as he recently did, they generally ignore that the very policies they have opposed throughout their career – higher minimum wages and stronger social safety nets – are the very reasons the U.S. has less poverty and hunger than India. The argument that some on the Right make – that we have less deprivation than the developing world, so we should cut the programs that gave us those lower levels of deprivation – makes no sense at all.

Besides, comparing hunger in the U.S. to hunger in developing countries sets a very low bar indeed. We don't compare our economy to North Korea's economy. We don't compare our Olympic team to the one of Burkina Faso. And we don't compare our space program to the non-existent one in Albania. Thus, comparing our hunger to theirs is just pitiful.

America should be measuring our own hunger and food security against the amazing accomplishments of which the nation is capable. In 2013, fully 49 million Americans lives in food insecure homes, unable to afford an adequate supply of food. Yet American farmers produced 13.9 billion bushels of corn in 2013, a record high, and exported about 200 billion pounds of grain. The U.S is the most agriculturally abundant nation in world history. In 2013, the U.S. exported \$144 billion worth of food, equaling \$2,938 worth of food for every American struggling against hunger.

Thus, in neither India nor the U.S. is hunger caused by a scarcity of food or resources in the societies as a whole. It's obviously the case that if nations have enough food to export vast amounts of it, they have enough food to feed their own people. The main cause food deprivation in both countries is the inability of mass numbers of people to afford to purchase enough food, which in turn is caused by mind-boggling inequality of wealth. While defenders of inequality trip all over themselves to manufacture supposedly unalterable economic or cultural reasons for inequality of wealth, its main cause is inequality of political power. One thing we do have in common with India is that our government policies are generally more concerned with further enriching wealthy grain traders and hedge fund managers than with ending domestic hunger.

As the chart below demonstrates, between 2007 and 2013, the combined net worth of the *Forbes* 400 wealthiest Americans rose by 30 percent, while food insecurity rose by 34 percent. Despite the end of the official recession, there has been no significant reduction in U.S. hunger. Yet the net worth of the 400 wealthiest Americans, according to *Forbes*, now tops two trillion dollars, which is more than four times the amount of the entire U.S. budget deficit. That's right, 400 people in the U.S. have four times as much money as the entire federal shortfall for a nation of 319 million people.



In every nation on the earth that has significant hunger, poverty and economic inequality, there is also significant political inequality. The converse is also true: the countries that do the best jobs of meeting the basic living needs of their residents economically also have the political systems in which the most citizens have an active and effective stake in their governments. In the last few years, I have visited India, Australia, Colombia, and all the Scandinavian countries, and this correlation was crystal clear everywhere.

Political power results in public policies favorable to those who hold that power, and public policies *do* matter, in nation after nation.

While India has more than twice as much food insecurity as the U.S. per capita, Australia has a third as much. In Australia, according to a national nutrition survey in 1995, more than five percent of the population is food insecure, although some more recent, less comprehensive surveys, indicate the percentage may be a bit higher. Thirteen percent of Australians live below their poverty line. In contrast, in the U.S., 14 percent of Americans are food insecure, and 14.5 percent live in poverty.

Why does Australia have so much less poverty and hunger, even per capita, than the U.S.? Again, its public policies. The minimum wage in Australia is about double that of the U.S. And despite right-wing claims in both the U.S. and Australia that higher minimum wages harm wealth creation, the wealthiest in Australia are doing just fine. According to *Forbes*, Australia has 26 billionaires, and their combined net worth tops 74 billion dollars.

While doing better than the U.S, Australia has a far less comprehensive safety net than Western Europe and consequently far more per capita poverty and food insecurity than Europe. It is also important to note that in Australia, like the U.S., poverty is unequally distributed by location and ethnic group. According to the Australian Bureau of Statistics, more than one in five (22%) Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in 2012 – 2013 were living in a household that, in the previous 12 months, had run out of food and had not been able to afford to buy more. This was significantly higher than in the non-Indigenous population (3.7%). While the plurality of people who are poor, food insecure, hungry, and receiving SNAP in the U.S. are white, members of minority groups in the U.S. are also disproportionately impacted. In 2013, U.S. household food insecurity rates for Blacks (26 percent) and Hispanics (24 percent) were double the rate (11 percent) for white, non-Hispanics. The U.S. poverty rate in the U.S. in 2013 for Blacks (27 percent) and Hispanics (24 percent) is double the rate (10 percent) for white, non-Hispanics.

The European Union calculates that the poverty rate across Europe is nine percent. In other words, the least poor group in the United States, non-Hispanic whites, has a higher poverty rate than Europe as a whole. Sweden only has a percent poverty rate.

Scandinavia used to be very poor. That's the main reason why, between 1820 and 1940, fully 19,592 people from Finland, 335,025 people from Denmark, 697,095 people from Norway, and 1,325,208 people from Sweden emigrated to the United States. Scandinavian art and literature from the 19th century is replete with references to mass hunger and other serious forms of deprivation.

Today, these Scandinavian countries have virtually no hunger and food insecurity, and minimal poverty. It's not that their basic cultures changed. With the exception of oil production in Norway, nor was it because they've significantly developed new natural resources. The main reason that these nations eliminated hunger and virtually eliminated poverty is that they made conscious decisions as societies to change their economic and social policies in order to do so.

These countries generally do *not* define poor people's programs as distinct from everyone else's programs. They define government programs, by and large, as stuff *everyone* in society gets. *Everyone* is eligible for free health care, and heavily subsidized public transportation, child care, higher education, unemployment benefits, maternity leave, etc. They view these as benefits to the society as a whole, and everyone, especially the wealthiest, pay their fair share of taxes to support these programs in the name of the mutual good.

Not coincidentally, there is far much less fraud in social programs in Scandinavia than in India. When everyone believes they are in it together, they are far less likely to steal.

When I suggest that the U.S. should model its programs and policies on Scandinavia, I am told that those countries are just too small and just too homogenous to be appropriately compared to the U.S. Point taken.

Perhaps a better comparison is between the U.S. and France, a large diverse, country that has recently attracted many immigrants, including very low income ones. Yet France also has much less poverty and hunger than the United States, even per capita.

According to French National Institute for Statistics and Economic Research, in 2001, six percent of the population of France (or 3.7 million people) were below the poverty line (which, according to INSEE's criteria, is half of the median income).

In comparison, in the U.S. in 2013, 14.5 percent of Americans lived under the meager federal poverty line, earning \$19,510 a year or less annually for a family of three. Under this definition, the U.S. poverty rate was three times that of France.

The U.S. defines poverty by merely how much money people have in absolute terms, while France, and many other nations, defines poverty relative terms, compared to average families. If the U.S. defined poverty the same as France does, then fully 25 percent of Americans would be in poverty, or nearly five times the rate in France.

About six percent of Paris residents lived in households suffering from food insecurity or hunger in 2010, according to a paper published in BMC Public Health. In the lowest income Paris neighborhoods, the rate was 14 percent. In contrast, 17 percent of all New York City residents, and 29 percent of the residents of the Bronx (the lowest income borough of New York City) lived in food insecure households in 2013, according to federal data calculated by the New York City Coalition Against Hunger. In other words, Paris had less hunger in even its poorest neighborhoods than New York City had citywide. The lowest-income borough in New York had more than twice as much food insecurity as the lowest income neighborhoods in Paris.

France also has lower levels of obesity and higher life expectancy than the United States. In France, farming is more likely to be conducted by small and medium size family farmers, while in the United States it is more likely to be carried out by massive corporate agribusinesses.

It is obvious that the difference between the U.S. and France is that France has higher wages, a more robust social safety net, and more targeting of farm programs towards smaller, family-owned, farms. Recent outbursts of violence, racism, xenophobia, and anti-Semitism in France has recently demonstrated that their society is far from perfect, but, compared to the U.S., they still have far less violence, poverty, hunger, and food-related disease.

A 2013 study by the United Nations Children's Fund, on the well-being of children in 35 developed nations, demonstrated just how poorly the U.S. is fairing compared to other competitor nations. More than one in five American children fall below a relative poverty line, which UNICEF defines as living in a household that earns less than half of the national median. The United States ranks 34th of the 35 countries surveyed, above only Romania and below virtually all of Europe plus Canada, Australia, New Zealand and Japan.

The only nation that I know of to that has used, on a nationwide scale, the same methodology for measuring food insecurity as the U.S. has been Canada. A 2007 study, jointly written by researchers with the U.S. and Canadian governments, found that the percentage of households who cannot afford an adequate supply of food is far higher in the United States than in Canada—and the difference is particularly severe in families with children. Covering the years 2003 to 2005, the study found that out of all households, 14.1 percent of US adults and nine percent of Canadian adults suffered from food insecurity. Among households with children, the rate of adult food insecurity in the US was nearly twice that in Canada, and the rate of “severe food insecurity” (the term previously called “hunger” by the US government) among adults was approximately 80 percent higher in the US than in Canada. Food insecurity among children was also substantially higher in the US than in Canada—roughly 70 percent higher for overall child food insecurity and more than 50 percent higher for severe child food insecurity. One might suspect that the reason for these disparities is that America has more poverty and diversity than Canada. Yet the paper found:

The food security status of households is strongly associated with their income, and the national-level differences in food insecurity described above might be thought to result in large part from differences in income distribution between the two countries. Cross-classification of households by food security status and income adequacy, however, suggests that this is not true. Rather, the differences in food insecurity reflect almost entirely differences between the two countries in the prevalence of food insecurity among households with similar cash incomes. Households in the US are, on average, more likely to be food insecure than households in Canada with the same annual income and household size.

In other words, low-income families in the US are far more likely to be food insecure than low-income families in Canada.

Who is hungry in America?

Hungry families may be your neighbors. While many equate hunger with homelessness, the vast majority of hungry Americans aren't homeless; they just earn too little money to afford all the nutritious food they need. Hungry families live in urban and rural areas – and increasingly even in the suburbs. And most hungry families are white.

Most hungry Americans are low-wage workers, children, senior citizens, or people with disabilities. USDA has found that, out of families with children suffering from food insecurity and hunger, 68 percent contained at least one adult working full-time, 10 percent had at least one adult working part-time, seven percent had an unemployed adult actively looking for work, and seven percent were headed by an adult with a disability. The main problem is low wages and few jobs, not laziness.

Hungry Americans can also be overweight. Because low-income families have more difficulty affording the most nutritious foods, and because low-income neighborhoods are often “food deserts” that lack healthy food options, hunger and obesity are often flip-sides of the same malnutrition coin. Some Americans falsely believe that some low-income people are overweight because they shop poorly, fail to cook at home, or choose to eat too much fast food. But a recent study proved that the vast majority of low-income families cooked at home at least five nights a week and desperately struggled to serve healthier food. Another study also found that middle-class Americans eat fast food more often than low-income people, which shouldn’t be surprising since SNAP benefits generally can’t be used to eat at restaurants, including fast food establishments.

All Levels of Food Insecurity Have a Devastating Impact upon People and Families

All levels of food insecurity – not just the most severe level – have a devastating impact on personal and family physical and mental health, workplace productivity, educational performance, and yes, personal happiness.

Permit me to quote distinguished commission member Dr. Deborah Frank: “Food insecurity is strongly associated ... (with) increased numbers of hospitalizations. I would point out that a single 48-hour hospitalization, besides being traumatic for child and family, costs federal (health) benefit programs more than a year’s food stamp benefits for a child!”

Even though the U.S. has 49 million food insecure residents, given that the nation’s overall population is about 319 million people, this means that 270 million Americans (about 85 percent of the population) have enough food.

So why should the non-hungry 85 percent of Americans care?

Reason one: Although most people who face hunger were poor or near-poor their whole lives, people who are now middle-class Americans may still face hunger themselves someday. Job losses, divorces, bad mortgages, illnesses, and plain bad luck often contribute to sudden drops in financial well-being, particularly if the people facing the setbacks previously had significant debt and limited assets (as is the case with many middle-class Americans today). So the first reason to worry about the nation’s hunger problem is that the crisis might someday be your own.

Reason two: The high prevalence of food insecurity in America has a devastating impact upon our economy and international competitiveness by increasing our nation’s spending on health care and reducing our productivity and educational performance. Hunger also makes it nearly impossible for people to escape poverty. A 2011 study by the Center for American Progress, where I am a Senior Fellow, found: “Hunger costs our nation at least \$167.5 billion due to the combination of lost economic productivity per year, more expensive public education because of the rising costs of poor education outcomes, avoidable health care costs, and the cost of charity

to keep families fed. This \$167.5 billion does not include the cost of the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program and the other key federal nutrition programs, which run at about \$94 billion a year.”

Reason three: The national economy, like a skyscraper, is only as strong as its foundation. Ensuring a brighter future for America much include empowering and enabling its citizens to succeed and contribute. Even Henry Ford—no great liberal—understood that workers needed to be paid at least well enough to buy his cars. It significantly weighs down the entire economy when large numbers of people are too poor and too hungry to purchase goods and services, or be as innovative or productive as they can be.

In recent decades, scientists have produced vast amounts of data proving that hunger and food insecurity harm low-income Americans at each stage of their lives. Not only does hunger impair physical growth and health, but it saps energy and makes it impossible to concentrate, thereby compromising performance at school, work, and home. All those factors then fuel feelings of despair and inadequacy.

The Nutrition-Cognition National Advisory Committee—a panel comprised of doctors, nutritionists, and other experts on the effects of hunger—concluded in 1998 that problems with poor nutrition start even before birth: “Pregnant women who are undernourished are more likely to have low birth weight babies. Along with other health risks that are common to low birth weight babies, these infants are more likely to suffer developmental delays. In the case of very low birth weight infants, permanent cognitive deficiencies associated with smaller head circumference may reflect diminished brain growth.”

According to pediatrician Dr. Deborah Frank, malnourished mothers are more prone to have children with birth defects: “Micronutrient deficiencies that arise from inadequate maternal nutrition—even in the presence of adequate maternal weight gain in pregnancy—can have devastating consequences. There is a well-established relationship between inadequate maternal folate intake at the time of conception and the risk of neural tube defects (spinal bifida) in children.”

A recent study published in the *Journal of Nutrition* finds that self-reported food insecurity is associated with poor dietary quality and less physical activity among California elementary students in high-poverty schools.

Clearly, if you want fetuses to develop properly, you should support expansion of the WIC program, which provides food to young children and mothers, and has a spectacular track record in ensuring exactly that. Based on earlier USDA calculations, I have estimated that the WIC program, since its inception, has prevented at least 500,000 babies from dying at birth. I can’t help but note the irony that the vast majority of Member of Congress who call themselves “pro-life” voted for a sequestration process that has cut WIC funding.

After birth, problems associated with hunger are only compounded, as Dr. Frank noted: “Child hunger is a health issue, a very serious one. My kids [at the clinic] don’t have AIDS but they function as if they did. The difference is that their immune system was fine until they become malnourished. Now they just continue to decline and decline.”

The Nutrition-Cognition National Advisory Committee described it this way: “Under nutrition impacts the behavior of children, their school performance, and their overall cognitive development.... Undernourished children decrease their activity levels and become more apathetic. This in turn affects their social interactions, inquisitiveness, and overall cognitive functioning. Even nutritional deficiencies of a relatively short-term nature influence children’s behavior, ability to concentrate, and to perform complex tasks.... [Child hunger] is capable of producing progressive handicaps—impairments which can remain throughout life.... By robbing children of their natural human potential, under nutrition results in lost knowledge, brainpower and productivity for the nation. The longer and more severe the malnutrition, the greater the likely loss and the greater the cost to our country. “

Dr. J. Larry Brown explained further: “The research shows that youngsters from food insecure and hungry homes have poorer overall health status: they are sick more often, much more likely to have ear infections, have higher rates of iron deficiency anemia, and are hospitalized more frequently. In short, going hungry makes kids sick.... They miss more days of school and are less prepared to learn when they are able to attend.... Further exacerbating this interactive impairment of young bodies and minds are the emotional and behavioral impacts.”

A study at urban medical centers in five states and the District of Columbia found that food-insecure children had odds of “fair or poor health” nearly twice as great, and odds of being hospitalized since birth almost a third larger, than food-secure children.” Another study concluded that food-insufficient children scored significantly lower on arithmetic tests, were more likely to repeat a grade, were more likely to see a psychologist, and had greater difficulty getting along with other children.

Beyond the direct physical and psychological impact upon children due to the deprivation of nutrients, simply knowing that your family faces hunger—even if your parents take great pains to feed you before they feed themselves (as is often the case)—can take its toll. One study found: “Children as young as 11 could describe behaviors associated with food insecurity if they had experienced it directly or indirectly.... Psychological aspects included worry/anxiety/sadness about the family food supply, feelings of having no choice in the foods eaten, shame/fear of being labeled as poor, and attempts to shield children. Social aspects of food insecurity centered on using social networks to acquire food or money and social exclusion.

Even more so than simply being poor, one study found that being food insecure is associated with increased mental illness and behavioral problems among children: “Hungry children were three times more likely than at-risk for hunger children and seven times more likely than not hungry children to receive scores indicative of clinical dysfunction....The same pattern of at least doubling of risk was found for other indicators of psychosocial dysfunction like special education and repeating a grade.... Hungry children were seven to 12 times more likely to exhibit symptoms of conduct disorder than not hungry children.”

Another study that looked at a broad variety of factors found that food insecurity generally decreases health-related quality of life and physical function for children.

As children move into adolescence, a lack of food continues to have devastating effects. One study found that simply being poor didn’t make teenagers more suicidal than those who were non-poor, but being hungry or suffering from food insecurity did make them more suicidal.

Facing hunger also makes it more difficult to be a good parent. Food insecure parents have higher rates of depression and more significant stress, and this has a negative impact upon their parenting.

The percentage of mothers with either major depressive episodes or generalized anxiety disorder increases with increasing food insecurity. A study in Oregon found that “adults in food insecure households were more than twice as likely to suffer depression as adults in households with adequate food.” One study in large cities found a vicious cycle: food insecurity made women more depressed, but because they were more depressed they were less able to take the steps necessary to end their food insecurity. Household food insecurity is positively associated with depression among low-income Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program participants and income-eligible nonparticipants, according to a new study in the *Journal of Nutrition*. Among SNAP participants, low food security and very low food security were both associated with higher odds of depression, but the odds were not as great as those for non-participants. A recent study in Canada found an association of moderate and severe food insecurity with suicidal ideation in adults. Another study in the *Journal of Nutrition* found food insecurity is associated with poor sleep outcomes among US adults.

In adults, food insecurity and hunger are also closely tied to poor physical health as well. Only 11 percent of people who use food pantries, soup kitchens, and homeless shelters in America reported that their health is “excellent,” compared to 16 percent who say their health is “poor” and 30 percent who say their health is only “fair.” Twenty-one percent of all the adults who obtain food from these emergency programs reported that they had no health insurance. Forty-one percent of the food recipients reported unpaid hospital and medical bills. Nearly one in ten clients reported that they had been refused medical care because they could not pay or because they had a Medicaid or Medical Assistance card during the previous 12 months.

Maternal food insecurity is associated with having a young child with special health care needs (SHCN), according to a recent study in the *Maternal and Child Health Journal*. The odds of food insecurity were 2.6 times greater for mothers with a child with SHCN compared to mothers without a child with SHCN. Material need insecurities – inadequate access to or inability to afford food, medication, housing, and utilities – are associated with worse diabetes control and increased use of health care resources, according to a study in the *Journal of the American Medical Association - Internal Medicine*.

All of these effects of hunger inhibit one’s ability to make a living. Finding and keeping a job is hard enough —it is even harder on an empty stomach. It is no wonder that hunger is so harmful to worker productivity. Nobel Prize-winning economist Robert Fogel estimated that 20 percent of the population in England and France was effectively excluded from the labor force around 1790 because they were too weak and hungry to work. Improved nutrition, he calculated, accounted for about half of the economic growth in Britain and France between 1790 and 1880. As a result, he has pointed out that hungry people cannot work their way out of poverty. A more recent study of low-income urban women found that “food secure women tended to have better employment and income outcomes than food insecure women, and they also tended to be less socially isolated.”

According to Feeding America, 8.4 percent of the U.S. senior population was food insecure in 2011, meaning that nearly one in 12 seniors has only a limited access to food. This condition is especially difficult for elderly people who must rely on help from pantries and Meals-on-Wheels programs that often provide food that is too high in both sodium and sugar.

The impact grows greater still among people battling life-threatening diseases. A study of low-income cancer patients found that food-insecure patients had higher levels of nutritional risk, depression, and financial strain, and lower quality of life compared with food-secure patients. Fifty-five percent of food insecure cancer patients reported not taking a prescribed medication because they could not afford it, versus 13 percent of food-secure patients. Many seriously ill people must choose between paying for either medicine or food. I can't imagine a more awful dilemma. The only thing worse is being able to afford neither.

Noting how some question whether hunger is truly a problem distinct from poverty, author Nick Kotz, writing in 1969, retorted by pointing out that "if hunger is, in fact, a new metaphor for looking at the problems of abject poverty, it is the most basic one."

Some question whether ending hunger would reduce poverty. But only someone who has never known hunger could ask such a question. Hunger makes it harder for children to learn, for parents to parent, and for workers to work. It causes frustration and hopelessness. It makes it nearly impossible for sick people to get well. Put simply, being hungry makes it more difficult for a person or family to escape poverty. It is a huge actor in the cycle of poverty that traps more and more people in this country every year. Ending hunger is an achievable goal that can help to break that cycle, offer people the fighting chance we all deserve, and move us toward ending poverty in America.

Some U.S. conservatives try to argue that the existence of mass obesity in America proves that we simply can't have mass hunger, but the facts prove that hunger and obesity often coexist in America, and that food insecurity actually fuels obesity. While obesity is a serious problem faced by Americans of all income levels, it is an even greater threat to low-income Americans. Because more nutritious food costs more money, takes more time to prepare, and is harder to obtain in low-income neighborhoods than healthier food, the hungriest and poorest Americans ironically suffer from the highest rates of obesity. Hunger and obesity are flip sides of the same malnutrition coin.

According to the U.S. Center for Disease Control, more than one-third of U.S. adults and approximately 17 percent of children and adolescents ages 2 to 19 are obese. Fully 27 percent of today's young adults are too heavy to serve in the military. Disqualification from military service due to obesity ranks far higher than the second-top reason: smoking marijuana (nearly 13 percent of disqualifications).

Obesity prevents the country enlisting some who could have turned out to be our best soldiers and officers, and makes it even more difficult for our military to meet its recruiting targets. Thus, food insecurity and obesity threaten our national defense.

I note that, in the vast majority of the studies mentioned above, food insecurity at any level – not just very low food security – has severe negative consequences.

In order to achieve every other major goal we seek to achieve as a nation – rebuilding our economy, fixing public education, restoring the middle class, expanding opportunity, reducing crime and incarceration, making health care more affordable, protecting the nation from enemies, and slashing poverty – we must first end hunger and food insecurity in America.

U.S. hunger, food insecurity, and malnutrition are massive hindrances to America’s economic competitiveness and national security. No superpower in the history of the world has remained a super power if it has failed to adequately feed its own people. Ending U.S. hunger and food insecurity is both a moral imperative and a basic requirement of national survival.

The Commission Should Focus on All Food Insecurity, Not Just Severe Food Insecurity

I understand that the Commission is considering focusing its recommendations mostly on the most severe form of U.S. food insecurity, not on the broader food insecurity that impacts 49 million Americans. Permit me to make a forceful argument that such a strategy would be a serious mistake.

First, as documented above in great detail, *all* forms of food insecurity harm families and the nation as a whole. Even being unable to afford a fully supply of nutritious food only occasionally is absolutely devastating to anyone’s mental and physical health, as well as to their educational and work performance.

Second, I would argue that limiting the scope of your work would not fully meet your Congressional mandate. As your own mandate documents states, you have been empowered by federal law to “provide policy recommendations to Congress and the Secretary [of Agriculture] to more effectively use existing programs and funds of the Department of Agriculture to combat domestic hunger and food insecurity.” I note that the mandate says to combat hunger *and* food insecurity. Had it been the intent of Congress to ask the Commission to combat just hunger or just the most severe form of food insecurity, it surely would have done so. Given that Congress gave the Commission such a broad mandate, I don’t believe the Commission should, on its own, severely limit that mandate.

Third, I worry that limiting the scope of the Commission would unintentionally send a political message that the Commission is validating the claim of some far-right-wing activists that the broader problem of food insecurity really isn’t a serious problem for the nation, and that the only Americans truly suffering are those who suffer from very low food security. By doing so, the Commission could unintentionally support those who want the nation to avoid its responsibility for broader efforts to create jobs, raise wages, reduce inequality, slash poverty, improve nutrition, and bolster the broader social safety net.

Lastly, and perhaps most importantly, I am convinced that any attempt to target efforts just to the most food insecure will fail.

Just as Americans shift frequently between deep poverty, poverty, and non- poverty, they shift frequently between very low food security, low food security, and food security.

While many Americans assume that most U.S. families in poverty are impoverished for long, continuous periods of time, over multiple generations, such long-term, multi-generational, poverty is relatively rare. In the 36 months spanning the years 2009 to 2011, while about a third of Americans live below the poverty line for at least one of those months, only three percent of U.S. families were poor for *each* of those 36 months, according the Census Bureau.

U.S. hunger and food security rates track closely with poverty rates. In 2012, fully 46.5 million Americans lived below the meager federal poverty line, \$18,284 annually for a family of three. Another 14.7 million Americans were “near poor,” in families with annual incomes below \$22,855. Thus, a whopping 61.2 million Americans live in poverty or near poverty, and the vast majority of those Americans could be at risk of severe food insecurity at some point in their lives. Keep in mind, those are average income levels over a full year, and many Americans in poverty and near poverty go for months and weeks earning even less than their year-long averages.

Most families who suffer from hunger and poverty do so sporadically, repeatedly climbing into, and then falling out of, the lower middle class. Likewise, many middle class Americans fall into poverty multiple times over a lifetime.

Both from my study of U.S. food insecurity data and my frequent conversations with low-income Americans throughout the country, I know that Americans shift frequently between having enough food and not having enough food. For the Americans who lack enough food, sometimes that condition is frequent and severe, and sometimes that condition is somewhat less common and somewhat less severe. Sometimes families go from being somewhat food insecure to being more severely food insecure but sometimes families fall directly and rapidly from being middle class and food insecure to being very poor and very food insecure. Since families are usually pushed into food insecurity and more severe food insecurity by unpredictable events such as illnesses, lay-offs, divorces, reductions in work hours, or car malfunctions, those conditions are usually impossible to predict. Given that it would be nearly impossible to predict which individual people and families will become severely food insecure, it would be truly impossible to do that at a vast national scale. Furthermore, because conditions change so rapidly, it would be impossible to develop interventions that somehow find – and instantaneously aid – only those families at that very moment when they suffer from the most severe form of food insecurity.

I certainly understand the desire to pinpoint, then target, interventions to those with the most severe need, but that’s not always possible or wise. To make an analogy, if you were fighting a flu epidemic nationwide, it wouldn’t make sense to try to find and treat just the people who are currently experiencing the worst symptoms of it; if you did so, you would usually be too late, and the flu would surely spread. The only way to truly reduce the flu is to reduce the risk of exposure to the broader population at the same time as treating those with it. Thus, the only real way to reduce severe food insecurity in America is to reduce the risk of Americans to *any* food insecurity at the same time as feeding those who are currently suffering.

Most U.S. Hunger is caused by a Failing Society, Not Failing People

As noted above, vast numbers of Americans are poor or near-poor, usually at little or no fault of their own.

Too many Americans remain unemployed or under-employed. U.S. median family income in 2012 was \$51,017, essentially the same level as in 2007, despite the still high cost of living. Calculating for inflation, the median U.S. family now has \$6,554 *less* in income than in 2007. The key factors that threaten the U.S. middle class – too few jobs and low wages, combined with high costs for housing, fuel, health care, education, food and child care – are the very same factors that are the main causes of U.S. poverty and hunger.

The U.S. median income now equals about \$25 per hour. Yet, according to the National Low-Income Housing Coalition, \$18.92 per hour would need to be spent just to pay to live in an average two-bedroom dwelling nationwide, leaving average families only \$6 per hour to pay for every other expense.

Most U.S. hunger is caused by failings of our society, not by supposed failings of hungry Americans. The main causes of U.S. hunger is too few jobs, too low wages, and an inadequate safety net, so the main solutions should be more jobs, higher wages, and more robust and modernized safety net. Our main solutions should be focused on fixing our society, not further micromanaging the personal behavior of poor people.

How America Went from Almost Ending Hunger to Creating a Mass Epidemic of Hunger

We already know exactly how to end U.S. hunger because we almost did so.

The 1960's and 1970's proved that politics and policy truly do matter. Campaigning in West Virginia in 1960, John F. Kennedy, who had grown up in great privilege, was genuinely shocked and appalled to find hungry children with hollow eyes, living on little more than surplus lard and cornmeal. He made hunger an issue in the general election, even raising domestic hunger in the opening statement of a debate against Nixon: "I'm not satisfied when we have over nine billion dollars' worth of food [in surplus]—some of it rotting—even though there is a hungry world, and even though four million Americans wait every month for a food package from the government, which averages five cents a day per individual. I saw cases in West Virginia, here in the United States, where children took home part of their school lunch in order to feed their families ... I don't think we're meeting our obligations toward these Americans."

After winning the election, Kennedy quickly acted upon his concern. The first executive order he issued as president on January 21, 1961, doubled the number of foods on the commodity surplus list and directed the USDA to start the pilot Food Stamp Program, which Eisenhower had refused to implement, in select locations. What a difference a day makes.

A year later in 1962, the publication of Michael Harrington's groundbreaking book on poverty, *The Other America*, significantly increased the nation's awareness that not all Americans were benefiting from the nation's growing prosperity. Then in 1964, President Lyndon Johnson launched the War on Poverty. Late that year, as a part of a deal to pass a wheat and cotton bill, Congress slightly increased the Food Stamp Program, allowing, but not requiring, any locality in the nation to run a local program. In 1966, Congress began expanding the National School Lunch Program and created the first pilot school breakfast programs.

Still, the hunger problem persisted. In April 1967, a Senate Subcommittee held a hearing on poverty and the Head Start Program in the Mississippi Delta (a region comprising of parts of Mississippi, Arkansas, and Louisiana that has extraordinarily high rates of poverty and a large African American population) and Senators Robert Kennedy (D-NY) and Joseph Clark (D-PA) decided to see poverty conditions for themselves outside of the hearing room. Given Kennedy's superstar status as the brother of the martyred president and a potential presidential candidate himself, his visit with hungry children in Mississippi attracted widespread media attention. According to Kennedy aide Peter Edelman, Kennedy saw "visible swollen bellies and running sores on the arms and legs of young children that appeared not to be healing. Kennedy asked the children what they had eaten and how many meals they ate every day. They said that they usually have one meal a day, and they had eaten whatever they were going to eat that day."

Said Kennedy, "I've seen bad things in West Virginia, but I've never seen anything like this in the United States. . . . My God, I didn't know this kind of thing existed. How can a country like this allow it? Maybe they just don't know." Kennedy's children later said "he came home to dinner that night deeply shaken," and that he, a man of few words so much of the time, "couldn't stop talking about what he had seen that day."

A few weeks later, a team of doctors headed by Dr. Robert Coles and funded by the Field Foundation traveled to the Delta to study hunger there. Discovering Third World-style malnutrition, their findings startled the nation:

We saw children whose nutritional and medical condition we can only describe as shocking—even to a group of physicians whose work involves daily confrontation with disease and suffering. In child after child we saw: evidence of vitamin and mineral deficiencies; serious, untreated skin infections and ulcerations; eye and ear diseases, also unattended bone diseases secondary to poor food intake; the prevalence of bacterial and parasitic disease, as well as severe anemia, which resulting loss of energy and ability to live a normally active life; diseases of the heart and lungs—requiring surgery—which have gone undiagnosed and untreated. . . . and finally, in boys and girls in every county we visited, obvious evidence of severe malnutrition, with injury to body's tissues—its muscles, bones and skin as well as an associated psychological state of fatigue, listlessness, and exhaustion. . . . We saw homes with children who are lucky to eat one meal a day. . . . We saw children who don't get to drink milk, don't get to eat fruit, green vegetables, or meat. . . . Their parents may be declared ineligible for the food stamp program, even though they have literally nothing. . . . We do not want to quibble over words, but "malnutrition" is not quite what we found. . . . They are suffering from hunger and disease and directly or indirectly they are dying from them—which is exactly what "starvation" means.

One of the doctors on the team, Dr. Raymond Wheeler of North Carolina, included his own field report:

At one house the landlords reportedly had forbidden the tenants to have a garden although in this particular case, there was obviously ample space for one. This—from all reports—is common practice in the towns as well as on the plantations, though why this should be so in view of their well-known need for food seemed inexplicable on any ground other than outright spite. . . . Only one of the families I visited ever had milk at all

and this was reserved for the "sickliest" ones. One mother summed it up: "These children go to bed hungry and get up hungry and don't ever know nothing in between."

A few months later, at a US Senate hearing, Dr. Wheeler again gave a vivid description of what he saw in Mississippi. But he added an even more shocking charge, especially coming from a Southern white man—that the white ruling class of Mississippi was purposely starving African Americans in order to drive them out of state because the mechanization of cotton picking had made their labor unnecessary and because their civil rights organizing had made them a threat to the power structure. He called Mississippi "a kind of prison for a great group of uneducated, semi-starving people." His comments generated a firestorm.

Perhaps many Southerners were outraged that such oppressive conditions existed in their region and were thankful to Dr. Wheeler and his colleagues for having the courage to speak up, but judging from the letters to him on this topic, the greatest sentiment seems to be that they betrayed their race by raising the issue at all. Here's a typical hate letter written to the doctors from a woman in Neshoba, Mississippi:

Doctors! I want to...tell you just how cheap, rotten, lying, disgusting, and contemptible you, & all your cohorts are—in your most recent "liable attacks on Mississippi." If I just didn't know that God will see you all get your true punishment, I would love to personally take you on myself.... The "loads" of commodities the lazy Negroes carries out for their illegitimate children by the dozens & husbands too sorry & lazy to work and make a living and then drives around in some of the finest cars here is in Miss & I can't even afford a car to hold a job with & them such disciples of Satan. Forever lying and slinging mud at our Miss! All of you are of the very lowest caliber of humanity.... You are a Disgrace to America and also the entire medical profession!

One letter, claiming that it was "from a group of graduate students in sociology and anthropology who have been working in the field and good citizens who helped all across this land of ours," said:

Why smear the South with your headlines? (Incidentally four of us followed the Alabama march put on by Martin L. King and it was a disgraceful and degrading round of licentiousness which turned our stomachs even though we were supposed to be ready for anything as future sociologists)... We say to you that we are tired of working and paying taxes to support immoral Negro women producing illegitimates by the thousands for public dole—this applies to trashy whites as well...What does a doctor expect to find but skin infections and parasitic diseases when people don't wash themselves?... Those sullied woman bring much of the trouble to their children through association with the vilest and filthiest of "men"...all they do is sit back and wait for the monthly check and produce more illegitimates for more disease and more suffering. They should be sterilized so that society would be gradually cleaned of its diseases, but you wouldn't recommend that, would you Doctors?

The reason I provide so much text from the hateful letters is to document just how much of the underlying opposition to fighting hunger was fueled by racism (not just in Mississippi, but throughout the South, and indeed, nationwide), a situation that has not entirely ended even decades later, despite the fact that the polarity of hungry Americans were (and still are) white.

It is no coincidence that many of the strongest supporters of segregation were also the fiercest opponents of increasing government support for anti-hunger efforts. Leading segregationist (and the father of a mixed-race child) Strom Thurmond almost succeeded in halting efforts to get the federal government to measure hunger, saying: “There has been hunger since the time of Jesus Christ and there always will be.” Powerful House Agriculture Appropriations Chair Jamie Whitten complained to Senator George McGovern that if “hunger was not a problem, Nigras won’t work” and that McGovern was promoting revolution by seeking an improvement in food stamp benefits, which Whitten thought would be used for “frivolity and wine.” Whitten even opposed expansion of the School Lunch Program to many of the nation’s poorest jurisdictions that did not yet have such programs. Sadly, for me at least, the USDA headquarters building in Washington, DC, where I worked for eight years, is now named for Whitten.

Author Nick Kotz has described how, in the 1960s, “Food and welfare aid, in minimal amounts, were available for the docile poor who ‘stayed in line,’ but these benefits could be withheld from anyone who challenged or threatened the institutions.” Kotz described how food aid was cut off to civil rights activists in Mississippi, how parents in Kentucky who fought for school lunches for their kids had their children denied use of a youth corps program, and how party bosses in Des Moines and Chicago used food aid to bolster their political machines.

The opposition of key Congressional committee chairs in the mid-1960s further weakened the small federal nutrition programs. As some counties switched from free commodities to food stamps, because people had to provide cash to buy a portion of their food stamps up front (when they previously got the commodities for free), the number of people getting help for the government dropped. For instance, in Sunflower County, Mississippi, in the 1960s, participation in federal food aid dropped from 18,540 persons in the commodity programs to 7,856 in food stamps. In 1967, less than one in six poor Americans benefited at all from the commodity or food stamps programs. More than half of all states denied food aid to many people with incomes below the poverty line (in 1967 it was \$3,335 for a family of four). Localities were allowed a great deal of discretion over how they managed their programs, which encouraged eccentric rules such as the one in an Indiana township which denied commodity aid to families with dogs in the household. Eligibility requirements were different in each state, but Whitten insisted on a rule that no county could have both commodities and food stamps. As a result of all those restrictions on food aid, Third-World-like conditions existed in significant pockets of the nation at the time.

Following up on the Field Foundation’s study of Mississippi, the Citizens’ Board of Inquiry on Hunger and Malnutrition in the United States conducted a study in 1968 in order to prove that such conditions existed throughout America and to motivate the media to focus on the issue. The cochairs of the study, Benjamin E. Mays and Leslie W. Dunbar, wrote: “No other western country permits such a large proportion of its people to endure the lives we press on the poor.... To make four-fifths of a nation more affluent than any people in history, we have degraded one-fifth mercilessly.” The report found “chronic hunger and malnutrition in every part of the United States,” and that people were going without food for four or five days in a row or subsisting on powdered milk for a week at a time. Substantial numbers of newborns were dying, “from causes that can be traced directly and primarily to malnutrition.” Only five million of the 29 million then-eligible Americans were participating in the two existing government food programs (commodities and food stamps) and, “the majority of those participating [were] not the poorest of the poor,” because the poorest of the poor could not afford to buy the stamps. While noting the

inherent challenge in measuring the problem, the report stated: “We face a problem which, conservatively estimated, affects 10 million Americans and in all likelihood a substantially higher number.” The report concluded: “We find ourselves somewhat startled by our own findings, for we had been lulled into the comforting belief that at least the extremes of privation had been eliminated in the process of becoming the world’s wealthiest nation.”

Despite setbacks in the last few decades, there is still far less hunger and malnutrition in the United States today than in 1968. What did we achieve that hunger reduction? Grassroots activists took action, the media took notice, elected officials took their cue to pass anti-hunger legislation—and the modern safety net was constructed. The system worked.

Dr. King launched the “Poor People’s Campaign” to target poverty nationwide, and one of its top goals was to expand federal nutrition assistance programs. After King’s assassination, the movement, led by Rev. Ralph Abernathy, camped out on the Washington Mall to dramatize the issue. They were able to demand and obtain meetings on hunger with key national leaders.

Later in 1968, CBS broadcast an extraordinary, hour-long, Emmy-winning, prime-time documentary called “Hunger in America,” based on the Citizens’ Board report. Opening with a lengthy close-up of a malnourished baby literally dying as the camera rolled, the broadcast galvanized the nation. Other networks and newspapers also gave hunger great attention. NBC Evening News also won an Emmy that year for its frequent hunger coverage. The issue was fully rediscovered.

The Field Foundation and Citizens’ Board studies were both specifically designed to attract media coverage, which, it was hoped, would then advance legislation. The strategy worked.

In the late 1960s, hunger was a hot issue in Washington. The US Senate created a Select Committee on Nutrition and Human Needs (often referred to as the “Hunger Committee”) chaired by liberal Senator George McGovern of South Dakota. Significantly, the committee also included arch-conservative Robert Dole of Kansas.

A further breakthrough came when Senator Ernest Hollings of South Carolina unexpectedly disavowed his previous claims, which he had made when he was Governor, that there was no hunger in his state, saying that he had previously denied the problem because he worried that companies in the North would cancel their plans to relocate to South Carolina if they knew the level of deprivation there. Hollings then said: “South Carolina’s hunger is both white and black.... Let me categorically state there is hunger in South Carolina. I have seen it with my own eyes. Starving—that is too dreadful a term. But the result is the same. Those weakened and diseased by hunger are dying from the diseases caused by hunger.”

In early 1969, the new president, Richard Nixon, expressed doubt that there was any serious hunger in America. A senior White House official echoed the president, saying, “there may be malnutrition in America—but real hunger on a substantial scale—I don’t believe it.” Nixon’s Director of Communications publicly criticized Senator McGovern (who they suspected, correctly, would run for president) for “traipsing around the country with television cameras” and said it was disgraceful for McGovern and others to “make hunger a political cause.”

Yet the political pressure for Nixon to do something about hunger had increased so significantly that, in May of 1969, he sent a “Special Message to Congress Recommending a Program to End Hunger in America.” The message included the implication that the poor were hungry due to ignorance and that “people must be educated in choosing proper foods.” But other than that, Nixon’s anti-hunger rhetoric was surprisingly stirring, and most importantly, his policy proposals were progressive, concrete, and broad. He called for Congress to expand the Food Stamp Program and eliminate the requirement that even the poorest people in need of food stamps purchase them. He sought Congressional authority for the USDA to have both a Food Stamp Program and a food distribution program in the same county. He announced that he had created a Food and Nutrition Service within the USDA to administer anti-hunger programs. And he even indicated that he had directed the USDA to start a “Special Supplemental Food Program,” the forerunner to the WIC Program, which would be specially aimed at aiding low-income women and infants. Thus, almost entirely due to agitation from the media, anti-poverty activists, and other political leaders, an administration, which doubted that hunger even existed just months prior, ended up proposing what were, at that point in American history, the most significant proposals ever made to reduce it.

Nixon placed such a high public priority on hunger issues that, later in 1969, he sponsored the first—and, as of today, only—White House conference on hunger, although he told his Secretary of Agriculture to “use all the rhetoric so long as it doesn’t cost any money.” In order to entice a young Congressman, Donal Rumsfeld, to take a job in the administration as head of the Office of Equal Opportunity, a Great Society agency with the legal mandate to ensure “maximum feasible participation of the poor” in running government anti-poverty efforts, Nixon threw in the extra enticement that the individual would head up the administration’s anti-hunger initiatives. Rumsfeld took the job, and although he was in charge of the one federal office directly tasked with increasing the involvement of poor people in government, he actually opposed inviting representatives of the poor to the anti-hunger conference because he feared an embarrassing militant protest.

Most of the nation’s leading anti-hunger groups were founded during a fourteen-year period starting in 1970: The Food Research Action Center (FRAC) in 1970; Bread for the World in 1973; World Hunger Year (WHY) in 1975; Second Harvest (which later changed its name to America’s Second Harvest and then Feeding America) in 1979; and Share Our Strength (SOS) in 1984.

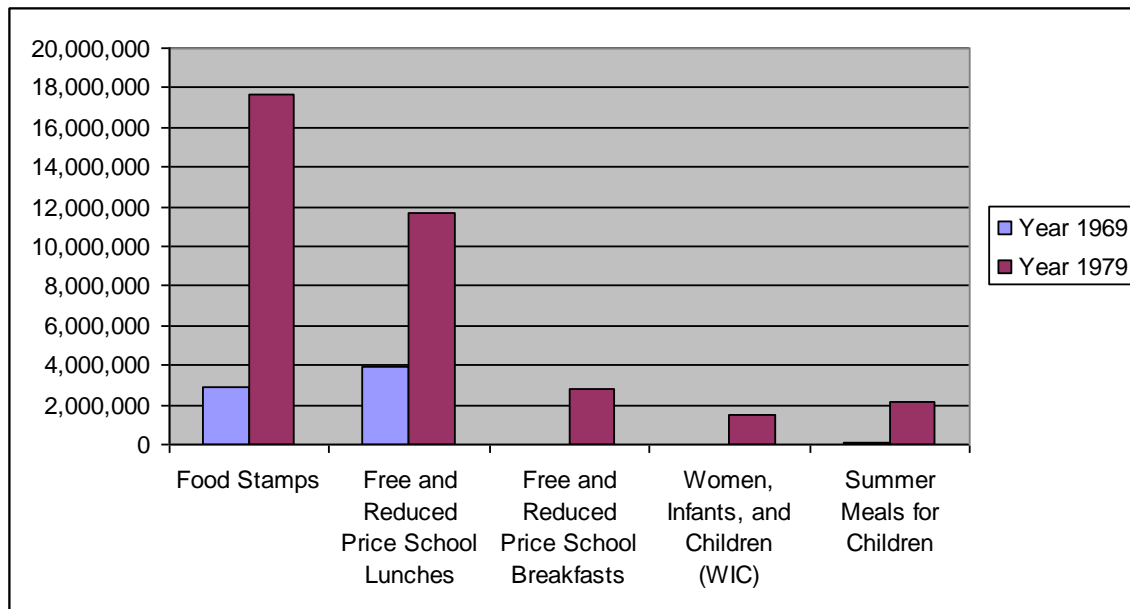
Not coincidentally, the nation’s greatest advances in reducing hunger came in the same decade. Not only was the fledgling anti-hunger movement strongest in flexing its new muscles, but Senators Dole and McGovern forged a consensus across party and ideological lines to take concrete steps to reduce domestic hunger. Over a span of just a few years, the developments came fast and furious.

In 1971, Congress passed legislation that limited the purchase requirement for food stamps and, as an amendment to the Child Nutrition Action of 1972, Congress authorized the Special Supplemental Food Program for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC). In 1973, Congress passed a law requiring states to expand the Food Stamp Program to every jurisdiction.

The biggest advance was the passage of the Food Stamp Act of 1977, which created the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance (SNAP) Program as we know it today. The act completely

eliminated the purchase requirement for food stamps, making them free on a large scale for the very first time. It also established national income eligibility guidelines at the poverty line and required outreach to enroll more people into the program. Showing the nation’s ambivalence toward such matters, the act also penalized households whose heads voluntarily quit jobs. Overall, though, the bill was a major advance and resulted in more Americans getting more generous benefits. In 1978, Congress permanently authorized the Child and Adult Care Food Program, which provides food to low-income children in child care and to low-income seniors in certain institutional settings.

Growth of the Federal Safety Net Programs



Source: USDA Food and Nutrition Service

Overall, between 1969 and 1979, as the chart above demonstrates, the expansion of existing programs and the start of new ones resulted in a dramatic increase in the percentage of low-income Americans who received federal help obtaining food.

Participation in the Food Stamp Program increased six-fold, from 2.8 million people to 17.6 million people. The number of children receiving free and reduced-price lunches tripled, from 3.9 million to 11.7 million children. The number of children receiving free summer meals increased even more dramatically, from a small pilot program feeding 99,000 kids to a major national program serving 21 million. Neither the WIC Program nor free and reduced price breakfasts paid by the federal government even existed in 1969; by 1979 there were four million people benefiting from WIC and 2.7 million children getting free- and reduced-price breakfasts.

These expansions succeeded spectacularly in achieving their main goal: ending starvation conditions in America. In 1979, the Field Foundation sent a team of investigators back to many

of the same parts of the United States found to have high rates of hunger in the late 1960s. They found dramatic reductions in hunger and malnutrition, and concluded: “This change does not appear to be due to an overall improvement in living standards or to a decrease in joblessness in these areas.... The Food Stamp Program, the nutritional components of Head Start, school lunch and breakfast programs, and...WIC have made the difference.” Had the nation built upon this progress by further expanding and strengthening these programs, it could have easily ended hunger entirely.

Some say the greatest symbol of the Reagan era is the fallen Berlin Wall, even though it fell after Reagan left office and even though Reagan’s role in prompting the collapse of the Soviet Union is debatable. I think a much more apt symbol of the Reagan era is the food pantry.

The gauzy nostalgia of Reagan's “Morning in America” masked the reality that high unemployment, social service cutbacks, and plummeting wages brought back significant domestic hunger.

When Reagan entered office in 1981, there were only a few hundred emergency feeding programs in America, most of which were traditional soup kitchens serving mostly the people who had been historically the most hungry – single men with substance abuse or mental illness problems. Yet, as a direct result of the economic policies and social service cuts set in motion by Reagan, the number of emergency feeding programs in America skyrocketed, and continued to do so even after he left office. There are now more than 40,000 such programs in America, and roughly two-thirds of them are food pantries, where parents and their children, the elderly, and working people obtain free groceries. Pantries didn’t exist in any great numbers in the years between World War II and the 1980s.

Pantries were needed because Reaganomics failed. Somehow, tax cuts for the wealthy and massive defense spending did not lead to a “trickling down” of money for the poor. In the early years of the Reagan presidency, a nominally Democratic Congress, awed by Reagan’s personal affability and scared of his political popularity, approved his harsh budgets. Social programs were hit hard. Even previously moderate Congressional heroes of the anti-hunger movement, such as Senator Dole, went along for the ride. They allowed Reagan to cut food stamps and WIC, and even prevented the Food Stamp Program from engaging in outreach. Typical of how Reagan operated, he smilingly claimed that he cut outreach funds so the money saved could go to benefits, but none of that savings was used for benefits. He also slashed funding for education, health, support services for the mentally ill, and housing. The Congressional Budget Office estimated that there were \$110 billion in reductions in social services from 1982 to 1986.

To add insult to injury, all these cutbacks occurred during a time of a deep recession and extensive factory closings. After some insensitive comments by Reagan and his top aides—and after it became clear that there was a sharp spike in the number of feeding charities, as well as a massive new wave of homeless people on the streets of the nation’s cities—hunger was again briefly back in the national limelight.

A team of doctors once again traveled the country looking for, and finding, “severe malnutrition,” and Dr. J. Larry Brown chronicled their disturbing findings. They found a day care administrator in New Haven, Connecticut, who said: “The majority of babies come here hungry.” They visited a firehouse in rural Maine, which doubled as a feeding program that

provided a daily hot meal to senior citizens, and the center director said that “for a majority of them, I’d say it is the only meal of the day.” They met a doctor in Mississippi who said that he literally “watched a baby die from malnutrition.” A Mississippi girl told them she was not happy about the start of summer vacation because: “When we is in school we get to eat lunch, but in summer we only gets supper.” They heard of an Alabama man undergoing dialysis treatment who said that he and his wife didn’t have one bit of food for their children that night. This man said: “While I am dying it’s heartache to see my children going hungry and I can’t do anything about it.” The doctors concluded that 20 million Americans were going to bed hungry at some time each month. Even though the team hand delivered its report to the White House, when asked about the report by the media, the White House denied they had seen it. An administration spokesperson at the USDA later said: “The problem of hunger is not widespread. The federal government is doing more to end hunger than any administration in history.”

But the turning point in the Reagan revolution was when the administration tried to cut funding for school lunches, and, in addition, tried to save funds by classifying ketchup as a vegetable so that it would meet the vegetable requirements of school lunches. That caused a firestorm. While people could accept cuts to food stamps, which many thought went to lazy adults, the public couldn’t abide cutting food for innocent kids. Plus, the “ketchup as a vegetable” idea was so easy to ridicule that it provided persistent fodder for the nation’s comics and cartoonists. The flap prompted so much media coverage and water cooler talk that even Americans who did little to follow government and politics were aware of it. Recognition of the severe domestic hunger problem finally led Congress back to its senses, and it enacted incremental improvements in the Food Stamp Program in 1985 and 1987.

The U.S. almost ended hunger entirely in the in 1970’s with a more inclusive economy and a stronger safety net, which received strong bi-partisan support. We have such high levels of hunger now because we abandoned those policies. We know exactly how to solve U.S. hunger, but our nation is doing precisely the opposite.

Federal Nutrition Safety Net Programs Work Spectacularly Well

Previous analysis of Census data showed that safety net programs cut the poverty rate nearly in half. Data released recently by the Urban Institute, which corrected for underreporting of key government benefits in the Census survey, reveal an even stronger impact: the safety net reduced the poverty rate from 29.1 percent to 13.8 percent in 2012 and lifted 48 million people above the poverty line, including 12 million children. According to the Center for Budget and Policy Priorities, correcting for underreporting reveals that the safety net also did more to reduce deep poverty than previously shown, although 11.2 million Americans remained below half the poverty line.

SNAP is our largest tool IN THE fight AGAIANT U.S. hunger. SNAP prevents hunger for tens of millions of American families and boosts the economy. SNAP provides vouchers – available electronically on cards similar to bank credit or debit cards – that enable low-income families to shop for the food they need at private grocery stores and markets. Because SNAP creates U.S. jobs for those who grow, pick, process, manufacture, ship, warehouse, wholesale, and retail food, every dollar spent on the program generates \$1.84 in U.S. economic activity.

Most of the people who receive SNAP are children, seniors, working parents, and people with disabilities. About half of all SNAP participants are children and nearly 10 percent are seniors. Most of the rest are working parents and people with disabilities. Undocumented immigrants are not eligible for benefits and even many legal immigrants, including many with full-time jobs, are also ineligible.

SNAP benefits that are illegally sold constitute only 1.3 percent of all SNAP benefit dollars, according to USDA, proving that there is less fraud in SNAP than in most big businesses, nonprofit groups, or defense contracts. Due to increased oversight and improvements to program management by USDA, the illegal trafficking of benefits has fallen significantly over the last two decades, from about four cents on the dollar in 1993 to a little over one cent today.

Despite increasing SNAP participation, many Americans that are eligible for benefits still don't get them, and eligible working families and seniors have the lowest participation rates. In 2011, according to USDA, 20 percent of eligible households, and a 37 of eligible working households, did not receive the SNAP benefits to which they were entitled. A whopping 51 percent of eligible seniors failed to receive the benefit. There are many reasons that eligible people do not apply for – or ultimately enroll in – the program, including: misconceptions about whether they can get SNAP and how much in benefits they can obtain; lack of time to travel to a government office, wait in line, participate in an interview that often feels like an interrogation, and submit a large amount of documents; and stigma, fear, and embarrassment

Despite the racially tinged fulminations by some right wingers against high SBAP participation rates in so-called “inner cities,” fully 88 percent of people eligible for SNAP in rural America receive it, a full 11 percentage points higher than the rate in urban areas.

Food Research and Action Center and Children's Health Watch have summarized recent studies on the effectiveness of SNAP, which I quote at length, verbatim, below:

- A number of studies released within the past year alone demonstrate the SNAP's effectiveness in improving food security and health among participants. One such study found that participating in SNAP for six months reduced the percentage of SNAP households that were food-insecure by up to 17 percent. In addition, the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) has released a number of reports which reinforce earlier evidence that SNAP reaches those most in need of food assistance in our country, including children, the elderly, people with disabilities, those who are very poor, and working adults struggling to make ends meet.
- Based on several recent USDA reports, the characteristics and circumstances of SNAP participants show how deep the need is (Gray, 2014; Leftin, Wemmerus, Mabli, Godfrey, & Tordella, 2014). Broadly, in an average month in federal fiscal year 2014, 46.5 million people received SNAP benefits with an average per-person benefit of \$125. But what else is known about SNAP participants? First, SNAP primarily serves those who are most in need. More than 60 percent of participants are children, the elderly, or people with disabilities. Second, many SNAP households include at least one working adult. About 43 percent of participants live in a household with a working adult. Third, those who receive SNAP benefits are very poor. On average, SNAP households have incomes less than 59 percent of the poverty level (59 percent is about \$14,250 annually for a family of

four). Fourth, new SNAP participants stay on the program for a short time (less than 12 months on average), and most join the program because of a job loss. Finally, SNAP reaches an estimated 83 percent of those eligible (Cunnyngham, 2015).

- Earlier evidence has shown that SNAP plays a critical role in alleviating poverty and food insecurity and in improving dietary intake, weight status, health, and well-being (e.g., Hartline-Grafton, 2013; Ratcliffe & McKernan, 2010; Sandel et al., 2014). This is especially true when benefits are closer to adequate. For example, the temporary increase in SNAP benefit levels from the 2009 American Recovery Reinvestment Act (ARRA) helped reduce the food insecurity rate by 2.2 percentage points and reduce very low food security by 2.0 percentage points among low-income households between December 2008 (pre-ARRA) and December 2009 (about eight months post-ARRA) (Nord & Prell, 2011). In addition, two years after the temporary ARRA boost, young children in households receiving SNAP benefits were significantly more likely to be “well” than children from non-participating low-income households; such a difference was not observed prior to the benefit boost (March et al., 2011). In terms of health and economic outcomes, exposure to SNAP in utero or in early childhood reduced the incidence of metabolic syndrome (obesity, hypertension, diabetes, heart disease) in adulthood and, for women in adulthood, increased economic self-sufficiency (e.g., educational attainment, earnings), based on a study of people who grew up in disadvantaged families and were born between 1956 and 1981 (Hoynes, Schanzenbach, & Almond, 2012).
- Several studies published within the last year examined SNAP participation and food insecurity among households, adults, and children. Many of these studies resolved study design issues that have been a concern in past examinations of SNAP. For instance, two studies led by Mabli tried to estimate SNAP’s effect on food insecurity while minimizing “selection bias.” Selection bias, the influence on the study when those who are struggling the most with food insecurity are more likely to seek out assistance from SNAP, could mean that those participating in the program appear to be doing worse than others (e.g., have higher rates of food insecurity) when SNAP may actually be lowering rates and helping them. The researchers tried to address this problem by making two sets of comparisons using SNAP Food Security Survey data: 1) a cross-sectional (one point in time) comparison group comparing households approved for SNAP but not yet receiving it to households that had participated for about six months; and 2) a longitudinal (over the course of time) comparison of SNAP households at program entry and that same group about six months later. In a study on household food insecurity by Mabli and Ohls (2015), participation in SNAP for six months reduced the percentage of SNAP households that were food insecure by six percent and 17 percent, respectively, in the cross-sectional and longitudinal analyses. The reductions in severe food insecurity (i.e., very low food security) were 12 percent and 19 percent, respectively.
- In a separate study by Mabli and Worthington (2014) on child food insecurity, participation in SNAP for six months was associated with a lower likelihood of child food insecurity in both the cross-sectional and longitudinal analyses (36 percent and 38 percent lower, respectively). These findings are consistent with a longitudinal study by Li and colleagues (2014) that used national, monthly data from the Panel Study of Income Dynamics and concluded participation in SNAP reduced the probability of child food insecurity.

- While these recent findings demonstrate SNAP's effectiveness in alleviating food insecurity, new research also suggests that high food prices and poor food access may diminish the beneficial impacts of program participation. Based on USDA and Census data, SNAP participation, in general, was found to reduce household, adult, and child food insecurity prevalence by about 34 percent, 25 percent, and 70 percent, respectively (Gregory & Coleman-Jensen, 2013). However, a ten dollar increase in the price of the study's market basket increased household, adult, and child food insecurity prevalence among SNAP households by 5 percent, 5 percent, and 12 percent, respectively. And those SNAP households living in areas with the highest food prices were 15 to 20 percent more likely to be food insecure than those SNAP households living in areas with the lowest food prices. In other words, higher food prices may further stretch limited food budgets and, thereby, increase food insecurity, particularly among SNAP participants.
- In another study using USDA data in cross-sectional and longitudinal analyses, participating in SNAP for six months was associated with reductions in household food insecurity and child food insecurity in both urban and rural areas, and the magnitudes of the reductions did not differ by how urban or rural the location was (Mabli, 2014a). However in a companion study, SNAP participation reduced food insecurity by a larger amount for urban households that had high (compared to low) geographic access to food (Mabli, 2014b). (Food access was examined using a variety of measures, including distance to the nearest supermarket and the number of supermarkets in each household's local area.) Among rural households, the analyses provided mixed results for differences in the association between SNAP and food insecurity based on food access. Overall, more research is needed to better understand the role food access plays in the relationship between SNAP participation and food insecurity, especially given the interest in the public health and anti-hunger communities to improving food access in underserved communities.
- A number of recent studies have examined the impact of SNAP participation on participants' health, and there is growing evidence in support of the notion that, at least when it comes to families receiving SNAP, "food is medicine." Using national data and accounting for selection bias, Gregory and Deb (2015) found that SNAP improves adult health in terms of increasing the probability of reporting excellent or good health, as well as having fewer sick days, office-based doctor's visits, and outpatient visits. SNAP also may have a positive impact on mental health outcomes. In a national sample of low-income adults, low food security and very low food security were both associated with higher odds of depression among SNAP participants, but the odds were not as great as those for similarly situated non-participants (Leung, Epel, Willett, Rimm, & Laraia, 2015). And while SNAP participants had a higher prevalence of depression, the odds of depression were lower for food insecure, SNAP participants than for food insecure, non-participants.
- Children's Health Watch released several studies over the past year addressing SNAP's effectiveness among families with young children, including studies set in their Boston, Philadelphia, and Minnesota hospitals. More specifically, mothers in food insecure households that received SNAP benefits were less likely to experience maternal depressive symptoms and less likely to be in fair or poor health compared to mothers in food insecure households that were not receiving SNAP benefits (Goldman, Ettinger de Cuba, Sheward, Cutts, & Coleman, 2014; Sheward, Ettinger de Cuba, Cook,

Pasquariello, & Coleman, 2014). Young children in food insecure households that received SNAP benefits were less likely to be at developmental risk, in fair or poor health, and overweight compared to children in food insecure households that were not receiving SNAP benefits (Goldman, Ettinger de Cuba, Sheward, Cutts, & Coleman, 2014; Sheward, Ettinger de Cuba, Cook, Pasquariello, & Coleman, 2014). On the other hand, families with young children whose SNAP benefits were recently lost or reduced due to an increase in income had higher odds of poor child health, household food insecurity, forgoing medical care for family members, or making health care trade-offs (compared to families who consistently received SNAP benefits) (Bovell, Ettinger de Cuba, Scully, Chilton, & Coleman, 2014).

- The latter study by Bovell and colleagues suggests that the adequacy of SNAP benefits is important in achieving favorable outcomes; this is consistent with the research on the ARRA boost highlighted above. In addition, there is new research on the impact of SNAP benefit adequacy on dietary intake. Prior to the temporary ARRA boost in SNAP benefits, Todd (2014) found that caloric intake declined by as much as 25 percent at the end of the month among SNAP participants; however, the temporary boost in benefits eliminated this decline. Todd concluded that “now that the ARRA-induced benefit boost has been eliminated, it is likely that SNAP recipients are again experiencing a monthly cycle in caloric intake.”

A recent report on WIC from the Center for Budget and Policy Priorities found:

- Women who participate in WIC give birth to healthier babies who are more likely to survive infancy.
- WIC supports more nutritious diets and better infant feeding practices. WIC participants now buy and eat more fruits, vegetables, whole grains, and low-fat dairy products, following the introduction of new WIC food packages that are more closely aligned to current dietary guidance.
- Low-income children participating in WIC are just as likely to be immunized as more affluent children, and are more likely to receive preventive medical care than other low-income children.
- Children whose mothers participated in WIC while pregnant scored higher on assessments of mental development at age 2 than similar children whose mothers did not participate, and they later performed better on reading assessments while in school.
- Improvements made to the WIC food packages in recent years have contributed to healthier food environments in low-income neighborhoods, enhancing access to fruits, vegetables, and whole grains for all consumers regardless of whether they participate in WIC.

There is a massive amount of literature that school lunch and breakfast programs reduce child hunger and food insecurity, help fight obesity, improve educational performance, and boost the physical and mental health of children who benefit from them.

Recent Congressional Actions Would, If Enacted into Law, Make Hunger and Poverty Far Worse

Instead of building on the success of the safety net in order to end U.S. hunger, Congress is pushing the country in the reverse direction. The Congressional majority just voted for a budget that would reduce federal spending by five trillion dollars over ten years, with 63 percent of the cuts in non-defense spending coming out of programs that aid low-income Americans, according to the Center for Budget and Policy Priorities. According to the Center, the budget “reduces basic food assistance for low-income families and individuals substantially and significantly cuts grants and loans to help low-income students afford college. The budget also allows key provisions of tax credits for working-poor families to expire after 2017, which would push 16 million people into – or deeper into – poverty.” Yet the House of Representatives also recently voted to eliminate the estate tax, aiding only couples who inherit more than \$10 million.

Moving Beyond the Charity Myth

Many Americans believe that we can end US hunger one person at a time, one donated can of food at a time. They are well meaning. But they are wrong.

US history proves that major societal problems can only be solved by massive, coordinated, society-wide action, led by the only entity capable of organizing such action: the government. Yes, the government. I’m perfectly aware that, in today’s political climate, it’s downright shocking to claim that government must take the leading role in solving a major social problem such as domestic hunger, but history proves that claim is demonstrably true.

Innovative nonprofit programs – such as the New York City Coalition Against Hunger’s Farm Fresh CSA Project – should be expanded and replicated – but such efforts can never be the main way to end hunger in America.

America’s dominant political narrative now tells us that our own government is somehow an evil, alien, occupying force that does nothing except steal our money. We’re told that government is the antithesis of community. And we’re told that government programs rarely, if ever, work. That narrative is problematic for many reasons, not the least of which is that it’s utterly untrue.

Although the Tea Party movement seeks to claim that centralized government programs are a violation of the US Constitution, the truth is that the original Constitution was created to replace the weak Articles of Confederation precisely so that the federal government would be more capable of engaging in coordinated action on behalf of the states and the people.

In a democracy such as the United States, government is the most legitimate embodiment of community. Of course, all the components of civil society—including businesses, nonprofit groups, civic and religious congregations, families, and individuals—have important roles to play in addressing social problems such as hunger. Yet the leaders of nonprofit organizations aren’t elected by the public. Neither are business leaders. These kinds of leaders are generally picked by small, self-selected boards of directors. In contrast, the reason we call “elected

officials” by that name is that they were elected by a plurality of voters. Whether you like your elected leaders or not, the fact remains that they are the only leaders empowered by the community to act on behalf of the interests of the entire community. How can government be the enemy if we all are the government? Moreover, the knee-jerk hatred of all things governmental ignores the historical reality that government efforts have often been extraordinarily successful at accomplishing its goals.

If people don't believe me when I say that government has solved major problems in the past, I ask them a question: have you ever had cholera? If not, the reason is that cholera—not to mention other major diseases such as malaria and yellow fever—was wiped out almost entirely in America, owing mostly to government-led efforts. Throughout the first few hundred years of US history, yellow fever, cholera, and malaria were persistent killers, with the deaths mostly clustered in low-income neighborhoods and communities. Yellow fever was as miserable and scary as it was deadly. It turned people's skin yellow, forced them to vomit black bile, and made them ooze blood out of every orifice and pore. In 1795, yellow fever killed 732 people in New York City, or about one out of every 68 people. As a point of comparison, when the AIDS death rate in New York was at its highest in the mid-1990s, it killed about one out of every 1,000 residents.

Yellow fever killed more than 41,000 people in New Orleans alone between 1817 and 1905. In 1878 a report described how the disease had ravaged the town of Granada, Mississippi: “Deserted stores, empty houses, abandoned fields and public roads, unmarked by a wagon-track, extended one hundred miles.”

Cholera was an even more deadly mass killer, claiming the lives of tens of thousands of Americans, including former president James Polk. In New York City in 1832, cholera killed 100 people every day in July, and the year's full death toll equaled 3,500 people (about one in 57 of the city's residents). If the same proportion of New York City residents died today, that would equal 112,000 deaths per year—enough people to fill Madison Square Garden six times over. Malaria infected US presidents from Washington to Lincoln. During the American Civil War, malaria accounted for 1,316,000 illnesses and 10,000 deaths. An estimated 50 percent of the white soldiers and 80 percent of the African American soldiers contracted malaria.

The public, believing that these diseases were simply a natural part of existence and there was nothing mere mortals could do to stop them, left it up to private charities to do the best they could to marginally ease the horrible (but inevitable) suffering. Many even believed that the diseases were sent by God to punish poor people for drinking too much or not washing enough. In 1832 wealthy New Yorker John Pintard wrote: “At present [the cholera] is almost exclusively confined to the lower classes of intemperate & filthy people huddled together like swine in the polluted habitations. A visitation like the present may work beneficially to promote temperance by proving a blessing instead of a curse.”

Few people thought that human actions could end these diseases. Indeed, those three diseases are still rampant in many parts of the developing world. Over the last few decades, the number of yellow fever epidemics has actually risen, and more countries are reporting cases. Yellow

fever still causes 200,000 illnesses and 30,000 deaths across the globe. Cholera is still a huge problem worldwide, and in 2007 more than 2,000 Iraqis contracted the disease. Up to 7,000 people may have died in a recent cholera outbreak in Haiti. Even more staggering, in 2010, 216 million people contracted malaria, which caused an estimated 655,000 deaths.

Yet these diseases no longer exist in the United States, except in the very rare instances when someone brings them to the country from overseas. Why? Given that yellow fever, cholera, and malaria are generally warm-climate diseases, and given that the United States has gotten warmer in the last few hundred years, one would think these diseases would only have increased here. Yet they went away.

What happened to them?

The US government wiped them out. *Yes, the government solved major problems facing the country.*

When cholera was found to be caused by dirty water, government authorities devoted vast sums of money to a massive effort to create public works projects to bring fresh water into—and take wastewater out from—US cities and towns nationwide. They also created and enforced a wide variety of sanitary and public health laws. As for yellow fever, scientists, led by US Army general Walter Reed, discovered that the disease was caused by mosquitoes and then sent public health officials to destroy mosquito breeding grounds, clean local water supplies, and fumigate. During World War II, the US government began serious efforts to end malaria because increasing numbers of soldiers stationed in the South needed to be protected. In 1947 the National Malarial Eradication Program, a cooperative effort by state and local governmental health agencies and the US Public Health Service, conducted more than 4.6 million antimosquito spray applications, and within a few years the United States was declared “free of malaria.” That effort launched the modern US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC).

New York City provided the best example of how government-led efforts eradicated cholera. In 1832 cholera killed 100 city residents every day in the month of July, and the year’s death toll equaled 3,500 people one in 57 of the city’s residents). If the same proportion of New York City residents died today, it would be the equivalent of 112,000 deaths per year—enough people to fill Madison Square Garden six times over.

In response, starting in 1835, state and city officials started planning a colossal reservoir and aqueduct system—rivaling the engineering marvels of the ancient Romans—to bring fresh water from upstate New York to the city. The system began operation in 1844 (and still operates today). Within twenty-five years, cholera in New York City was almost entirely a thing of the past. Considering that most Americans today believe that government can’t do something as simple as deliver trailer homes to disaster areas (and under President George W. Bush, it couldn’t), most Americans would be surprised to understand just how effective past governments were in annihilating deadly diseases. What does this have to do with hunger?

A lot. The beliefs held by the American public about those diseases—that they were inevitable and unstoppable and that the best humans could do was apply a little charity to slightly reduce the misery—were almost identical to the beliefs that Americans hold today about hunger, which they think can be ameliorated by charitable acts but which they also believe is so ingrained as a permanent part of the natural environment that it can never be eliminated.

Americans were wrong in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries about disease, and they are wrong today about hunger. Major diseases were eliminated then, and government took the lead in doing so. Hunger also can be eliminated, if Americans band together to demand that their government once again solve big problems. Hunger is a human-made problem, and it can be a human-ended problem. There have been times in US history when hunger was far greater than it is today, as well as times when it was significantly less—the difference being the state of the nation’s governmental and economic policies.

It is also important to note that government actions not only reduced hunger (as detailed above) but reduced the poverty that causes hunger. Between 1960 and 1973, the US poverty rate was cut fully in half—and 16 million people climbed out of poverty and into the middle class. Surely a significant cause of that reduction was broad-based economic growth and increasing wages for workers. Most Americans now assume that such economic growth was solely a result of the independent productivity of the private sector. But government efforts, most notably the original GI Bill, played a critical role in that growth. The GI Bill enabled millions of returning soldiers to obtain government help to pay for college and become the first in their families to obtain higher education, including my father.

There is no question that government efforts—most notably government-enforced protections for union organizing and collective bargaining—played a significant role in bolstering high wages for workers. It is no coincidence that the most massive reductions in US poverty coincided with the height of the Great Society and War on Poverty programs initiated by the Johnson administration in the 1960s. Today the attacks on these programs in the media and in our political system have been so pervasive that it is now accepted conventional wisdom that all those programs failed. The truth is that most of them were working spectacularly. We were actually winning the War on Poverty.

As noted above, by the late 1970s, almost entirely ended hunger in America, but conservative policies since then have caused poverty and hunger to soar as America was sold on the myth that charities could solve all our social problems.

We can learn a lot about fighting hunger from historic lessons on fighting fires. Before the mid-1800s, the most common way of fighting fires in the nation’s cities and towns was the bucket brigade, made up of volunteers. When a fire was spotted, the cry of “throw out your buckets” would be sounded, and a bucket brigade would be formed, two lines of people stretching from the town well to the fire to deliver as much as sixty gallons of water per minute. One bucket at a time. One bucket at a time. One bucket at a time. Such bucket brigades epitomized the very best of the fledgling nation—the kind of voluntary community association that foreign observers such as Alexis de Tocqueville said made the United States so different from old Europe. But there was one small, intsy-tinsy glitch in this system: the bucket brigades almost never worked. I’ve

calculated that bucket brigades, at most, could deliver 60 gallons of water per minute, and that's if the water didn't run out and if all the volunteer showed up, which they didn't always do at 3:00 a.m. in February. No wonder major cities would simply burn to a crisp within hours. NYC after the fire of 1776? Nothing but ashes. Great Chicago Fire? Entirely destroyed city. Post-earthquake fires in San Francisco and Seattle? Devastation.

Why don't fires burn down entire cities anymore? Because government – yes evil government – solved the problem. Buckets were replaced by modern fire trucks (which now can deliver up to one thousand gallons of water per minute); untrained volunteers were replaced in big cities by professional, full-time government firefighters, paid to be on call 365 days per year, 24 hours per day; and fire safety codes were enacted by local lawmakers to make buildings safer.

So let me pose this question: if your own house is on fire – and you are on the third floor with your family and all your prized possessions – your cat, your family photos, your minutes from meetings of the National Hunger Commission – who would you rather have respond to your fire:

A volunteer bucket brigade, which may or may not show up, which, even in the best of circumstances can deliver only 60 gallons of water a minute, and can't get water to the second floor, no less the third? ... or would you prefer:

A professional fire department, paid by our tax dollars to be always on call and show up every time they are needed, with a modern fire truck that delivers 1,000 gallons of water a minute, that can reach to the third floor or even the 100th floor if needed?

I have posed this very question literally hundreds of times in talks all across America – including in some of the most conservative, Tea Party-fueled states in the union – and not once – not once – when it came to the safety of their own families and homes – did even the most government-hating audience members say they preferred volunteers.

If, when it comes to our own family's safety and well-being, we pick guaranteed government help, why in the world – when it comes to something as critical as feeding 49 million hungry Americans – do we say that volunteer, part-time, charity is somehow good enough?

Food drives are the bucket brigades of today. One can at a time. One can at a time. One can at a time. And just as the bucket brigades failed to end fires, food drives and food banks are failing to end hunger.

Every year, more and more Americans are going to soup kitchens and food pantries, and every year more Americans are going hungry.

Besides, if your own grandmother couldn't afford prescription medicine, you'd never ask your neighbors to hold a prescription drug drive, and go into their medicine cabinets to donate old drugs they think your grandmother might need. Of course not. Well, food drives are essentially the same thing, people donating food to total strangers, having no clue as to the medical, nutritional, or cultural needs of the family getting help.

Now, I want to be crystal clear that I honor and appreciate all Americans who donate time and food, and every bit does help. But I must be equally clear that charity is not the long-term answer.

When Ronald Reagan entered office in 1981, there were only a few hundred emergency feeding programs in America, most of which were traditional soup kitchens serving mostly the people who had been the hungriest historically—single men, many of whom suffered from substance abuse or mental illness problems. Yet, as a direct result of the economic policies and social service cuts set in motion by Reagan, the number of emergency feeding programs in America skyrocketed and continued to do so even after he left office. There are now more than about 40,000 such programs in America—across urban, suburban, and rural areas—and roughly two-thirds of them are food pantries where parents and their children, the elderly, and working people obtain free groceries.

Rather than using modern sorting machines, these charities typically sort their food donations by hand, one can at a time. Rather than being staffed by trained social service professionals paid to work regular business hours, they are usually run by untrained volunteers available to provide food only a few times a month when they have no other obligations. And rather than serving as a last resort that would be secondary to more serious government hunger-prevention efforts such as boosting the minimum wage or hiking food stamp benefits, these charitable feeding agencies have increasingly become the nation’s first line of defense against hunger. And unfortunately, these grassroots feeding programs are similar to the original bucket brigades in one other important way—they are mostly failing to solve the problem. Although the unpaid volunteers and underpaid staff who run these agencies engage in inspiring efforts every day, and though their efforts do supplement government programs enough to prevent Americans from starving (certainly a vital role), they have not—and cannot—end hunger in America.

The fact is that pantries and kitchens, despite the tireless work of volunteers, have their failings. Sociologist Janet Poppendieck, in her seminal book about the emergency food system titled *Sweet Charity*, lists what she calls the “Seven Deadly ‘ins’” of the network:

- *Insufficiency* (not enough food)
- *Inappropriateness* (people don’t get to pick what is best for their families)
- *Nutritional inadequacy* (too much high-sugar, high-sodium, high-fat junk food)
- *Instability* (feeding agencies can’t always predict when they will be open and when they will run out of food)
- *Inaccessibility* (agencies can be particularly hard to get to in rural areas, or for seniors, people with disabilities, or people with no car)
- *Inefficiency* (the agencies require a massive, three-tier system just to give out free food)
- *Indignity* (at even the best-run agencies, obtaining emergency food is usually a degrading experience)

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All these problems concern me, but perhaps the worst is the inadequacy, since the average amount of food given out by a pantry is generally dwarfed by the amount of food a family could be getting if they were enrolled in the Food Stamp Program. For example, in 2007 a family who got food from the South Texas Food Bank based in Laredo generally received \$50 worth of groceries per month. Compare that with the average monthly household food stamps benefits of \$239 in Texas that year.

Still, most Americans hold tight to the myth that neighbor-to-neighbor generosity and compassion is the best support system for those in need, and certainly better than government aid. In response to an article on food stamp benefits in an upstate New York newspaper, an anonymous blogger posted the following: “There is a big difference between the guy with food stamps and the organizations that I donate my time, money, and energy to. The guy with the food stamps took my money at the point of a gun, he obtained it by force. I had no choice in the matter. The charities and the people they support received my money and efforts of my own free will and desire to help. . . . They receive zero government dollars.”

Even though food banks, soup kitchens, and food pantries are ubiquitous in today’s media, they are actually a relatively small part of the nation’s response to hunger. All the food they distribute provides about one-twentieth of the dollar amount of food distributed by federal nutrition assistance programs, despite the fact that those safety net programs are incredibly underutilized. Today, even if all the nation’s food charities somehow accomplished the Herculean task of doubling their food distribution, this feat would barely dent the nation’s hunger problem. In contrast, an easily achievable increase in the government safety net programs could wipe out the problem entirely.

In 2013 and 2014 the SNAP program was deeply cut by the President and Congress. In a 2014 study by the New York City Coalition Against Hunger, we found 92.7 percent of responding food pantries and soup kitchens in New York City reported being impacted by the SNAP cuts. 43.8 percent of respondents reported that the SNAP cuts have *significantly* increased the number of clients and/or significantly increased the food needs of existing clients, and 48.9 percent of respondents reported that the SNAP cuts have *somewhat* increased the number of clients and/or significantly increased the food needs of existing clients. Overall, 82 percent of responding agencies reported an increased demand in people needing food, with 43 percent reporting that demand has greatly increased. 37 percent of respondents reported being forced to turn people away, reduce the amount of food distributed per person, or limit hours of operation because they lacked enough resources with only 50 percent of agencies reporting that they currently distribute enough food to meet demand. 46 percent of respondents reported that they were not as equipped to meet demand due to the SNAP cuts. 19 percent of respondents reported having to turn away significantly more people, reduce the amount of food distributed per person greatly, and/or significantly limited hours of operation, while 27 percent of respondents reported having to turn away slightly more people, reduce the amount of food distributed per person somewhat, and/or slightly limit hours of operation. 47 percent of respondents reported a decrease in total funding with 34 percent reporting a decrease in government/public funding, 24 percent reporting a decrease in private funding, 12 percent reporting a decrease in paid staff, and 14 percent reporting a decrease in unpaid staff/ volunteers.

Many respondents said they knew of a food pantry, soup kitchen, or brown bag program that had shut down or closed for business in the past year. While some programs may have closed because of staffing or other administrative reasons, program directors repeatedly have told the New York City Coalition Against Hunger in conversations that decreases in funding for feeding programs were the main cause of the closings.

Today, because government makes it extraordinarily difficult for struggling families to obtain SNAP/food stamp, WIC, school breakfast, and summer meals benefits, large numbers of Americans who need them don't get them.

But even given the vast under-utilization of the safety net, those government programs still provide 20 times the value of food as does every food bank, soup kitchen, food pantry, and food rescue group in the country. And cuts in SNAP recently enacted by the President and Congress equally about three year's of food distributed by all the nation's charities.

Claiming we can end hunger with a bit more charity is like saying we can fill the Grand Canyon with a teaspoon. The Grand Canyon will always erode faster than we can fill it, and hunger will always increase faster than charity.

When the American people were asked in 2011, "How much of the time do you think you can trust the government in Washington to do what is right?" only 10 percent answered, "Just about always or most of the time"—down from 36 percent in 2007. That belief leads many people to falsely assume that charities provide more food than government does, and that they provide it more efficiently and economically. Perhaps if they knew the truth—that government feeds more people and does so more cost-effectively than charities—they surely would feel differently about government's ability to do the right thing. First, it's vital to note that much of the food distributed by charities was paid for by government in the first place. Second, because charities create a system of food distribution that is in addition—and parallel—to the existing commercial food distribution system, they have to spend additional money on overhead. When a national food manufacturer donates food to a national organization, which then ships it to a local food bank, which, in turn, trucks it to local food pantries, such logistics often involve two or three sets of trucks and fuel costs, two or three sets of warehouses, and two or three sets of administrative and fund-raising staffs. The late Dick Gabel, one of the pioneers of the food banking system, once told me that the emergency food system is the "most inefficient system in the world. I should know. I helped create it."

While it is often a great burden to enroll in SNAP, once someone receives the benefits, it is usually relatively easy to use them, especially since paper coupons have long since been replaced by easy-to-use EBT (electronic benefits transfer) cards. The government merely transfers the money electronically onto EBT cards, and then, at virtually no additional cost to the government other than the benefits themselves, recipients are able to use the money solely for food. That's why the vast majority of money in SNAP goes to food, not to administrative overhead. I calculated that, before the current recession, only about 15 percent of the spending in the entire program went to administrative overhead. Since then, because the spending on benefits has soared while the spending on caseworkers to administer the program has remained relatively flat, the administrative overhead is now less than 10 percent. In contrast, some food banks have

overhead rates of up to 20 percent. When you add in the overhead of a national organization that distributes to food banks as well as the overhead for local community-based pantries and kitchens that directly feed people, the total overhead for the entire system—from original donation to final distribution—is far greater than 20 percent.

Case closed: the Food Stamp Program is more cost-efficient than charities. Unfortunately, many feeding charities unconsciously—and sometimes deliberately—perpetuate the false impression that they are more effective and efficient than government. Many have even convinced themselves that this is true. In their marketing materials, they often make extreme claims—seldom supported by the facts—as to how many meals they can provide in exchange for each dollar donated. Such claims matter because, if people believe that ending hunger is as easy as giving just five bucks to an ultra-efficient charity that leaves government in the dust, why would they ever support government policies that spend their tax dollars to tackle the problem?

It's clear that charity—no matter how vast or small—cannot substitute for systematic, progressive social change to reduce poverty and inequality nationwide. Until that time, we should make sure that the charities have the resources they need to fill the gap.

And let's not kid ourselves, we are not going to end hunger either with more seasonal community gardens or farms, more cooking or nutrition classes, or some sexy new app. Sure, some of those things can help at the edges but the only thing that can truly end hunger in America is a fundamental paradigm shift that replaces charity with justice.

Some well-meaning people suggest that we could end domestic hunger if more low-income people grew their own food in their own gardens. Unfortunately, that's not even close to true. Even if all low-income people had enough time (which they don't) to grow all their own food, and even if they had access to land on which to do so (which they don't), such efforts would produce only a small amount of the vegetables and fruits they need and would be very unlikely to produce the grains, dairy products, meats, and other proteins necessary for a healthy, balanced diet. It would be nearly impossible for most low-income people to produce themselves the many parts of a healthy diet other than produce. Besides, most people, me included, enjoy eating fifty-two weeks out of a year, not just the handful of weeks that constitute the growing season in most parts of the United States.

Thus, while community gardens can be a very positive addition to a neighborhood—by reclaiming empty lots for community use and providing a laboratory for nutrition and environmental education—they cannot be an adequate mass response to ending food insecurity for the 49 million Americans who suffer from it. The same is true for Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) programs.

The new York City Coalition Against Hunger's pioneering Farm Fresh CSA Initiative works to reduce both hunger and obesity by increasing consumption of fresh, locally grown produce by low-income and middle-income residents and improving food access by increasing the availability of affordable fresh foods in communities where

In a traditional CSA program, members purchase shares of produce from a regional farmer and receive distributions throughout the growing season. But unlike most CSAs in New York City, which cater to upper-income members who can pay the full cost of their share at the beginning of the season, NYCCAH operates “mixed-income” CSA projects which enables low-income families by allowing members to pay on a sliding scale and use SNAP benefits (formerly food stamps). Like most CSAs, each of our sites depends on CSA members sharing in the burden of managing the CSA, and NYCCAH encourages lower-income members to take an active role and join the managing core group. This provides experience and knowledge in local food systems, and the long-term plans are for the CSAs to “graduate” and be completely sustained by the knowledge and abilities of their members. NYCCAH’s groundbreaking CSA model – with low-income participants as the centerpiece – offers a template for how to effectively transform community agriculture efforts nationwide.

We purchase 22 weeks of sustainable, locally grown produce for under \$500 for each share through this cost-effective direct-to-consumer model. We make the participation of SNAP recipients and other low-income households possible by financing the shares at the beginning of the season and permitting payment week-to-week and via SNAP benefits. Even the relatively reduced prices for sustainable produce made possible by the CSA model may be out of reach for some low-income individuals, which is why we subsidize up to 72% of the costs for SNAP recipients. By paying only \$6.05 for a weeks’ worth of produce, a SNAP recipient can use the scarce resources available to improving other aspects of nutrition. In 2014 we were able to provide 308 CSA households with 64,162 lbs. of local, sustainable produce. Also, as a result of our CSAs, an additional 9,564 lbs. was donated to emergency feeding programs. Our end-of-year survey also found that at least 90% of CSA members consumed vegetables four or more times a week during the season and 80% of all CSA members reporting that they would continue to consume that level of vegetables in the future.

Our partner for the West Harlem CSA is Broadway Community, Inc. (BCI), a faith- and community-based social service organization providing emergency food, clothing and shelter to those in need as well as long-term support aimed at healing the body, mind and spirit. Our partner for the Central Brooklyn CSA is the Hebron French-speaking Seventh-day Adventist Church meeting people’s immediate needs through social services such as tutoring and mentoring programs, meal programs, and disaster response - including a weekly food pantry on Wednesdays. Our new partner for the Bronx CSA is the Church of God of Prophecy, an organization in the Bronx with a membership of several hundreds hailing from over 22 nations (including the Caribbean, South America, Africa, the UK, and mainland U.S.) which has both a soup kitchen and a food pantry in its space.

For the 2015 season we anticipate providing at least 280 households with 52,000 lbs. of local, sustainable produce, as well as donating 9,000 pounds to emergency feeding programs. Yes, such efforts should be replicated and expanded, with both private and governmental money, but while helpful, such efforts will always be too small and too seasonal to be the main tools to end hunger.

Likewise, volunteerism can also help, especially if we act with our heads as well as our hearts. That’s why we’ve launched a nationwide Ending Hunger through Citizen Service initiative to enable Americans of all ages and backgrounds to volunteer more strategically. We’ve provided concrete ways on our web site (www.hungervolunteer.org) that people can use their professional

skills as designers, lawyers, coders, writers, accountants, strategic planners, fundraisers, and videographers to make an even bigger difference in the fight.

But the most important thing we all need to do to end hunger is to change public policies in order to create jobs, raise wages, and boost the food safety net.

Finding Common Ground to End U.S. Hunger and Food Insecurity

Americans should find ideological common ground again – based on the mainstream values of work, family, compassion, mutual responsibility, community, and enlightened self-interest, to end U.S. hunger and food insecurity once and for all. But we should not be distracted by fake solutions or false equivalency, and we should not adopt 10 demonstrably harmful ideas as the price of enacting ten demonstrably effective ideas. We must have a massive national effort to create jobs, raise wages, reduce poverty, and ensure a robust safety net. One example of wholesale change based on shared Americans values, would be to scrap the vast majority of the social services bureaucracy, and instead empower low income adults to become their own caseworkers, utilizing Hope Accounts and Action Plans to climb out of poverty and stay comfortably in the middle class.

As noted earlier, hunger costs our economy 167 billion dollars per year. Yet we can eliminate it if we increased the annual food purchasing power of low-income people by 32 billion dollars, through a combination of higher earnings and more food benefits. If you can solve a problem that costs you 167 billion for 32 billion, that's a no brainer. But successful effort *will require* additional federal funds.

First, let's dispense with some of the false claims of some on the right that we can end hunger by taking food *away* from hungry people.

When conservatives – who have spent much of their careers trying to take food, housing and health care *away* from people in poverty – offer what they claims is a comprehensive plan to reduce poverty in America, progressives can be forgiven if we take such proposals with more than a grain of salt. In fact, we take them with a ton of salt.

The House Budget Committee, Chaired by Representative Paul Ryan recently produced a 73-page report on opportunity and poverty. Any leading political figure who claims to offer a substantive plan to address poverty deserves a serious hearing, and a serious response. The plan includes a few positive proposals, such as the proposed expansion of the Earned Income Tax Credit to childless workers, which could receive bipartisan support. But because House Republicans refuse to even consider having the wealthy in America pay their fair share of taxes, as was the case in the past, and because Ryan has pledged that his anti-poverty proposal won't add a penny to the federal deficit, he has proposed to pay for his EITC expansion by eliminating some existing low-income programs that work. This includes the Farmers' Market Nutrition Program, which helps low-income women who are pregnant or who have small children obtain fresh produce at farmers' markets.

Moreover, the entire Ryan poverty plan is doomed to failure because of its reliance on five discredited, right-wing poverty myths:

Myth #1: The War on Poverty was a failure, and large federal safety net programs don't really work.

Reality #1: The War on Poverty slashed poverty in half and the safety net programs it created have greatly reduced the worst symptoms of poverty in America.

The Ryan report implies that the federal War on Poverty was a failure. The reality is that, as detailed above, after the War on Poverty was launched, poverty was slashed. The truth is that we were winning the war on poverty until the nation stopped seriously fighting it.

Moreover, the main thrust of most federal safety net programs is not, per se, to reduce poverty. The federal nutrition programs are meant primarily to reduce hunger, and they do. The federal housing programs are meant primarily to reduce homelessness, and they do. Medicaid is meant primarily to improve health care, and it does. Tucked into a section on how the War on Poverty didn't end poverty entirely, the Ryan report is sheepishly forced to admit, in one line: "The federal government has helped decrease material deprivation." In other words, even Ryan admits that federal programs help reduce the pain of poverty.

These programs also reduce poverty itself. But the implication in the Ryan report and so many other right-wing arguments is that, because these programs haven't wiped out poverty altogether, they are a failure. That's absurd. That's like saying that all spending on military and intelligence operations are a failure if the nation still has any enemies at all.

Myth #2: The only measure of the success of anti-poverty programs is whether they reduce the use of government programs.

Reality #2: A far better way to measure the success of anti-poverty programs is to assess whether they actually reduce poverty and improve the long-term economic and social well-being of communities, families and individuals.

The Ryan report states: "Our true measure of success is the number of people who don't need government assistance."

Ryan and so many on the Right decry every government program except the many programs through which they personally benefit. It is relevant to note that Ryan himself collected federal social security payments for two years after his father died, and he has been on government payrolls virtually his entire adult life. Ryan would never say that a declining use of social security or government roads automatically equates to success. What he really means is that success is defined only when *low-income people* need government less.

Moreover, defining the success of a program merely by how many fewer people use it makes as little sense as defining the success of a hospital by how many people leave it – without differentiating between how many people leave it cured, equally ill or dead. Likewise, if people are forced off a government program only to become destitute, hungry and homeless, than the caseload reduction should be deemed a failure.

Myth #3: Poverty can be solved without spending any more money.

Reality #3: While more money isn't the only solution to poverty, it is clearly the top one.

Poverty is the one and only problem that is defined, first and foremost, by lack of money. Therefore, claiming you can solve poverty without money is like claiming you can solve drought without water.

Given that conservatives usually claim that the only way to ensure a strong national defense is to keep throwing ever-more piles of cash at defense contractors, one would hope they could understand that perhaps more money might be needed to solve poverty.

Numerous studies prove that, when low-income people obtain more money (either through income supports, tax credits or food and housing support programs) they spend it mostly on basic necessities like housing, food, fuel, health care and education.

Myth #4: States fight major national problems such as poverty more effectively than the federal government.

Reality 4: The federal government is often more responsive, quicker and more capable – and less corrupt — than state and local governments.

The centerpiece of the Ryan plan is a pilot program which would allow states to scrap all the key federal poverty programs and instead combine them into one program run by states. Yet, there is not an iota of hard evidence that states, in aggregate, automatically run anti-poverty programs, or any programs, more effectively than the federal government.

If the federal government is truly as evil and ineffective as the right claims, why do even the most right-wing elected officials in the most right-wing states immediately demand that the federal government rush in to respond to local tornados or chemical plant explosions? When the chips are down, no one seriously argues that state or local governments alone – or faith based nonprofit groups alone – are better suited to respond to disasters than FEMA.

Moreover, the very reason Congress created federal safety net programs is that the states, on their own, were unable to solve large social problems.

It is telling that Ryan proposes that the federal government still pay for the safety net programs that he thinks should be run by states. Why? The dirty little secret is that the states in the South that are the most conservative and anti-Washington are the very states most likely to receive far more federal dollars than their residents pay in federal taxes. Out of the 20 states with the highest levels of SNAP participation as a percentage of their populations, 16 voted for Mitt Romney for president. These right-wing states couldn't survive without massive federal anti-poverty funding.

Myth #5: Most poverty is long-term, multi-generational and caused by irresponsible personal behavior.

Reality #5: Most poverty is caused by inequality and low wages, not personal behavior.

Ryan's plan differentiates between what it calls "situational poverty" and "generational poverty," and implies that situational poverty is due to temporary factors mostly beyond someone's control, and that generational poverty is long-term and caused mostly by irresponsible behavior. But since the plan includes no serious provisions to increase jobs or raise wages, its basic thrust is aimed at so-called generational poverty.

The plan claims that people in generational poverty lack "parenting skills" and "productive habits." It also says individuals in poverty are "at risk of return to substance abuse," as if it is self-evident that all people in long-term poverty previously engaged in substance abuse.

To correct such supposed anti-social behavior, the plan allows states to create "opportunity grants" to require low-income families to be held to "a contract outlining specific and measurable benchmarks for success." The contract would include: benchmarks such as finding a job, enrolling in employment training, financial education classes, parenting classes and even meeting "new acquaintances outside the circle of poverty." The agreement would also provide a "timeline" in which individuals are contractually obligated to meet benchmarks, receive bonuses for meeting benchmarks early and suffer "sanctions for breaking the terms of the contract."

This would amount to massive government intrusion into the personal lives of citizens. Conservatives claim they don't want government on their own backs, but when it comes to poor people, they want government on their backs, fronts, tops and bottoms.

Prior to the mid 1990s, the right claimed that most poverty was caused by high rates of welfare dependency, crack use, teenage pregnancy, and crime. But the 1996 Welfare Reform bill dramatically reduced cash assistance, and now fewer than 10 percent of Americans in poverty receive cash welfare. Nationwide, rates of crime, crack use and teenage pregnancy have plummeted. While poverty dipped in the late 1990s, it has soared since then as jobs disappeared and wages remained stagnant. The preponderance of evidence suggests that economics and inequality of wealth, not personal behavior and dependency, are the main causes of poverty.

While the Ryans of the world think low-income people need more financial education to lift them out of poverty, the reality is that no amount of financial education will aid a family that pays more in basic living expenses than it earns in wages.

Thus any attempt to create false equivalency, to suggest that, in exchange for enacting some progressive policies to fight hunger, the national should adopt some harmful policies based on the demonstrably false conservative myths such as those above, would be a mistake. Sure, even though the 1.3 percent trafficking rate in SNAP is historically small – and far smaller than fraud rates in most of government, nonprofit, and corporate sectors – we should consider legitimate ways to further reduce that rate that don't criminalize hunger or reduce program participation of eligible, law-abiding people. Sure, even though the majority of SNAP recipients who can find work already do work, we should support efforts to enable more SNAP recipients to obtain living wage jobs.

But many pending, conservative SNAP “reform” proposals are punitive, wasteful, and based on demonstrably false assumptions. Drug testing SNAP recipients would be a vast waste of time and money, and an unconstitutional intrusion into people’s lives. Given that the vast majority of SNAP recipients who can work do work, more work requirements in SNAP would also be counter-productive. SNAP recipients already have so few choices in life, so taking away their few existing choices would only make their lives worse. Some on the Right want government off their own backs and the backs of big businesses, but want government to micromanage the lives of low-income people. We must reject those double and triple standards.

Given that Senate and House Republicans have voted to take away flexibility for states in managing SNAP – limiting the ability of states to use categorical eligibility and limiting the ability of states to raise SNAP allotments by combining them with home energy assistance procedures – it is thoroughly hypocritical for those same leaders to try to block grant SNAP based on the claim that states always know better than the federal government how to manage programs in their own jurisdictions. Given the every penny spent of SNAP benefits is federal, it makes no sense to take away federal standards.

In the 1970’s, when there was strong bi-partisan support for expanding the nutrition safety net, both sides agreed to common sense compromises to improve the programs. It makes no sense to now call for steps that would harm these safety net programs just to try to obtain support from one side. “Splitting to difference” between a moderate proposal of proven effectiveness and right-wing proposal that is demonstrably harmful makes no sense. True bi-partisan progress can only be achieved by fact-based decision making based on mainstream values.

How to End Domestic Hunger

“The country demands bold, persistent experimentation. It is common sense to take a method and try it. If it fails, admit it frankly and try another. But above all, try something. The millions who are in want will not stand idly by silently forever while the things to satisfy their needs are within easy reach.”

—President Franklin D. Roosevelt, 1932

A very good President put the US on a trajectory to the moon. A truly great President would end hunger in America.

The next President and Congress should transcend petty partisanship and unite all Americans to solve one of our most harmful and needless problems. They should jointly set a goal of ending hunger and food insecurity among children and seniors within five years, as a down payment on a ten-year goal of ending all hunger and food insecurity in America. They should use the USDA food security methodology as the key benchmark.

To accomplish that goal, the nation must put serious resources behind a comprehensive food security continuum that will: reinvent the federal nutrition safety net to make it both more generous and less bureaucratic; make school meals universal regardless of family income; provide greater incentives for states to reduce hunger; launch a truly meaningful faith- and community-based initiative; empower more food pantries and soup kitchens to help their customers to achieve self-sufficiency; join with the business community to make all full-time salaries start at a living wage; and bolster community food production and marketing.

The first thing we need to do is further improve the federal nutrition assistance safety net.

Federal law, as well as extra rules piled on by states, counties, and cities, often make the process of applying for SNAP a Kafkaesque nightmare. New York State's handbook for administering SNAP is 391 pages long. While the State has bragged that it recently reduced the application form from 16 to five pages, in New York City even people who filled out the shorter form were still required to orally provide caseworkers the answers to up to hundreds of questions. People were even asked if they owned funeral plots because, in New York, if you owned one, that would not count against food stamps eligibility, but if you owned two, that could count against your eligibility.

The image on the next page is a reproduction of the front of a large envelope that is printed by USDA to give out to potential applicants to encourage them to apply for food stamps. Notice that it has 27—yes 27—different categories for the types of documents that an applicant might need to physically bring to a food stamps office to prove their eligibility. And that is from an outreach tool that is supposed to *encourage* participation.

In order to receive the average SNAP of just \$1.40 per meal, the government wants you to prove everything. Sometimes you even have to prove a negative—that you don't have a bank account or that you don't have a boyfriend or girlfriend living with you.

As Dr. Deborah Frank has explained: “As community health providers, our teams dedicate an incalculable amount of time to assisting families with the pitfalls and traps of filling out applications, understanding requirements and recertifying for the Food Stamp Program, the application for which is much longer (and harder to understand) than the one I fill out each year for my medical license.”

Of course, when the system isn't working as it's supposed to (which is quite often), it is even worse. Some states, like Texas, have tried to outsource their government food stamps management functions to private contractors, claiming that would improve efficiency. Of course, the real reason they did this was to try to save money and to reduce the power of public employees' unions, and, of course, the system actually became less efficient and the processing backlogs increased. Caseworkers—many of whom are absurdly overworked and yelled at by clients and thus also victims of the system—frequently fail to return client calls, have voice mail boxes that are full, give applicants incorrect information, and become downright surly.

Documents You Will Need for a Food Stamp Application

The checklist on this envelope can help you get ready for your interview with a food stamp worker. You do not need everything on this list.

Collect only the checked items.

Bring them with you to your food stamp interview.

- Driver's license
- Birth certificate
- Work or school identification card
- Health benefits identification card
- Voter registration card
- Utility bills
- Rent or mortgage receipts
- Library card with address
- Immigration and naturalization papers
(not required if you are not eligible to receive food stamp benefits but are applying for your children who were born in the United States)
- Pay stubs
- Income tax forms
- Self employment bookkeeping records
- Bank statements
- Benefit award letter
- Divorce or separation decree
- Unemployment compensation award letter
- Court order or other legal document for child support payments
- Canceled checks for child support payments
- Statement from person to whom child support payments are made
- Paid receipts for child support payments
- Canceled checks for child/adult care payments
- Statement from child/adult care provider
- Medical bills
(households with elderly or disabled members only)
- Itemized receipts for medical costs
(households with elderly or disabled members only)
- Medicare card showing "Part B" coverage
(households with elderly or disabled members only)
- Repayment agreement with physician
(households with elderly or disabled members only)
- Other:



**Food Stamps Make
America Stronger.**

USDA United States Department of Agriculture
Food and Nutrition Service
September 2005

Ironically, while conservatives support such onerous practices because they keep down program participation, many social workers also believe that applicants should be subject to lengthy "case management" interviews through which the social workers can identify a full array of family problems to be solved.

It is also a reality that many nonprofit organizations—the one I run included—obtain large private grants and government contracts to navigate people through the food stamps application process, and if it were simplified, we wouldn't receive that money. Perhaps because they have a fear (either conscious or unconscious) of losing such funding, most of these groups – mine excluded – are hesitant to push too hard to simplify the Food Stamp Program.

Food stamp benefits are also difficult to keep getting once you are enrolled in the program. Many people in the program—and especially people with fluctuations in income due to employment—need to physically go to a food stamps office every few months, again with large piles of paperwork in their hands, to prove they are still eligible. I once heard a woman in New York explain how she was cut off from food stamp benefits because she had to take her daughter to the hospital on the day of her recertification interview.

Writer Jason DeParle chronicled the surreal attempt of a low-income woman to maintain her food stamp benefits in the late 1990s in Milwaukee:

Angie was broke and didn't eat all day. The loss of her food stamps left her incensed. The program required an eligibility review every three months. Arriving at her most recent appointment, she discovered her caseworker had gone on a leave of absence. In welfare jargon, that had left Angie in the "vacant zone": she no longer had a designated worker but could see whoever was free. No one was. A few weeks later Angie got a notice saying she had been cut off for failing to complete the review. "Questions? Ask your worker," it said. "Worker name: VACANT." It took two months of calling to get another appointment. When she did, the bus broke down, she got there late, and no one could see her again. Having worked until midnight the previous night, Angie was out of patience; she responded with off-color tirade that nearly got her thrown out of the office. A supervisor calmed her down, but still she had to come back the following day, when ten minutes of paper pushing restored her stamps. The frou-frou had cost her \$500.¹⁸

A 2007 USDA study found that people who recently left the Food Stamps Program are actually more food insecure than people still in the program or those who have not received benefits recently.¹⁹ This provides further evidence that people removed from the Food Stamp Program are far more likely to be removed as a result of administrative problems during the recertification process (missed interviews, lost letters, administrative hassles, etc.) than because they are no longer eligible. Indeed, a study in New York City in 2007 found that 80 percent of people leaving SNAP were still financially eligible.

The quickest and easiest way to end most hunger in America—with one bold action—would be to entirely reinvent the existing system by combining all existing federal programs (food stamps, WIC, commodities, etc.) into one larger, but more efficient, entity.

To win public support for a massive expansion of these government programs, they must be reformed and modernized. As I explained in Chapter Four, the current safety net is a confusing array of programs, each of which have different eligibility requirements, application procedures, and physical locations to which people need to go to apply. There is a far better way.

I have proposed combining all these programs into one streamlined, seamless entitlement program available to all families at 185 percent of the poverty line or below (meaning any family of three with a yearly income below \$32,500 would be eligible). My colleague, Thomas Z. Freedman, suggested calling this the “American Family Food, Opportunity, and Responsibility” (AFFORd) program. More low-income Americans would be eligible for this program than the existing, separate programs—and eligibility determination and application processes would be dramatically simplified.

There would be one short, universal federal application for AFFORd benefits, which Americans could complete online or during a visit to any office that administers any part of the program. Not only would this significantly increase the amount of nutrition provided to low-income families, it would reduce government paperwork and bureaucracy. AFFORd applications would also tie into annual tax forms, and families who qualify for the Earned Income Tax Credit (EITC) would automatically receive AFFORd benefits if they have incomes below 185 percent of poverty. Any legal immigrant who would otherwise be eligible based on income would be eligible for the program. Families with low incomes would be allowed to save money for their futures and not immediately lose benefits, allowing them to eventually enter the middle class and no longer need benefits at all.

Not only would this program be far easier for low-income families to access, it would also be far easier for the federal, state, and local governments to administer. Right now, each level of government has separate offices to administer all of the overlapping programs. The money saved through the administrative consolidation would be pumped right back into feeding hungry families.

The new program would still allow women and children in the WIC program to get the extra special nutritional and medical help that has made that program so successful, but families would generally have a lot more flexibility about how to use the AFFORd benefits than they do in using the benefits under the current nutrition programs. AFFORd benefits could be used for hot and prepared foods, as well as at farmers’ markets, Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) projects (in which people buy shares in local farms), fruit and vegetable carts, and farm stands.

The program would reach far more people than the current SNAP Program and would especially help working families struggling just above the poverty line. Raising eligibility levels to 185 percent of the poverty line (from the current 130 percent in the Food Stamp Program) would increase by 29.8 million (57 percent) the number of people eligible for this new program who are not now eligible for food stamps. Such a program would not only significantly reduce hunger, it would be such a large wage supplement that it could help the nation decrease the number of people living in poverty conditions as well.

School breakfasts are hampered by both stigma and logistical hurdles, and only about half of the U.S. children who receive free and reduced price breakfast received free lunches few eligible children receive them. The best way to reverse that trend is for the new President and Congress to agree to provide universal school breakfast to all children free of charge, and to do so directly in first-period classrooms. Both universal and in-classroom breakfasts have already proven their success in select school districts nationwide. For instance, in Newark, New Jersey—where both

are utilized—the district has a 94 percent breakfast participation rate. When I visited Newark to check out the effort for myself, I was thrilled to find elementary school student breakfast monitors cheerfully delivering breakfasts to all their peers. I also learned of a local high school in which the number of breakfasts served increased literally tenfold after the meals were provided in classrooms.

In 2008, New York City launched a pilot project to try out in-classroom breakfasts in a number of schools. At one pilot site I visited, Public School 68 in the Bronx, every student ate breakfast together during their first-period class. The pilot is working better than anyone could have anticipated. The school's principal told me that, before the pilot, an average of 50 kids came to school late every day, so many that she had to assign extra staff to writing out late slips. When they started serving breakfast in their classrooms, kids came in early just for the meals, and now only about five kids a day are late—a 900 percent decrease in tardiness. The principal also told me that absenteeism and visits to school nurses also dropped, and in the afternoons, kids fell asleep in the classrooms less frequently. This is obviously not only good nutrition policy but also good education policy.

Given that most school districts must now have a complex system in place to collect forms and data on the income of each student's parents to determine the eligibility of each child for either free, reduced-price, or full-cost meals, when a district adopts a universal breakfast or lunch policy, not only does it reduce the stigma faced by children and thereby increases participation, it also reduces the paperwork and bureaucracy, saving the school district time and money. When kids eat breakfast in a classroom instead of a lunchroom that is a hallway or two away, they have more time to focus on their studies and are protected from the stigma of having to leave their friends to go to a special breakfast room “for the poor kids.”

It is no wonder that most large school districts – including Dallas, Chicago, Los Angeles, and Houston—are moving towards universal, in-classroom school breakfasts, also known as Breakfast after the Bell.

Given that textbooks are widely understood to be a critical educational tool, public school districts typically lend them out free of charge to all students. The time is ripe for the nation to view school meals in the same way. Free breakfast and lunch should be universal in all classrooms around the country. In a 2010 paper for the Center for American Progress, “Feeding Opportunity,” I wrote: “An estimated \$1 billion in tax dollars at the federal, state, and school district levels is spent each year solely on collecting and submitting required forms and daily meal counts for the school meals program (free, reduced-price, and full-price lunch and breakfast). Cutting this paperwork and simplifying applications could save a vast amount of money. And if the money saved were to be pumped back into feeding more children and making meals healthier that would help achieve both the hunger and obesity reduction goals.”

Given that the previous Child Nutrition Reauthorization Bill focused mostly on food quality for low and middle-income children, the new CNR bill should focus most on access and hunger reduction for low-income children (including children from struggling lower middle class families

The Healthy, Hunger-Free Kids Act of 2010 focused largely on improving the nutritional quality of food served through federal child nutrition programs. Child nutrition advocates lauded the improved meal patterns, the move to get junk food out of schools, and the largest financial investment in school meals in over 30 years. Comparatively, changes to increase access to these programs and reduce hunger were less prominent and impactful. It should make school meals universal, paperwork free, and available in all first period classrooms. It should increase reimbursement rates for all child nutrition meals and make WIC an entitlement. It should remove the requirement that all summer meals for kids be eaten only at the site at which the food distributed, which doesn't work well in rural areas or in very hot climates. And it should strengthen, not gut, the improved nutritional standards in these programs

The federal government can also be more effective in forging faith-based and neighborhood partnerships. Long before George W. Bush became President and popularized faith-based partnerships, many federal agencies had already begun efforts to partner with religious groups. For example, the USDA Community Food Security Initiative, which I ran (and which was, absurdly, opposed by the Republican Congress and ended by the Bush administration) worked closely with both faith-based and secular groups throughout the country to fight hunger and strengthen neighborhoods. Providing such organizations with technical assistance, national publicity, staff support, and (when Congress let us) limited seed money, we began to see increases and improvements in their services. It is no wonder that Vice President Gore, when running for President in 2000, proposed expanding such efforts.

Forging such partnerships isn't easy. It can't be done on just "a wing and a prayer." And it can't be accomplished solely by leaders using the bully pulpit to encourage citizens to donate and volunteer more either. If the government wants these groups to substantially increase their services, then the government must provide them with a substantial increase in resources—including direct funding, technical assistance, staff support, and surplus property and real estate.

Government should allow nonprofit groups—as well as state, local, and tribal government agencies—to compete equally with faith-based organizations for the right to aid local social services. Not all faith-based organizations are effective, and not all effective grassroots social service organizations are faith-based. No single faith-based organization should automatically be granted a monopoly over any service area or task. Since Republicans keep telling us that competition always improves services, they should particularly embrace this suggestion.

Government should also overhaul its procedures for running programs and awarding funds by modernizing federal grant, cooperative agreement, contracting, and financial management procedures in order to meet the unique needs of nonprofit groups. Most government grant management systems are the worst of both worlds: they require a mountain of paperwork but do little to ensure that grantees use the money well and run their programs effectively. These systems should be entirely revamped to make tracking performance more important than checking the right boxes on the paperwork.

It is always vital to make clear that such nonprofit efforts are intended to supplement—not replace—a strong federal government safety net. Most faith-based organizations—already

reeling under the additional burdens placed upon them by welfare reform and bad economic conditions—are barely able to keep up with their current caseloads. They would be the first to tell the federal government to strengthen—not cut—core federal programs that provide low-income families with food, child care, housing, and health care. We must again ensure that government does what it does best (providing a basic safety net, ensuring equal rights and equal protection in programs, guaranteeing uniform coverage of benefits, etc.), so that faith-based and secular nonprofit groups would be freed up to do what they do (providing individual attention to people, building a sense of community, and rapidly responding to changing conditions, etc.)

Some progressive now have a knee-jerk reaction against faith-based efforts, possibly because such efforts are official associated in the public’s mind with the political Right. But it’s hypocritical for progressives to automatically oppose the involvement of religious groups in the public sphere when they embraced (rightfully so) the efforts of the Reverends Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., William Sloan Coffin, and Jesse Jackson Sr. to connect religious imperatives with public policy. After all, the Civil Rights Movement was, at its core, a faith-based initiative.

So the debate shouldn’t be over whether religious groups should be involved in the fight against hunger. They already are, up to their necks. The real debate should be over whether they can obtain serious resources needed to do so more effectively.

Religious organizations are already doing more than their part to fight hunger, but they could do even more if they used their resources and influence to both fight for better public policies and to provide technical assistance to struggling pantries and kitchens who are trying to provide self-sufficiency-boosting social services beyond food. For example, the Episcopal Diocese of New York, The Trinity Church Grants Program, the Cathedral of Saint John the Divine, and the New York City Coalition Against Hunger came together to launch the “Feed the Solution” initiative in 2004, which combined public policy advocacy work with technical assistance provision that built the capacities of Episcopal-run feeding programs.

Kitchens and pantries should do more to provide their customers with more choices, less stigma, and more power. In New York City, the West Side Campaign Against Hunger (WSCAH) was among a few food pantries nationwide that pioneered an entirely new “supermarket-style, customer choice model” of providing food. In most pantries, people are given a preselected bag of food—the same as every other bag of food no matter what they or their family actually needs. But in the customer choice system, people are allotted a certain number of points and then they may “shop,” choosing as many items (which are also coded on a points basis, with meats usually having the highest point value and produce the lowest) as they can purchase with their points, thereby being able to choose items that best meet the needs of their families. WSCAH goes to great lengths to empower its customers, who volunteer to conduct many of the tasks needed to run the pantry and who also serve on its board. Such customer choice pantries cost more money, need more space, and utilize more staff time than regular pantries, but they are well worth the extra effort. More pantries nationwide should adopt this model.

Given that most grassroots pantries and kitchens are tiny and entirely volunteer-run, it is not realistic to expect that all of them will automatically become all-purpose social service agencies. But every feeding program should engage in at least a little advocacy for improved public

policies and should consistently make it clear that charity never could—and never should—replace government. It is also reasonable to ask every feeding agency in America to take at least one other step to bolster the self-sufficiency of their clients/customers, by helping them to: obtain government nutrition assistance and/or anti-poverty benefits; engage in local food production or marketing activities; increase their nutritional knowledge; gain job skills; or otherwise advance their economic and job security. Food banks and food rescue groups should encourage their member pantries and kitchens to do all those things.

Many pantries and kitchens have already done just that. In 2000, just before I joined the group as Executive Director, the New York City Coalition Against Hunger launched the pioneering Emergency Food Action Center to provide technical assistance to help pantries and kitchen provide additional, non-food, services. Partially as a result of that work, many more feeding agencies are enabling their clients/customers to obtain federal EITC payments and WIC benefits. Others are starting Customer Advisory Boards to better enable their clients to play leadership roles in the operations of the feeding program and in government advocacy efforts. Some launched after school and summer feeding programs for children. Still others started community gardens.

The Coalition joined with the New York City Human Resources Administration, at the time headed by then-Commissioner Robert Doar (the esteemed co-chair of this Commission), to help start a pilot project to help people apply online for food stamp benefits onsite at a few pantries and kitchens. This involves actually scanning in all their required documents at the location, and, for some, enabling them to entirely avoid a time-consuming and often-humiliating visit to a government office in order to get their food stamp benefits. The program was so successful it was later dramatically expanded to many other nonprofit organization sites.

Across the nation, pantries and kitchens are empowering the people they help with more than just food. One food pantry in Milwaukee, operated by a local hospital, has a special clinic to help people prevent and treat high blood pressure, diabetes, and other ailments. The director of the program, Bill Solberg, said, “We’re taking a window of opportunity approach. We know we can see these people once a month.” Such efforts should be expanded and funded by the federal government.

Willie Sutton, the famous bank robber, was once asked why he robbed banks. He responded, “That’s where the money is.” When asked why the organization I head uses food pantries and soup kitchens as prime places at which to provide social services and self-sufficiency aid, I say, “that’s where the poor and hungry people are.” For that reason, I always tell government officials and private donors that one of the best places to pilot a new anti-poverty initiative is at a feeding program. But these tiny, strapped agencies will need far greater resources to do so.

Business also has a critical role in fighting hunger. First and foremost, businesses should ensure that all their workers—as well as the workers of their contractors (including the contractors that hire people to clean or guard their offices at night)—be paid living wages, provided full benefits, guaranteed safe working conditions, allowed to bargain collectively, and given paid family and medical leave, as well as vacation and sick leave. Investing in workers will both reduce worker’s

hunger (and that of their families) and boost their long-term productivity. American businesses should also make a commitment to keeping as many jobs as possible in the United States.

The business community should certainly donate money and food to anti-hunger and anti-poverty organizations, but when they do so, they should do it on top of—not instead of—providing adequate compensation to their workers.

Businesses should also be challenged to limit the disparity between what their highest paid executives and their lowest-paid workers earn. A few decades ago, CEOs made 209 times what the average worker made, which was already a far higher ratio than most of the world's major industrialized nations. In 2007, CEOs made at least 400 times as much. I propose that CEOs voluntarily limit their compensation to no more than 100 times that of their lowest paid workers. Thus, in a company in which the lowest-paid worker earned \$20,000 a year, the CEO could still earn \$2 million, which they might not think is much, but is actually five times what the President of the United States makes. Currently, business leaders are rewarded with higher salaries for limiting worker wages and downsizing payrolls. But if a CEO voluntarily pegged his or her pay to no more than 100 times the pay of their lowest-paid workers that would give them a tangible incentive to actually raise worker pay. Thus, in the example above, if the CEO raised minimum salaries of his or her workers to \$40,000, then she or he could raise their own salary to \$4 million. Besides, the one-to-100 pay ratio that I propose is far more generous than the ratio at more progressive companies like Ben & Jerry's, where, in 2001, the highest ranking executive earned only 16 times the salary of the lowest paid employee.

Business executives should take all those steps voluntarily, out of patriotism and a sense of common good. But if they don't, the government should step in. In 2008, in the Netherlands—even though executive pay there was 25 percent less than in the US—the country was up in arms about large payouts to corporate leaders. As a result, the Dutch finance minister sent a bill to their parliament limiting executive windfalls.⁸ The US should consider similar measures. The US should also increase minimum wage levels; require that companies and organizations getting government grants and contracts pay their employees living wages; and end tax breaks that encourage companies to downsize or outsource jobs while increasing executive pay. Furthermore, businesses should stop hiding behind their trade associations and lobbyists who work effectively on their behalf to oppose such measures.

The business community should also design job training and job apprenticeship programs that promise living wage, career-ladder jobs to people who successfully complete such programs.

Public opinion polling demonstrates that the plan I outlined to end domestic hunger would win broad, bipartisan support from average Americans. Americans of all ideologies and parties very much want to end domestic hunger. A bipartisan poll in 2007 examined what the pollsters called "Do Right Voters"—people who "urgently wanted policy action to solve problems like hunger and poverty" and found 46 percent of the people in the category were Democrats, 27 percent were Republicans, and 16 percent were Independents. Of course, the Do Right Voters were far more likely to be in households with lower income levels.⁹

A 2007 survey by the polling firm Peter Hart and Associates on behalf of anti-hunger groups found that 78 percent of voters think hunger is a problem in America, 57 percent feel that the government is spending too little on anti-hunger programs, and 81 percent believe food stamps are important. Seventy-nine percent said they would increase the minimum monthly food stamps benefit of \$10, but when they were told most of the people who would get that benefit were elderly or disabled, that number shot up to 90 percent. Yet when they were read arguments in support of increasing food stamps benefits (that current benefits don't keep up with rising costs) alongside language opposing such a move (that food stamps were meant to simply supplement other food spending and that the government can't afford this extra spending) support dropped to 66 percent.

These results don't mean that Americans necessarily share the view of advocates that expanding SNAP is the single best way to fight hunger. When people are asked an open-ended question about how to end hunger in America, they often pick private charity and local government as the top entities to solve the problem, followed by state government and then, as a last resort, the federal government. In other words, without being given details of the status quo in which federal programs are the most significant and local programs are the least significant (at least in terms of money), voters have a hazy idea that they prefer a situation that is almost exactly the reverse of today's reality.

Polling also shows that "even voters who strongly believe in helping the poor and hungry will balk at increasing programs they views to be ineffective." Also, when voters were asked to evaluate government's response to hunger, 46 percent said, "the government is not making a big effort to reduce hunger" while 33 percent said that "government is making a big effort to fight hunger, but it is not working." Only 14 percent thought "the government is making a big effort to reduce hunger, and it is working." Voters across the political spectrum also strongly believed that federal nutrition assistance programs should promote self-sufficiency.

People hold complex and sometimes conflicting opinions regarding poverty policies, as evidenced by detailed annual polling conducted by the Pew Research Center for People and the Press. 12 In 2007, Pew found that 69 percent of all Americans, 83 percent of Republicans, and 60 percent of Democrats believe that poor people have become too dependent on government programs. Notably, reported Pew, 63 percent of those who say the poor are too dependent also believe that the government has a responsibility to take care of people who cannot take care of themselves. And nearly half of those who say the poor have become too dependent on the government (48 percent) also agree with the statement: "The government should help more needy people even if it means going deeper in debt." Who ever said human beings were consistent?

The single most popular policy prescription continues to be ensuring that work pays. Fully 93 percent of Democrats, 85 percent of Independents, and even 69 percent of Republicans told Pew in 2007 that they favored raising the minimum wage. Even three-quarters of small business owners supported raising the minimum wage, which is particularly striking because the organizations that purport to represent small businesses usually oppose such wage hikes.

What do these polling numbers tell us? First, it's clear that we need to do a better job of telling the story of how existing federal nutrition assistance programs are working, and how they promote work and strengthen families by enabling parents to feed their children while staying employed.

Second, these polls tell us that the American people would only support an expansion of federal nutrition programs if they were reformed and modernized, exactly what my plan would do. Also, by giving more aid to struggling working families just above the poverty line, my plan is perfectly in line with the nation's desire to promote work. It is also clear that the public would widely support my calls to provide more meaningful aid to nonprofit groups and pressure big businesses to pay living wages.

For a community to have good nutrition, three things need to happen: food must be affordable; food must be physically available; and individuals and families must have enough education to know how to eat better and regularly choose to perform the extra work necessary to do so. If you don't have all three legs of this table, the table will collapse. Yet all too often projects only focus on one of the three. Many provide nutrition education, lecturing people that they should eat better, but neither make food more available nor more affordable and are therefore destined to fail. Sometimes, food is brought into low-income neighborhoods, but at prices too high for most people to afford. That won't work either. The only way to truly succeed is to focus on all three aspects of this problem at once. Government should play a leading role in doing so, but for that to happen, we all need an entirely different mindset. Food should be a central organizing tool of neighborhood development, uniting communities through community gardens, farmers' markets, nutrition education, supermarkets, food cooperatives, and food-related small businesses. Community gardens can reclaim empty lots from drug-pushers. Food businesses can create jobs and raise community income. Farmers' markets can give neighborhoods central gathering spaces and nurture a feeling of the "public commons" that is so often lost in today's society.

In food security issues as with hunger issues, in order for fundamental change to occur, government must be a key player. In the late 1990s, when Secretary of Agriculture Dan Glickman launched the USDA Community Food Security Initiative, and I ran its day-to-day operations. The initiative established innovative public/private partnerships to fight hunger, bolster food security, and help low-income Americans move from poverty to economic independence. It implemented a detailed plan of action in seven areas: local anti-hunger infrastructure; economic and job security; the federal nutrition assistance safety net; food recovery and donations; local food production and marketing; education; and research.

The President should re-launch such an initiative immediately and work with Congress to give it serious resources. The President and Congress should also work together to more fully integrate these efforts with the USDA nutrition assistance programs. One way to accomplish this would be to dramatically expand the ability for WIC and food stamp participants to use their benefits at farm stands, farmers' markets, CASs, and street vendors that sell fruit and vegetables.

The President and Congress must end corporate agriculture welfare, and focus resources on aiding truly struggling small farmers, particularly those growing fresh fruits and vegetables. The federal government should also better protect drinking water by increasing aid for conservation

measures on small farms. The President and Congress—as well as states, localities, and tribal governments—should shift procurement rules to make it easier for school districts, public hospitals, prisons, and all other public institutions to purchase food directly from small farmers. Also, more of the food commodities purchased by the government for soup kitchens and food pantries should be purchased directly from small farmers. All levels of government should also use a combination of tax breaks, grants, land swaps and other innovative efforts to preserve farmland. Localities must preserve existing—and set-aside new—land for urban farms and gardens and farmers’ markets. Local governments should require all large real estate development projects to include plans for food, including rooftop gardens and greenhouses, affordable supermarkets (staffed by employees paid a living wage), and farmers’ markets in public spaces. Since the big money in agriculture is made from processing, all levels of government will want to support the creation of local and regional processing facilities. As I detailed in a 2009 report for the Progressive Policy Initiative, the federal government should launch a comprehensive effort to create food-related jobs.

A New War on Poverty

It’s relatively easy to end hunger in America. If the nation increased and modernized the already-existing safety net and took all the other basic steps I have proposed, we’d finally wipe out this egregious problem. But even if we ended hunger as we know it, if poverty continued to increase in America, not only would people continue to suffer, but taxpayers would need to continually pump more money into the safety net to prevent hunger from returning. Consequently, in order to truly make the American dream attainable for all those willing to work for it, the country must make the eradication of hunger just the first step in a broader effort to slash domestic poverty.

Poverty in America hurts everyone. As harmful as the \$167.5 billion cost to our economy resulting from hunger among adults and children is, the \$500 billion cost to our nation as a result of childhood poverty is even worse, equivalent to four percent of the US Gross Domestic Product (GDP), according to a study by the Center for American Progress. This reduces productivity and economic output by about 1.3 percent of the GDP, raises the cost of law enforcement and prisons by 1.3 percent of the GDP, and raises health expenditures and reduces the economic value of good health by 1.2 percent of the GDP. Ultimately, America’s high poverty rate hampers its ability to compete in the world economy. It is in the best interest of the country to invest in its citizens, and therefore its own future.

If we want to see real change, we need an entirely new framework for addressing domestic poverty. While our leaders still choose sides—and boldly declare that either faltering economics or personal irresponsibility alone are responsible for poverty—the American people know that we need to move beyond such false choices. The public knows that increased government support, economic growth, community involvement, and a focus on personal responsibility are all needed to solve the problem. While the citizenry is ready to move forward based on common sense answers, our leaders are stuck in a partisan and ideological time warp.

To make matters worse, neither conservatives nor liberals spend significant time interacting with poor people. It is no wonder that neither side has advanced a serious plan to empower low-income American families to accomplish their primary goal: to be able to enter—and stay in—

the middle class, and have a serious expectation that each subsequent generation has a real shot of moving further up the economic ladder.

The nation must move beyond our current stalemate in poverty politics by enacting an “Aspiration Empowerment Agenda” that gives all families the opportunity to advance their dreams through hard work and responsible choices. Rather than focus only on those rare stories of poor people who climb their way out of poverty against all odds or those rare people with so many problems they can’t move to self-sufficiency no matter how much help they get, this clearheaded new approach would focus on the majority of folks who could climb out of poverty with some help.

The Aspiration Empowerment Agenda would provide an array of government-funded benefits and work supports at levels sufficient enough to enable low-income people to develop assets to move out of poverty. It would emphasize the importance of personal responsibility for all members of society (including the rich), but also design public policies that reward—not punish—low-income people for positive behavior. This new empowerment-centered agenda would create economic pathways for upward mobility—and reverse a trend that is ensnaring more and more working people into poverty.

We need to empower low-income families to end debt and move from owing to owning. New efforts would help low-income families achieve their dreams by learning, earning, and saving their way out of poverty. The agenda is both revolutionary in its ambition and mainstream in its values. The goal is to overhaul all our programs and policies in order to give low-income families the tools they need to achieve a middle-class lifestyle —with a good job, a safe place to live, and a hopeful future for their kids and grandkids.

While the most obvious difference between poor Americans and the rest is that they earn less income, in actuality a far bigger difference is that they own less and have miniscule financial assets. Wealth inequality outstrips income inequality by large margins. According to Citizens for Tax Justice, in 2004, the wealthiest one percent of Americans owned 33.4 percent of the nation’s wealth, up from 30.4 percent in 1989. The wealthiest five percent owned 55.5 percent of the wealth in 2004. The poorest 50 percent collectively owned 2.5 percent of the wealth in 2004, down from 3.0 percent in 1989. The gap in ownership by race is even vaster.

The government has long encouraged asset development for the middle and upper classes through tax incentives. According to the New America Foundation, the federal government spends over \$300 billion per year on asset-building activities. But approximately 90 percent of those benefits go to individuals earning more than \$50,000 annually.

All federal and state social programs should be reformed to make it easier for recipients to save their money so they can pay for a down payment on a first home, start a business, pay for higher education for their children, or build a retirement account. This can be done by eliminating provisions that automatically kick people out of such programs when they save money.

One embodiment of the assets growth idea is the Individual Development Account (IDA) program, created in the 1990s by an ideological odd couple: then-President Bill Clinton and

then-Chair of the House Budget Committee, archconservative John Kasich. These accounts allow low-income families to match their own savings with funds from government and private sector sources in order to save for job training, home ownership, or business start-ups. Such accounts are often coupled with financial education. Ides are still only available in small pilot locations and they have been hampered because too few people in poverty had even minimal disposable incomes that they could save. Furthermore, even though IDA projects are very labor-intensive to run, most money for IDA projects that goes through nonprofit groups is set aside for the benefits themselves, with little or no administrative funding going to the organizations. To truly expand into a universally available benefit for people in poverty (as we should), the government needs to both increase the matching funds and also provide more realistic support to the entities that operate such efforts.

Surely, programs like the IDA, which promote both personal responsibility and economic opportunity, should be supported by liberals, conservatives, and moderates alike as bold new steps to finally stem the growing tide of poverty. Likewise for the idea of “Kids Accounts”—which have already been created in the United Kingdom—through which every child born in the nation automatically receives a savings account with a small deposit in it, and is provided with long-term incentives (with extra incentives for low-income families) to save more for education, job training, home purchases, or retirement.

An assets agenda would also ensure greater availability of low-cost banking services, as well as crack down on payday loans, high-fee check-cashing facilities, and other financial services that rip off poor people. This plan should also dramatically ramp-up governmental and private efforts to provide micro-loans to start very small businesses. Helping someone to open their own shoe shine stand, for example, or to start a sidewalk business to sell ethnic food delicacies, can help people enter the economic mainstream and perhaps later expand their efforts by hiring employees to aid them.

Instead of incorrectly assuming that poverty is caused by irresponsible behavior that should be corrected by “sanctions” against poor people, government and low-income families should forge an entirely new social contract based on mutual responsibility and shared prosperity.

In my experience, when people believe their hard work will be rewarded, they will work their tails off. To truly reduce poverty, restoring economic opportunity and restoring hope must go hand in hand. Low-income Americans don’t need more lectures and punishment. They need more money.

When people believe their hard work will be rewarded, they will work their tails off. That’s why we should dramatically expand the AmeriCorps national service program, which rewards full-time service to the country with small living allowances and educational awards.

When government provides anti-poverty benefits, it must move beyond the meager levels now offered – which all but guarantee families will be unable to leave poverty using them. And it must end the arbitrary benefit cliffs that kick-in as families marginally raise their wages as they struggle to get in – and stay in – the middle class.

Low-income individuals, already eager to take steps to better their lives, should have government as a true partner in hope, not a patronizing disciplinarian criticizing their every move.

To do so, the federal government should launch a pilot program to create HOPE (Health, Opportunity and Personal Empowerment) accounts and action plans that combine improved technology, streamlined case management and coordinated access to federal, state, city and non-profit programs, and modernized job training and placement services that give people the tools they need to take charge of their future and implement a long-term plan to climb into – and stay in – the middle class. If the federal government fails to do so, states or localities should create them.

A HOPE program would enable families, in one step, to apply for a wide range of government and philanthropic aid to improve health, nutrition, job training and placement, housing, income, etc., and provide them with matching funds if they are able to set aside any personal savings. The accounts would allow low-income families to easily access and monitor – in one central online account – the status, amounts and recertification deadlines of all their benefits.

The families, government officials and nonprofit entities providing resources would voluntarily sign a long-term HOPE plan of action specifying how all parties will work together to help the families to earn, learn, work and save better in order to ensure greater economic opportunity for themselves and their children.

At a superficial level, these accounts and plans would be similar to the contracts proposed by Ryan, but they would be very different in both intention and implementation.

Unlike the Ryan opportunity grants that would replace existing federal programs, the HOPE accounts and plans would be in addition to existing government efforts.

Unlike Ryan's proposal, which seems to assume that his proposed opportunity grants can somehow succeed even if the rest of the safety net is slashed and the economy is still failing, this proposal assumes that HOPE accounts and plans can only be effective in the context of both a robust safety net and broad-based economic growth that create jobs and raises wages.

The Ryan plan would make government an overlord of families and determine their fate. In contrast, this plan would empower families with the concrete tools necessary to take charge of their own futures.

Low-income Americans don't need more lectures and punishment. They need more money and hope.

One major caveat about such an assets agenda is that it will only work in the context of broader economic and poverty policies that increase what people earn and decrease what they pay for basic necessities. For instance, if a family earns \$20,000 per year in salaries but pays \$24,000 in rent, not only won't they be able to develop assets, they will go into debt. Thus, lower costs and higher wages for people in poverty are an absolute prerequisite for assets building.

To reduce costs, the nation must enable all Americans to obtain health care, housing, and child care that are both affordable and high quality. Once the nation has accomplished that very simple task, we can turn to the issue of wages.

It is often said that the “best social program is a job.” I agree with that adage, but would modify it to say: “The best social program is a job that provides people with wages and benefits sufficient enough to ensure at least a bare middle-class existence.” We need to design all our anti-poverty plans to create good jobs and ensure low-income Americans have the tools to get them and keep them.

All four of my grandparents, as well as my mother, were born outside America, in poverty. They came to America for freedom. The freedom to practice their own religion—or not. The freedom from the fear of Cossacks riding into town to slaughter their families. And yes, the freedom to make a fair day’s wages for a fair’s day’s work.

It wasn’t easy. They risked their lives to get here. Both of my father’s parents worked in garment industry sweatshops for paltry wages, until the unions they helped organize raised their pay and improved their working conditions. My mother’s father started out selling dry goods door-to-door, until he saved enough money to buy his first parking garage, and then saved even more money to buy a mini-chain of parking garages. Those garages paid for my mother to become the first person in her family to go to college, and—because my grandparents saved far more than they ever spent—ultimately paid for much of my Ivy League college tuition. My father fought in World War II, and then used to GI Bill to become the first person in his family to go to college.

Why did my grandparents and parents risk so much, work so hard, and sacrifice so consistently? Because, even as they were bending over white-hot sewing machines or knocking on their thousandth unresponsive door, they knew—just knew—that the America of their dreams would ultimately reward them and their offspring.

The very name “America” became an ideal for the world. But we’ve lost that. Our growing poverty crushes hope and squanders dreams.

America must once again live up to those ideals by restoring pathways of mobility and returning to the land of my grandparents’ dreams.

Conclusion: We need a Political Movement to End Hunger

Some ask how we can end hunger *without* using public policy. That’s like asking how we can transport ourselves to someplace new without moving our bodies.

The only way to truly end US hunger is by advocating for fundamental change that includes living wages jobs and a robust safety net. Today hunger, poverty, and homelessness are soaring nationwide. Most elected officials are either ignoring these maladies or taking actions that actually make them worse. The reason they get away with that is that there is no broad-based, grassroots anti-hunger movement to counteract them.

The recent moment that encapsulated the weakness of anti-hunger fights was our collective inability to stave off defeat on the recent federal Child Nutrition Reauthorization (CNR) and Farm Bills. Collectively, those bills cut \$14 billion from SNAP.

Many of us had hoped that the bill would contain massive new investments in child nutrition programs and move the nation toward President Obama's previously stated pledge to end child hunger by 2015. Yet the final bill contained few serious expansions of anti-hunger programs. The vast majority of the money was used to increase the quality of school lunches for middle-class and low-income students (certainly a worthy goal), but relatively little of the bill's money went to ensuring that more hungry children would even get to eat school breakfasts, summer meals, or after-school snacks in the first place.

To add insult to injury, because of a last-minute deal to protect corporate welfare, the final CNR bill was almost entirely paid for with billions of dollars' worth of cuts in SNAP, a program in which half the recipients of benefits are children, all of whom are low-income. Ironically (but predictably), Congress has since attempted to gut even the higher quality school meals.

Thus, the CNR bill took away money for feeding low-income children in order to pay for improvements in existing meals for middle-class and low-income children—improvements that may not even fully come to pass. In a cruel irony, the bill that we had hoped would help end child hunger in America will probably increase child hunger in America. The president and Congress have recently enacted other cuts in ant hunger funding (including cuts in WIC and the Federal Emergency Management Agency's Emergency Food and Shelter Program, the main source of federal cash for feeding charities). The bucket brigades of pantries and kitchens have never been more outgunned.

The sequestrations process further cut that program, and it even cut WIC funding.

On top of all those cuts, in 2014, Republicans in Congress pushed – and the President and Democrats in Congress eventually agreed to – \$8.7 billion in additional cuts to SNAP as part of the Farm Bill, which simultaneously boosted corporate welfare.

Senator Gillibrand proposed an amendment to the Farm Bill that would have avoided the SNAP cuts by instead cutting corporate welfare subsidies to crop insurance companies, a number of which are foreign-owned. Under normal circumstances, a vote to fund food for hungry Americans instead of corporate welfare for foreign companies should have passed the Senate easily. Yet this common sense amendment was defeated by a vote of 70-26. Not a single Republican voted yes, and half of Senate Democrats, including former liberal stalwarts, voted no. The dominance of big money in politics and the undue deference to Tea Party demands doomed the amendment. The final bill passed the Senate overwhelmingly.

In the House, the G.O.P. leadership had a hard time passing the Farm Bill, because the \$8.7 billion in additional SNAP cut was still deemed too small for some right-wingers and some progressive Democrats objected to cuts that large. Ultimately though, nearly half the House Democrats, voted for the final bill which slashed SNAP. Even many Democrats representing

liberal, urban districts voted for the bill. In the end, the bill passed the House 251 to 156, and another \$8.7 billion food food was taken away from struggling Americans.

Yet it could get even worse still. The recently passed Congressional budgets could take trillions of dollars away from vital programs that aid low-income people.

My only hope is that this all could be a blessing in disguise, giving the nation the final jolt we need to once again ignite a grassroots movement to end hunger.

In the late 1960s and early 1970s, when advocates were able to harness significant grassroots activism (including the prominent participation of low-income people) and obtain significant (on-message) media coverage, not only were they able to turn President Nixon from a hunger-denier to an anti-hunger champion, but they were able to prompt the creation of the modern nutrition safety net, which almost ended domestic hunger. Popular movements emerge from the daily struggles of thousands of citizens. Progress is never easy, but as we've seen with the government activities that wiped out cholera, yellow fever, and malaria in the United States, if society has the will, it has the way. If enough people push for change, then the governmental and other institutions can solve big problems. We are at a moment in US history when we must expect and demand real change. It is simply not acceptable to have hungry people amid such skyrocketing wealth. We must start feeding the solution.

What seemed inevitable in one age is unthinkable in other another.

When we look back in our country's history, we can't allow ourselves to imagine how bad things really were. Take child labor. Can we imagine that the country was so heartless as to often allow "breaker boys" as young as six years old to work in anthracite coal mines, separating slate rock from the coal, for fourteen to sixteen hours day, six days a week, frequently losing fingers or dying from black lung—all for just a few dollars per month? No, we can't imagine it. Or slavery. Can we truly remember that America used to be so barbaric that it was acceptable to buy and sell human beings? Can we even conceive of the fact that we split up families for profit? We can't imagine that either.

We must work together so that, in the not-too-distant future, we simply won't be able to imagine a time when US children had to go through dumpsters to get breakfast, or when tens of millions of our neighbors were forced to use food pantries and soup kitchens.

How did we end child labor and slavery? Through mass movements that forced our political system to change. True, it also took a war to end slavery, but it only did so because the abolitionist movement had made the notion of slavery abhorrent to the majority of Americans. Most contemporary Americans have been brainwashed into believing that our government and political system are so broken that citizen action simply doesn't matter. But history proves that's not true. Collective action works. Together, we can ensure that all Americans have enough to eat. But it's up to each of us to join the movement needed to do so and it's up to the federal government to appropriately respond.

Dr. Martin Luther King led a highly successful movement to ensure that people of all skin colors and backgrounds had an equal place in America's political system. But in 1969, King said, "What does it profit a man to be able to eat at an integrated lunch counter if he doesn't earn enough money to buy a hamburger?" It's time for us to launch another movement, this time to ensure that all Americans have physical and economic access to all the nutritious food their families need. It's time for all Americans to have an equal place at the dining table.

NOTE: To save space and time, I did not provide citations for every fact or study cited. I would be glad to provide any specific citations upon request.