

# Strengthen, Protect Anti-Hunger Programs

By Larry Sly

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As the House begins drafting its version of the 2012 Farm Bill, we hope members of Congress will remember that the health and well-being of millions of people who will be affected by any cuts to anti-hunger programs in the bill are more important than numbers on the balance sheet.

Our nation's economy is struggling to recover from the worst recession in decades, and families across America are still hurting.

Unemployment remains above 8 percent nationally and 11 percent in California. Many who were once comfortably middle class, or at least managing to get by, now have to turn to federal programs for help feeding their families.

At the Food Bank of Contra Costa and Solano, we see this firsthand every day, with one in six of our neighbors facing hunger. They include people like Francisco, who fell off an 18-foot ladder, leaving him disabled. Efforts to return to work only aggravated Francisco's injuries.

"I am disabled now two years," he says as he waits with about 500 others for a monthly food distribution at the American Legion building in Antioch.

While we feed 132,000 people every month, we could not meet the need without strong federal anti-hunger programs.

We strongly oppose any cuts to anti-hunger programs. With sustained high need for food assistance, food banks across the country are stretched thin, serving more people with less food. For example, food from the Emergency Food Assistance Program, or TEFAP, which provides 20 percent of the food distributed by Feeding America food banks, has declined by more than 30 percent since fiscal year 2010.

Our economy is slowly improving, but unemployment is projected to remain high for some time. There is a long path ahead until jobs and opportunities are restored. In the meantime, we need to make sure that vulnerable families, children and seniors have access to three square meals a day.

As important as charity is, it cannot meet the need alone and food banks like ours cannot fill the gap if SNAP (formerly known as Food Stamps) is cut. SNAP has responded quickly and effectively during the recession to help ensure that California families, children and seniors have enough to eat.

The average amount of time a participant spends on SNAP is only 10 months. Eighty-four percent of SNAP benefits go to households with a child, elderly person or disabled person.

Please ask Congress to oppose any proposals that would reduce funding or impose harmful policy changes to federal hunger-relief programs like SNAP. Investing in hunger relief makes sense fiscally.

Hunger increases health-care costs, lowers worker productivity, harms children's development and diminishes their educational performance. These are costs that we cannot afford.

We urge our nation's leaders to work together to strengthen and protect anti-hunger programs, such as SNAP and TEFAP, from budget cuts. Helping our neighbors in need is one of our most important national values and hunger shouldn't be a partisan issue.

The cuts to SNAP proposed by the House of Representatives would be devastating to charities such as the Food Bank of Contra Costa and Solano, and to the clients we serve.

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*The author is executive director of the Food Bank of Contra Costa and Solano, based in Concord.*