

## **Thanksgiving: Another Day of Hunger for Some**

“Food insecurity” - that’s what it’s called in polite circles. President Obama didn’t try to dress it up when he bluntly said, “Hunger rose significantly last year.”

Today, millions of Americans will join family and friends to celebrate Thanksgiving. There will be many stories showing this holiday celebrated with an abundance of food. There won’t be many stories about the millions of Americans and thousands of New Yorkers who will spend this holiday hungry.

Recent figures from the U.S. Department of Agriculture put the number of Americans who live in households that lack consistent access to adequate food at 49 million, up from 36 million a year ago. In about 10 million of these households, many of them with children, family members will be forced to go hungry or scramble to find a soup kitchen providing a meal on our Thanksgiving holiday. Here in New York City, the number of people seeking emergency food assistance is up 20.9 percent over last year, according to a recent report by the New York City Coalition Against Hunger.

### **Food Stamp Increase**

The primary reason for the growth of hunger is the steep increase in the unemployment rate, now at 10.2 percent nationally. Rising food prices and the credit crunch have added to the problem. In response to this situation, the number of people using food stamps rose to 36 million, a 40 percent increase in the last two years. During this time, many cities and states have made it easier to apply for food stamps, but not New York City.

It is true that food stamp recipients in the city reached an all-time high of 1.6 million in October, a nearly 30 percent jump in one year. But all the reports indicate, including our own survey, that hundreds of thousands of New Yorkers who are eligible aren’t getting help. There seems to be two primary reasons.

Some don’t believe they are eligible for food stamps and others who apply are inappropriately turned down by the city. Both problems can be handled. Aggressive marketing by the city, nonprofits, and the business sector could help ensure that everyone knows how and where to qualify for food stamps. And the city has to stop restricting food stamp access to single adults who haven’t jumped through every hoop.

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### **Hunger in America is a disgrace**

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President Obama’s stimulus package extended food stamp benefits for able-bodied adults, but Mayor Bloomberg refuses to do so unless they are enrolled in the city’s Work Experience Program. As City Councilman Bill de Blasio, soon to be New York’s public advocate, said, “Instead of putting hungry New Yorkers on a path out of poverty, the city is placing them in unpaid jobs before they can receive federal food aid they would be entitled to anyway.”

The mayor believes that people should have to work for a living. But with six applicants for every job opening, that kind of thinking makes no sense. And it’s not a policy based on budgetary considerations.

Food stamps are an entirely federal entitlement. The only cost to the city is the administrative cost of the program.

### **Form of Stimulus**

In addition, food stamps are a form of stimulus, aiding the city's hard hit economy, especially small businesses. Food stamps are most often used at the neighborhood grocery or bodega to buy bread and milk. Some local grocery stores depend on food stamp purchases for their entire profit margin.

Some think food stamps are a form of welfare, but the program is actually a work support, allowing people to make ends meet and maintain their low-wage employment. In doing so, food stamps help people get off and stay off the welfare rolls.

In fact, this misguided policy is a holdover from the Giuliani administration's belief that all benefits create dependency and should be denied whenever possible. The racist undertones of this policy - given who is poor in New York City - are just too obvious to ignore. The Bloomberg administration has done much to heal the rifts along race and class lines, but it's time to break completely from this policy from the past.

### **Soup Kitchens Overwhelmed**

There may still be some people who refuse to believe that hunger exists in America. They should visit the city's food pantries and soup kitchens, which are being overwhelmed. They saw an increase of 15 percent - about 400,000 more visits by hungry New Yorkers - just during the third quarter of 2009 than during the same time period a year ago.

While we celebrate Thanksgiving, we should not forget that there are millions of people across the country - and in New York City - who scramble for food every day. Our public officials should be working to strengthen a social safety net that has become further weakened by the fallout from the latest economic recession.

The fact that hunger still exists in America is a disgrace.

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David R. Jones is president and CEO of the Community Service Society (CSS), the leading voice on behalf of low-income New Yorkers for over 160 years. The views expressed in this column are solely those of the writer. The Urban Agenda is available on CSS's website: [www.cssny.org](http://www.cssny.org).

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