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How President Obama Can Reverse America's Worsening Hunger Metrics

Joel Berg February 2013

Introduction and summary

Domestic hunger, poverty, food insecurity—and, as a result, the use of supplemental nutrition assistance—all soared under the presidency of George W. Bush. In October 2008 then-candidate Barack Obama pledged to end childhood hunger in the United States by 2015 as a down payment on ending all domestic hunger.² At the time he made that pledge, however, he was unaware of the full extent of the economic downturn that he would inherit upon taking office, as well as the extent to which conservatives in Congress would—despite their embrace of corporate welfare—consistently and harshly oppose government efforts to fight hunger.

During the first three years of the Obama administration, the number of children in food-insecure households remained at the very high level of nearly 17 million.³ Although the Obama administration's actions to boost benefits from the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program, or SNAP, and improve access to other nutrition programs greatly mitigated the extent to which families struggled against hunger,⁴ we are no closer to meeting his goal to end childhood hunger by 2015 than we were four years ago—and we are far further away than we were in 2001, when 4 million fewer children lived in food-insecure homes.⁵

Moreover, food insecurity and hunger are on the flip side of the same malnutrition coin as obesity because healthier food is more expensive and less available in low-income neighborhoods than unhealthy foods. These joint problems harm the U.S. economy, hinder educational advancement, and increase health care spending.

In order to end childhood hunger in the United States, the president and Congress must work together to ensure a full-employment economy with sufficient living-wage jobs available in all low-income rural, suburban, and urban areas nationwide, as well as ensure that federal nutrition benefits are able to sustain families for a full month and that more working families are able to access them.

The president and his administration can take the following executive actions now to significantly reduce child hunger, as well as U.S. hunger in general:

- Sign an executive order directing key federal agencies to create food-related jobs and provide job training and placement services to ensure that low-income Americans are able to obtain and keep those jobs.
- Sign an executive order directing all federal agencies to aid the Department of Agriculture in increasing the participation of eligible children, seniors, people with disabilities, veterans, and working families in federally funded nutrition programs, including the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program, the Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants and Children, senior aggregate and home-delivered meals, school breakfasts, and summer meals.
- Direct federal agencies to do more work with the U.S. Department of Agriculture to expand urban agriculture and fitness opportunities on both federally owned and federally funded land.
- Host a bipartisan White House Conference on Hunger, either as a standalone event or as part of a broader conference on poverty.
- Lead a public service announcement campaign that features prominent Americans who have personally benefited from federal nutrition support.
- Create a Dole-McGovern White House Prize, which would be awarded to citizens for extraordinary service in fighting domestic hunger.
- Issue a “Call to Commitments” that challenges corporations, nonprofit groups, religious organizations, and state, local, and tribal governments to make formal commitments to reduce hunger and obesity.
- Promote long-term, skills-based volunteer activities to fight hunger and obesity.
- Appoint a public and/or private taskforce to implement and coordinate all of the above.

In his second Inaugural Address, President Obama placed a powerful marker on the need to reduce U.S. poverty, saying:

Together, we resolved that a great nation must care for the vulnerable, and protect its people from life's worst hazards and misfortune. ... We are true to our creed when a little girl born into the bleakest poverty knows that she has the same chance to succeed as anybody else.

Not only does childhood hunger inflict great hardship on the most vulnerable, but it also makes it nearly impossible for little boys and girls to grow up to achieve the American Dream. Ending childhood hunger should therefore be the defining mission of the president's second term.

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