



December 31, 2009

The Honorable Barack Obama
The White House
1600 Pennsylvania Avenue, NW
Washington, DC 20500

Dear President Obama:

I was heartened to learn that you read ten letters a day from ordinary people, as part of your ongoing effort to keep in touch with the American people without having to go through the filters of the media or staff.

Since I am a grass-roots community organizer who deals daily with the problems of hunger, obesity, and poverty – and because I am writing to provide very concrete and realistic suggestions as to how to advance your goals of creating jobs and improving child nutrition – I do hope that you can personally read this letter.

My organization represents the approximately 1,200 soup kitchens and food pantries in New York City, most of which are faith-based, and the more than 1.3 million low-income New Yorkers forced to rely upon them for food and other services. I am writing to you on their behalf.

I have good news and bad news to report.

The good news is that, because of the massive anti-hunger spending in the ARRA, and because of the stellar anti-hunger leadership being provided by Secretary of Agriculture Tom Vilsack and Under Secretary of Agriculture Kevin Concannon, there is significantly less hunger and food insecurity in America today than there otherwise would have been.

For example, in New York City, as we have documented in our annual report on pantries and kitchens (enclosed), while the number of New Yorkers forced to use the city's kitchens and pantries soared by 21 percent in the last year, because federal anti-hunger spending through the economic recovery bill and the SNAP (formerly Food Stamp) program increased in the city 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 lacked enough food to meet the growing demand, that was a significant improvement over 2008, when fully 69 percent of the pantries and kitchens lacked sufficient food. While the economic downturn has created a hurricane of suffering for hungry New Yorkers, the good news is that the massive increase in federal funding has provided a food life-raft for struggling families.

We are extremely heartened that you have proposed in your budget an additional one billion dollars annually to expand and improve child nutrition benefits, and that Secretary Vilsack has taken steps to ease access to the SNAP program and has launched the innovative Know Your Farmer, Know Your Food initiative to improve connections between agricultural producers and consumers.

It is inspiring indeed that you have made the courageous pledge to end child hunger in America by 2015. It was particularly encouraging that, even after your Administration announced that the number of food insecure Americans had soared to 49 million, you reiterated your commitment to achieving that goal.

I also strongly support your efforts to increase significantly the number of Americans with affordable health care. In 2005, before the broader economic downturn, of the 25 million Americans forced to use food pantries and soup kitchens nationwide, only 11 percent reported that their health was “excellent,” compared to 16 percent who said their health was “poor” and 30 percent who said their health was only “fair.” Even though pantry and kitchen users are usually the “poorest of the poor” who should, theoretically, have access to Medicaid, 21 percent of all the adults who obtained 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. **There is no question that improving health care in America is one of the most important steps necessary to reduce hunger and poverty in the nation.**

You are absolutely correct in taking on a number of the nation’s pressing issues at once. As you have eloquently explained, you have no choice but to do so. Permit me to make another analogy as to why it is crucial for you to take on a few big issues at once: When a naval ship is hit during combat, and is both burning and taking on water, the captain of the ship directs part of the crew to put out the fire and another part of the crew to bail out the water. The captian does *not* choose between either just putting out the fire or just bailing the water, because if the captain only addressed one problem, the ship would still either burn or sink, and the whole crew would be doomed. The America you inherited was both sinking and burning. Thus it is ridiculous to suggest that you should have picked between creating jobs and reforming health care. As you have accurately stated, no job-creation strategy can succeed in the long-term as long as America is spending so much money, so ineffectively, on health care.

Thus, without your Administration’s helpful initiatives and leadership, America would be in far worse shape than it is today.

However, despite all the progress you have already made, unless your Administration takes even bolder and more comprehensive actions (personally led by you), not only will you be unable to achieve your goal of ending child hunger by 2015, but it is also likely that there will be more poverty and hunger in America at the end of your first term than the day you took office.

I am confident that you agree that, from a moral perspective, it is unacceptable to have such hunger in America, particularly given that, despite the economic downturn, the combined net worth of the 400 wealthiest Americans (371 of whom are billionaires) is now \$1.27 trillion.

Furthermore, it is economically counter-productive to have such high rates of food insecurity. Voluminous data proves that hungry children learn less effectively, hungry workers work less productively, and food insecurity (and the obesity that it often causes) costs the nation tens of billions of dollars annually in health care costs. It is no wonder that a 2007 study by the Harvard School of Public Health found that domestic hunger and food insecurity cost the American economy \$90 billion annually. Given the massive increase in food insecurity since then, the cost of domestic hunger to our economy now likely exceeds \$126 billion.

In contrast, I have calculated, using USDA data, that the cost of ending food insecurity for the 49 million American children, adults, and seniors who suffer from it would be an extra \$30 billion annually in additional food purchasing power for low-income Americans.

Doesn't it make common sense to ensure \$30 billion in increased food purchasing power (through both increased wages and a strengthened nutrition safety net) in order to wipe out a problem that costs the nation \$126 billion a year?

Here are my concrete, practical suggestions for achieving your goals of creating more jobs, slashing domestic hunger and food insecurity, battling obesity, and improving child nutrition:

1) Launch a Good Food, Good Jobs initiative, as detailed in the enclosed paper published by the Progressive Policy Institute. (The paper is also available at www.progressivefix.com.) Modeled after the "green jobs" concept, a "Good Food, Good Jobs" effort would create jobs through projects and businesses that bring healthier food to low-income areas. Food and job deserts could become new oases of economic recovery and healthy living. The federal initiative I am proposing should begin by increasing funding for food systems projects of proven effectiveness, such as community and rooftop gardens, urban farms, food co-ops, farm stands, community supported agriculture (CSA) projects, and farmers' markets. Other important policies should include: expanding community kitchens that combine rescuing excess food with training people for food-service jobs; helping new supermarkets locate in low-income areas and existing supermarkets thrive; and hiring unemployed youth to grow, market, sell, and deliver nutritious foods, while teaching them entrepreneurship skills. The initiative should also take bold new steps. It should provide wage and even commuting subsidies to help current U.S. residents find living-wage work at regional and local farms, reducing the impetus for growers to exploit immigrant farm laborers. Since there is far more profit in processing food than in growing it, the initiative should focus on supporting food businesses that add value year-round, such as neighborhood food processing plants; businesses that turn produce into ready-to-eat salads and sandwiches; healthy vending-machine companies; and affordable and nutritious restaurants and caterers. **While much of what I am proposing could be accomplished by your Administration within existing authorities and funding streams, the minimal additional funding I suggest could be easily included in the next jobs bill that moves through Congress.**

2) Hold the second-ever White House Summit on Hunger and Nutrition. President Nixon held one such summit in 1969, and it directly led to concrete government efforts that dramatically decreased hunger in America. Given the growing interest of religious conservatives in anti-poverty and anti-hunger work, the Summit would also give you a rare opportunity to bring together conservatives and progressives for common cause, thereby advancing your other goal of uniting the nation.

3) Empower Secretary Vilsack to improve the coordination of anti-hunger, food security, and anti-obesity efforts across federal departmental lines. As the Secretary aptly put it in an interview on domestic hunger he recently gave to CNN: “We need a comprehensive effort involving not just my department but lots of departments of government and state governments.” Here are some very specific ways other federal agencies could help:

- a) The Department of Health and Human Services could do more to incorporate proper nutrition into efforts to bolster preventive health care.
- b) The Department of Education should include in the list of items for which schools are held accountable the number and quality of school lunches, school breakfasts, summer meals, and after-school snacks served by the schools.
- c) The Departments of Interior and Veterans Affairs should make excess federal land available for community gardening and farming projects.
- d) The Small Business Administration should provide more targeted start-up assistance to food-related small businesses.

4) Propose \$4 billion more annually in your next budget for child nutrition improvements. The additional one billion dollars per year that you previously proposed was an excellent start, but given the massive spike in child hunger that you have acknowledged, much more funding is now needed.

5) Propose a very specific Child Nutrition Reauthorization Bill that directly moves the nation towards your goal of ending child hunger by 2015. While I fully agree with the general Administration strategy of empowering Congress to have a sense of ownership over vital legislation, history has once again proven that, in order to pass major legislation through Congress, the President must provide significant personal leadership. I suggest that the Administration’s child nutrition bill have the following elements:

- a) Set a goal of cutting food insecurity among U.S. children in half by 2013 and ending it by 2015.
- b) Provide the funding and the guidance necessary to enable most American elementary and secondary schools to provide every student with free school breakfasts (regardless of their family income) in the first-period classroom.
- c) Provide the funding to enable every school in America to provide free lunches to all their students, regardless of family income (by making school meals universal in this way, the country can decrease government expenditures on paperwork now used to make income eligibility determinations and instead use that money to improve the nutrition of children).
- d) Increase reimbursements to school districts that provide healthier foods, particularly for districts buying from local and regional farmers.
- e) Make the Women, Infants and Children (WIC) nutrition assistance program an entitlement available to any low-income parent or child who needs it – and fund nutritional improvements in the WIC food package.

- f) Increase reimbursements for both government and non-profit agencies that sponsor after-school and summer meals for children.
- g) Create the Beyond the Soup Kitchen Grants Program as proposed in the Anti-Hunger Empowerment Act of 2007 (HR206).
- h) Create a pilot program to reward states for reducing child hunger and food insecurity.

6) Encourage more Governors to join with USDA and the nonprofit group Share Our Strength to implement state plans to slash child hunger. Governors can make great progress in this regard by better utilizing existing federal nutrition assistance funding.

7) Launch a Communications Campaign: “We Made It on SNAP” – Partially because of stigma against participation, according to USDA, about one-third of the Americans eligible to receive SNAP benefits currently don’t receive them. Given that you are the first President in history to have lived in a family that received food stamp (now SNAP) benefits, you are uniquely positioned to lead an effort to dramatically reduce that stigma. I suggest that you invite to the White House prominent Americans (entertainers, sports stars, elected officials, Nobel Prize winners, etc.) who also grew up in families that needed food stamps, to stress how accepting help enables families to prosper in the long run. While there, they could also film a PSA with you on the theme “We Made It on SNAP.”

Taking all or some of these steps would go a long ways toward accomplishing your vital goals. If your staff would like to follow-up with me on any of these ideas, they should not hesitate to contact me at (212) 825-0028, ext. 204, or at jberg@nyccah.org.

From one community organizer to another, I urge you to keep up – and intensify – your historic movement for change and progress.

Sincerely,



Joel Berg
Executive Director
New York City Coalition Against Hunger

cc: Vice President Joe Biden
First Lady Michelle Obama
White House Chief of Staff Rahm Emanuel
Ms. Melody C. Barnes, Director, Domestic Policy Council
Secretary of Agriculture Tom Vilsack