

Fighting Poverty With Faith: Working Together to End Hunger

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Fighting Poverty with Faith (FPWF) is a multifaith movement with a singular goal: to reduce poverty in the United States by 50% before 2020. FPWF focuses attention on the root causes of poverty, the impact of poverty on society and the initiatives that will lift people out of poverty.

The 2011 theme, “Working Together to End Hunger,” is designed to increase awareness and urge action on poverty and hunger issues in the United States. Poverty is experienced daily by more than 46 million Americans. Yet, this startling statistic does not account for all of the people who, despite incomes above the poverty level, struggle each day to make ends meet, including providing sustenance for their families.

On behalf of persons of faith in New Jersey, we pledge to work together with the community and elected officials to reduce poverty and hunger. We will be the voice against social conditions that lead to widespread poverty, and call for clear and compassionate solutions. We “speak up for those who cannot speak for themselves, for the rights of all who are destitute . . . and . . . the rights of the needy.” [Proverbs 31:8-9.]

Thanksgiving, Christmas, Diwali, Ramadan and Hanukkah are special times of the year when our hearts open up to those who are less fortunate. We donate turkeys, donate all sorts of ethnic foods, volunteer in soup kitchens, and “adopt” families in need. Our charity assists the poor and, at the same time, gratifies the giver. In this time of economic turmoil and long term unemployment, people living in poverty need more than charity – they need justice. They need programs and policies that will “grow” them out of poverty, giving them security and hope.

“If there is a poor person among you, one of your brothers within any of your gates in the land the Lord your God is giving you, you must not be hardhearted or tightfisted toward your poor brother. Instead, you are to open your hand to him and freely loan him enough for whatever need he has.” [Deuteronomy 14:4-5, 7-8.] In order to make poverty our “number one” social and legislative priority, we call upon elected officials and community leaders to address the “need,” to take immediate action on a number of programs to address hunger insecurity in the state.

The School Breakfast Program provides free and reduced-price breakfasts for school children in need and is administered in schools that have 20% or more eligible students. In 2010, only 28% of all eligible state students participated in the program; 265,000 eligible children are not served. The Departments of Education and Agriculture should promote the Program’s availability through initiatives such as “Grab-N-Go Breakfast,” “Second Chance Breakfast” and “Breakfast in the Classroom.”

The Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), formerly food stamps, is the first line of defense against hunger. Funded through the Farm Bill, SNAP is currently the target of proposed cuts to the federal budget. Although New Jersey has taken steps to expand eligibility for SNAP and streamline the application process, only about 60% of those eligible for SNAP actually participate in the program.

New Jersey must publicize SNAP to maximize program utilization for the wider purchase of basic food staples. Increasing eligibility to 200% of the federal poverty level will ensure that struggling families and seniors get desperately needed food assistance. Additionally, because the food prices are rising, we urge Congress to increase the SNAP benefit which has long remained static.

The federal Farm Bill funds various grants to states for food and nutrition programs. We urge Congress not only to preserve – but to increase – allocations for SNAP, Emergency Food Assistance Program,

Commodities Supplemental Food Program, Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants and Children, and the National School Lunch Program.

True moral leadership is needed at this time nationally and in the state to assure that the most vulnerable among us are not crushed in the name of “fiscal restraint.” We must carry on the American tradition of “justice for all.” The faith community, standing united with those in poverty, urges strongly that we not become “tightfisted” and “hardhearted,” but generous and compassionate toward their basic needs.

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