

Doing What Works to End U.S. Hunger

Federal Food Programs Are Effective, but Can Work Even Better

Joel Berg March 2010

Center for American Progress



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doing
what works

This publication is a product of CAP's Doing What Works project, which promotes government reform to efficiently allocate scarce resources and achieve greater results for the American people. Doing What Works specifically has three key objectives: (1) eliminating or redesigning misguided spending programs and tax expenditures focused on priority areas such as health care, energy, and education; (2) boosting government productivity by streamlining management and strengthening operations in the areas of human resources, information technology, and procurement; and (3) building a foundation for smarter decision making by enhancing transparency, performance measurement, and evaluation. Doing What Works publications and products can be viewed at http://www.americanprogress.org/projects/doing_what_works.

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Introduction and summary

In this era of both soaring budget deficits and escalating poverty, there is a great need for the federal government to ensure it is spending its resources as wisely and effectively as possible on the needs of those Americans who require a helping hand during hard times. This objective fits within the mission of the Center for American Progress's Doing What Works project, which was inaugurated by CAP earlier this year to ensure that each dollar government spends advances ambitious and carefully selected progressive goals.

There is no question that government must address the most basic of human needs—hunger and nutrition. Some federal programs focused on these needs are already very cost effective, among them the SNAP (formerly Food Stamp) and school meals programs, but they could be run even more efficiently.

These and other federal food programs are critical to millions of low-income Americans who are in crisis because of longstanding structural problems with the U.S. economy alongside existing holes in the nutrition and antipoverty safety nets. Both sets of problems are now exacerbated by the devastating consequences of the Great Recession. As recently as 2008 (before the worst of the economic downturn), 49.1 million Americans, including 16.6 million children, lived in households that suffered from food insecurity or hunger—unable to fully afford the food their families needed.¹ This number exceeded the combined populations of the states of Illinois, Missouri, Indiana, Iowa, Arkansas, Kentucky, and Wisconsin.

Combating hunger and food insecurity is an important goal in itself. But it is also a sound investment. Voluminous data proves that hungry children learn less effectively, hungry workers work less productively, and food insecurity costs the nation tens of billions of dollars annually in health care costs. A 2007 study by the Harvard School of Public Health found that domestic hunger and food insecurity cost the American economy \$90 billion annually.² Given the massive increase in food insecurity since then, this paper calculates that the cost of domestic hunger to our economy now likely exceeds \$124 billion. The price we pay for food insecurity in children alone is at least \$28 billion.³

Make no mistake, the federal nutrition safety net has saved countless lives and provided much-needed assistance to millions. Its creation and expansion in the 1960s and 1970s all but wiped out severe hunger in America. This same safety net greatly reduced the suffering caused by the Great Recession and other events such as Hurricane Katrina.

But it is also clear that the safety net is in desperate need of reform. The current safety net is a confusing array of programs, with 15 different nutrition assistance programs run by the U.S. Department of Agriculture alone, each of which have different eligibility requirements, application procedures, and physical locations that people must visit to apply. This system requires far-reaching bureaucracies and vast mountains of paperwork to administer, discouraging many low-income Americans from seeking the benefits they are entitled to, and costing the government billions of dollars in unnecessary administrative costs. Meanwhile, antifraud measures, inspired more by misguided fears than actual evidence of widespread cheating, cost the government more to implement than they save.

There is a far better way. This paper reiterates a previous proposal for the federal government to combine all these programs into one streamlined, seamless entitlement program available to all families at 185 percent of the poverty line or below.⁴ This means any family of three with a yearly income below \$33,873 would be eligible. My colleague, Thomas Z. Freedman, suggested calling this idea the “American Family Food, Opportunity, and Responsibility” program, or AFFORD. Doing What Works embraces that title as emblematic of the recommendations contained in this paper.

In the pages that follow, this paper will look at the 20th century history of hunger and food insecurity in the United States alongside the key reforms that led to significant gains against these two scourges by the end of the 1970s. We’ll then briefly examine how these programs failed to keep pace with a changing U.S. economy but also highlight how well they worked during recent crises, specifically Hurricane Katrina and the Great Recession. We will then detail our recommendations.

Whatever reforms we choose to implement, there is no question that federal nutrition programs must be modernized and their bureaucracies must be streamlined. Especially in these difficult economic times, when more and more families must rely on the nutrition safety net for food security, America cannot afford inefficiency. We owe it to hungry families to spend every dollar allocated to this safety net on fighting food insecurity, not on unwarranted paperwork or burdensome hurdles to receiving benefits.

A history of success

How the federal nutrition safety net ended near-starvation conditions

A short history of the federal nutrition safety net demonstrates why it is so important that each federal dollar spent fighting hunger and food insecurity is put to good use. When this funding actually reaches the low-income Americans they are intended to serve—rather than being squandered on paperwork or bureaucracy—they have the power to transform what it means to be poor in the world’s richest country.

Exactly one century ago, in 1910, long before any federal nutrition assistance programs existed, a young Frances Perkins (who would later go on to become the nation’s first female U.S. cabinet secretary, serving as President Franklin D. Roosevelt’s secretary of labor and helping write the Social Security Act) wrote a master’s thesis at Columbia University entitled “A Study in Malnutrition in 107 Children from Public School (P.S.) 51.”⁵ She found that, during the recession of 1907-1908, there were “pathetic cases of little boys and little girls fainting in school from sheer lack of food.” The doctor working with her found such symptoms as pallor, emaciation, and dark circles under the eyes in 107 children who were “bona fide malnutrition cases.”

Three-quarters of the children had for breakfast nothing more than bread, or bread and coffee, or tea: “In some cases butter is used with the bread in the morning, but this is very rare, for butter is costly.” A typical lunch was soup, possibly (but not always) with meat, and tea. A typical supper was bread and tea, some polenta, and, on some occasions, sandwiches. “Eggs, butter, and fresh milk are conspicuous by their absence from most family diets,” Perkins found. “Very little fresh fruit and few fresh vegetables enter into the diets.” Perkins summed up her findings this way:

The sight of many little children with the blight of hunger set upon their future made it impossible for the investigator and writer to gather that the material here treated in a cold, impersonal manner is nevertheless a mass of human documents full of human misery.

While exact statistical comparisons of food insecurity in 1910 versus today are not possible, it is still clear that low-income children then were far hungrier than they are today—even given the increasing hunger in America since the 1980s—largely because no government safety net at all existed in 1910. Nor did food insecurity improve until the middle of the 20th century.

When World War II arrived, General George C. Marshall and others noticed that American conscripts arrived at boot camp too malnourished to adequately fight. Consequently, President Harry Truman and ultraconservative Georgia Senator Richard Russell (chairman of the Senate Armed Services Committee and later, for whom the Russell Senate Office Building in Washington, D.C. was named) teamed up to create the National School Lunch Program. While the program wasn't required in all schools and many students still had to pay some reduced fee for lunch, it was a gigantic leap forward. Decades later, Russell said: "If I had to preserve one federal program above all others, I would still choose the School Lunch Program."⁶

In 1967, a team of doctors headed by Dr. Robert Coles and funded by the Field Foundation traveled to the Mississippi Delta region 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.⁷

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 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 5 million of the 29 million then-eligible Americans were participating in the two major existing government food programs (commodities and food stamps) and, "the majority of those participating [were] not the poorest of the poor." The reason: The poorest of the poor could not afford to meet the requirement that they purchase food stamps,

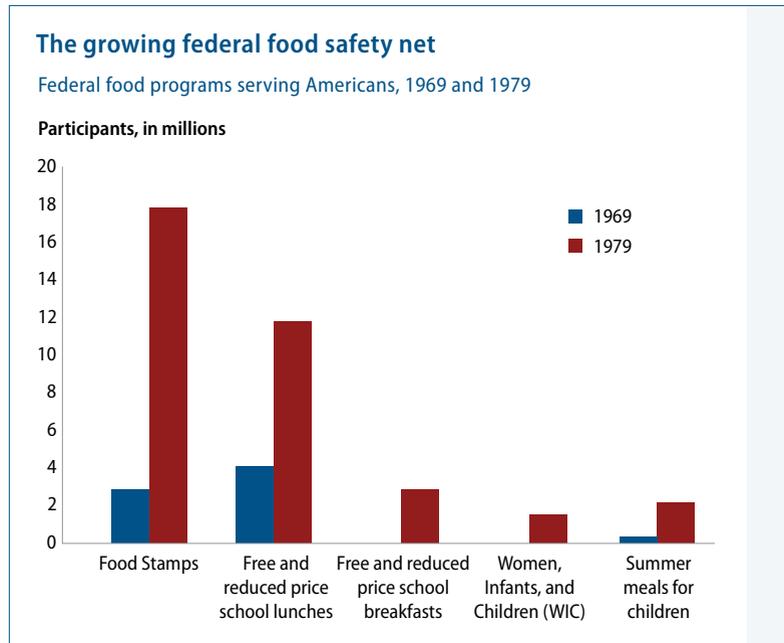
which were then essentially a discount coupon program. The report concluded: “We find ourselves somewhat startled by our own findings, for we had been lulled into the comforting belief that at least the extremes of privation had been eliminated in the process of becoming the world’s wealthiest nation.”⁸

As a result of these reports, and the grassroots activism and media attention that they fueled, Sens. Bob Dole (R-KS) and George McGovern (D-SD) forged a congressional consensus across party and ideological lines and gained support from Presidents Richard Nixon and Jimmy Carter to create the modern nutrition assistance safety net over the span of less than a decade.

In 1971, Congress passed legislation that limited the purchase requirement for food stamps and, in 1972, authorized the Women, Infants and Children, or WIC program. 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 program as we know it today. The act completely eliminated the original 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.⁹

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. Overall, between 1969 and 1979, as the chart below 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.¹⁰

Participation in the Food Stamp Program increased six-fold, from 2.8 million 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 for by the federal government even existed in 1969; by 1979, there were 4 million people benefiting from WIC and 2.7 million children getting free and reduced-price breakfasts.



Source: USDA Food and Nutrition Service.

The benefits of these changes were clearly evident. For example, in 1999, then-U.S. Secretary of Agriculture Dan Glickman said in a speech to the National Association of WIC Directors: “Without WIC, 22 percent of the four million children entering high school this year could have been saddled with handicaps and disabilities suffered as the result of low birth weights but the intervention of the WIC program helped prevent this from happening. And, without WIC, an estimated 113,000 babies would have died at birth.”¹¹ This report further calculates that, as of 2009, the number of babies saved from dying at birth by WIC exceeded 200,000.

The food program expansions also 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.”¹²

These initiatives showcased government programs that actually *worked* and effective collaborations between political rivals. Had the nation built upon this progress by further expanding and strengthening these programs, it could have easily ended hunger entirely.

Contemporary examples of federal food program successes

Beginning in the 1970s, when the American economy began replacing living-wage manufacturing jobs with poverty-wage service sector jobs, the federal antipoverty safety net also began to erode. These developments combined with federal nutrition programs that did not evolve as much as necessary to reflect changes in American society and technology. As a result, hunger in America spiked. The problem, however, would be unimaginably worse today if the safety net didn't exist at all. Some recent examples illustrate this point.

Hurricane Katrina

After Hurricane Katrina, when most federal government programs failed, the Food Stamp and School Lunch Programs were notable islands of success. In September 2005, food stamp participation nationwide rose by 1,771,404 people, largely due to the nutrition relief received by victims of Hurricane Katrina. Four states with large numbers of hurricane survivors—Louisiana, Alabama, Mississippi, and Texas—accounted for more than 1.51 million of that increase. Thus, the program reacted exactly as it was designed to do, rapidly providing additional food purchasing power to disaster victims.¹³

Similarly, the School Lunch Program was able to immediately respond via provisions that allow children experiencing homelessness to automatically enroll in the program without application or proof income, as well through the quick action of the USDA in issuing guidance to school districts throughout the country.¹⁴ Children who were displaced from their homes had a long list of other worries but getting food in school was not one of them.

The Great Recession and the stimulus act of 2009

As U.S. hunger spiked during the recent economic downturn, the nation's food programs demonstrated success in responding. The SNAP-Food Stamp Program, a countercyclical entitlement that is designed to be an economic stabilizer that expands when the economy worsens, worked exactly as planned. The number of participants rose from 26.4 million in federal fiscal year 2007 to 33.7 million in fiscal year 2009—a 28 percent increase in just three years.¹⁵

In contrast, other federal antipoverty programs were far less responsive to the economic downturn. For instance, participation in the Temporary Assistance to Needy Families Program actually dropped over those three years, from 4.1 million to 4.0 million Americans, even as the jobs necessary to no longer need TANF became considerably scarcer.¹⁶

Further, due to the \$21 billion in additional antihunger spending that was included in the stimulus package—the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act of 2009—there is significantly less hunger and food insecurity in America today than there otherwise would have been. The law included these additional funds:

- \$20 billion to increase Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program, or SNAP, benefits (formerly known as Food Stamps) for each of the tens of millions of Americans in the program
- \$300 million to help states administer the increased SNAP caseload
- \$500 million for WIC to support an increased caseload and an improvement in WIC information systems
- \$100 million for competitive grants to schools for the purchase of school food service equipment
- \$150 million for the Emergency Food Assistance Program to purchase commodities for food banks, food pantries, and soup kitchens to refill emptying shelves and to assist with administrative functions
- \$5 million for the Food Distribution Program on Indian Reservations for facility improvements and equipment upgrades¹⁷

Thanks to these funds, there is significantly less hunger and food insecurity in America today than there otherwise would have been.

The New York City Coalition Against Hunger (the organization the author of this paper manages) documented that the number of New Yorkers forced to use the city’s soup kitchens and food pantries grew by 21 percent in 2009. Yet because federal antihunger spending in New York City increased by more than \$500 million during the same period, fewer charities ran out of food than the year before. Although the report showed that 55 percent of emergency food programs still lacked enough food to meet the growing demand, it was a significant improvement over 2008, when fully 69 percent of the pantries and kitchens lacked sufficient food.¹⁸

The increase in federal funding provided a food life raft for struggling families. But the increased demand for food assistance only highlights the need to maximize the value of each federal antipoverty dollar. As Recovery Act funds run out, it is likely that the remaining nutrition safety net will be even further taxed in their absence.

Cost effectiveness of the safety net vs. charity

When the American people were asked in 2007: “How much of the time do you think you can trust the government in Washington to do what is right?” only 36 percent answered “just about always or most of the time.” Due to that belief, many people falsely assume that charities provide more food than government, 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.

While it is often a great burden to enroll in the SNAP-Food Stamp Program, once someone receives the benefits it is usually relatively easy to use them, especially since paper coupons have long ago been replaced by easy-to-use electronic benefits transfer or EBT 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 the Food Stamp Program-SNAP goes to food, not to administrative overhead.

In FY 2009, out of total Food Stamp Program-SNAP costs of \$53.6 billion, the federal government spent \$50.3 billion on benefits and only \$3.3 bil-

lion on administrative overhead. While the federal government pays for 100 percent of benefits, state and localities paid roughly 50 percent of the administrative costs, which means that they spent approximately \$3.3 billion as their share of the overhead. So out of the \$56.9 billion spent by all levels of government on the Food Stamps Program-SNAP, \$50.3 billion went directly to food benefits and \$6.6 billion to administrative costs. Consequently, 93 percent of all spending went directly to benefits and only 7 percent went to administrative overhead, an improvement over 2007, when 15 percent was spent on overhead. If government reduced even more of the unnecessary barriers to application and recertification, the overhead costs would be even lower.

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-SNAP is more cost efficient than charities.

Doing What Works

Making the safety net smarter and more modern

The federal nutrition safety net is a remarkable success story, but it is not getting the best possible “bang for the buck.” Federal antihunger programs are often too slow to respond to changing conditions and improved technology. They require beneficiaries to jump through unnecessary and expensive-to-administer hoops in order to receive benefits. And they are organized into a maze of overlapping programs when one overarching program would perform better.

There are three concrete steps the federal government can take to improve the efficiency and effectiveness of our nation’s food safety net:

- Remove burdensome participation requirements
- Improve the use of new technologies
- Reform overly complicated bureaucracies

Let’s consider each of these steps in turn.

Remove burdensome participation requirements

Participation requirements for families and individuals are ripe for reform. One misguided assumption of the Food Stamp Program is that most recipients also receive cash welfare and few have any earned income. In fact, between 1989 and 2008, the percentage of food-stamp households receiving cash welfare fell to 11 percent from 42 percent, while the percentage with income from work increased to 29 percent from 20 percent.¹⁹

The failure to recognize this shift is placing a hardship on the working poor. In order for people to receive cash assistance through the Temporary Assistance for Needy Families program, they are generally required to make multiple visits to government social service offices to meet with TANF caseworkers. Under federal law, families who only receive SNAP or Food Stamps are required to have fewer visits—and in some cases no physical visits—to a government office to receive benefits. Yet some of these food stamp-only par-

Participants are still required to make a greater number of visits as if they were in the TANF program. That makes no sense. For working families especially, they often don't need to be case managed by a social worker. They simply need their benefits.

Further, in order to receive benefits, many participants must first provide a mountain of paperwork and physically visit government offices to meet with a government official. They must repeat the process at least once a year to keep their benefits, even though there is little evidence that such repetition achieves its intended purpose—preventing ineligible recipients from receiving benefits. Case in point: Several states and localities require applicants to be fingerprinted before they can receive certain federal nutrition benefits, even though there is no evidence that fingerprinting is an effective way of catching fraud. The relatively limited fraud in the Food Stamp-SNAP Program is more effectively and more cheaply caught by other systems that don't add paperwork and visits for applicants or treat them like criminals; more effective systems include ones that electronically match applicants' financial information from computer records.

The federal response to Hurricane Katrina demonstrated the benefits of processing applications in a streamlined manner. The School Lunch Program reacted exactly as it was designed to do, rapidly providing food to school children.²⁰ Yet for routine benefits claims across food programs, our current system clings to inefficient and redundant processes that significantly burden beneficiaries at great government expense.

In the end, change should be welcomed by the full range of the political spectrum. Advocates of smaller government should embrace efforts to reduce government waste. Struggling families will no longer be denied the aid they are entitled to by unwarranted administrative hurdles. And American taxpayers will take comfort in the knowledge that their tax dollars are being spent to provide much-needed services, not to maintain a bloated and costly bureaucracy.

Improve the use of new technologies

Federal, state, and local governments should also work together to revamp antiquated social services information systems. Giving participants the option to complete application forms online would be less burdensome especially if computer access is available through public libraries, public schools, facilities at nonprofits, and other locations. It would save government the cost of processing forms by hand that could be automatically processed by a computer.

The governments should also work together to create a centralized “document commons” so that applicants for programs need to submit key documents—birth certificates and proof of citizenship—only once. Of course, there must be strict protocols to protect the privacy of such information.

Better information technology should also speed the application process. The 30-day deadlines that states have to process food stamp applications (a deadline they often do not meet, at least partly due to old information systems) should be reduced to five days. In some states, such as Oregon, applicants receive their benefit on the first day they apply; that should become the national standard.

Reform overly complicated bureaucracies

The sheer complexity of the federal nutrition safety net is another source of inefficiency. While the SNAP, School Meals, and WIC programs are the largest, they are only part of the 15 different federal nutrition assistance programs run by the USDA. And that universe does not even include senior nutrition programs run by the Department of Health and Human Services and the Emergency Food and Shelter Program run by the Department of Homeland Security. Maintaining so many programs wastes money on redundant staffing, paperwork, and other administrative costs—money that should be spent on nutrition assistance for the hungry and food insecure.

Perhaps the greatest problem with the current nutrition assistance safety net is that each program has different eligibility rules, different application forms and processes, and, quite often, different offices (sometimes across town or across the county from each other) to which people must physically travel to apply. Families must generally earn below 130 percent of the poverty line to receive SNAP benefits and free school meals, but they must earn below 185 percent of the poverty line to obtain WIC benefits and reduced-price school meals.

Similarly, some schools have school breakfast programs and others don't. Whether kids are eligible for free after-school snacks or free summer meals can depend either on their family's income or on the income of the people in the neighborhood in which they live. Baffling, right?

This tangled web of requirements is why hungry Americans are so confused about *how* to get help and why they often are unable to get the vital assistance their families need. It is no wonder that about a third of families eligible for SNAP benefits do not receive them, and that nearly two-thirds of the children who receive school lunches do not receive school breakfasts.

This paper reiterates the importance of a previous proposal to combine all of the federal antihunger 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 \$33,873 would be eligible). My colleague, Thomas Freedman, suggests calling this new arrangement the “American Family Food, Opportunity, and Responsibility,” or AFFORD program. Doing What Works embraces that name because it is emblematic of the reforms recommended in this paper.

Many more low-income Americans would be eligible for this new initiative than the existing, separate programs. The simplest approach would enable eligible families who successfully file with the Internal Revenue Service for Earned Income Tax Credits to also automatically receive AFFORD benefits if they check a box on the form electing to do so, thereby eliminating the need for most of the application bureaucracy.

Not only would this program be far easier for low-income families to access, but it would also be far easier for the federal, state, and local governments to administer. 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 currently do. AFFORD benefits could be used for hot and prepared foods, as well as at farmers' markets, community-supported agriculture 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) would expand coverage by tens of millions of people who are not now eligible for food stamps. This is especially important since fully 16 percent of the families in America with children who directly suffer from food insecurity earn between 130 percent and 185 percent of the poverty line, or between \$22,321 and \$31,764 annually for a family of three, making them ineligible in most states for SNAP-Food Stamp benefits.²¹ The revised benefit would significantly reduce hunger and would be such a large supplement to wages that it could also help the nation decrease the number of people living in poverty.

Yet even if President Obama and Congress chose to keep the various federal nutrition assistance programs legally and programmatically distinct, and even if they nevertheless agreed to allow eligible families to use one combined application (either in paper or online) to apply for all the benefits, they could still make it far easier for applicant families and achieve significant costs savings as well.

Conclusion

Large-scale reforms can be difficult. Some progressives might believe that the only major thing wrong with our existing nutrition assistance programs is that they are underfunded. That's fair enough. It is true that programs such as food stamps, the Women, Infants and Children Program, and school lunches have nearly wiped out large-scale starvation in America. This is a vital accomplishment that should not be understated, but if they were significantly expanded they could further decrease hunger. Yet certain reforms would lead to greater efficiency and even better results, including:

- Reducing unnecessary administrative burdens such as frequent visits to government offices or the completion of a mountain of paperwork in order to receive benefits
- Better utilizing technology to manage and process program applications
- Streamlining and consolidating the vast array of federal food programs
- Expanding eligibility to more families who are experiencing food insecurity

The best approach is forward thinking and takes the middle ground, achieving massive change through mainstream values and common-sense approaches. Federal policy should combine more resources with serious reform. This is the road to smarter government and an end to U.S. hunger and other forms of food insecurity.

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About the author

Joel Berg is a nationally recognized leader in the fields of hunger and food security, national and community service, and technical assistance provision to faith-based and community organizations. He is also author of the book, *All You Can Eat: How Hungry is America?* The book challenges the president and Congress to make hunger eradication a top priority—and offers them a simple and affordable plan to end it for good.

Since 2001, Berg has led the New York City Coalition Against Hunger, which represents the more than 1,200 nonprofit soup kitchens and food pantries in New York City and the more than 1.4 million low-income New Yorkers who are forced to use them. The coalition works to meet the immediate food needs of low-income New Yorkers and to enact innovative solutions to help them move “beyond the soup kitchen” to self-sufficiency.

Prior to his work with the coalition, Berg served for eight years in the Clinton administration in senior executive service positions at USDA. For two years, he worked as USDA coordinator of community food security, a new position in which he created and implemented the first-ever federal initiative to better enable faith-based and other nonprofit groups to fight hunger, bolster food security, and help low-income Americans move out of poverty.

He worked as USDA coordinator of food recovery and gleaning the previous two years, working with community groups to increase the amount of food recovered, gleaned, and distributed to hungry Americans. Also while at the USDA, he served as director of national service, director of public liaison, and as acting director of public affairs and press secretary. From 1989 to 1993, he served as a policy analyst for the Progressive Policy Institute and a domestic policy staff member for then President-elect Bill Clinton’s transition team.

Berg has published widely on the topics of hunger, national and community service, and grassroots community partnerships, including a recent white paper on food jobs for the Progressive Policy Institute.

A native of Rockland County, New York, and a 1986 graduate of Columbia University, Berg now resides in Brooklyn. He is the past winner of the U.S. Secretary of Agriculture’s Honor Award for Superior Service and the Congressional Hunger Center’s Mickey Leland National Hunger Fighter Award.

Acknowledgements

We would like to acknowledge the generous contributions made by the Walmart Foundation and the Rockefeller Foundation.

Some of the ideas in this paper originally appeared in a May 2006 Democratic Leadership Council report, “Ending U.S. Child Hunger by 2012. How America Can Break the Political Logjam,” by Joel Berg and Tom Freedman and in Joel Berg’s book *All You Can Eat: How Hungry is America?*, published in November of 2008 by Seven Stories Press.

Ms. Lori Azim, a volunteer for the New York City Coalition Against Hunger, helped with research and editing for the original draft of this paper.

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