



Getting to the Root of the Problem GRASSROOTS

The Newsletter of the Hunger Action Network of New York State February 2008

Faces of Hunger Action Network

Craig Murphey, Community Organizer for Cathedral Community Cares (CCC) and West Harlem Action Network Against Poverty (WHANP), was killed by a truck Oct. 18 while riding his bike in Williamsburg (Brooklyn). He was 26 years old. Craig was a remarkable person whom everyone in the hunger field knew and respected.

Craig started working at the Cathedral in Nov. 2003 as a VISTA volunteer for CCC. His task was to strengthen the work of the Upper West Side Colloquium

Against Poverty, which consisted of 5 EFPs in the Morningside Heights/West Harlem area. One of his projects was the West Harlem Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) Project.



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Spitzer's Budget: Health Reform, No Welfare Hike

Anti-poverty advocates are disappointed that Gov. Spitzer's proposed state budget not only fails to raise welfare benefits for the 18th year in a row, it doesn't even increase the Earned Income Disregard for welfare participants with paid employment.

Nor is there an increase in the annual funding for emergency food programs (HPNAP), though the Governor did include a big raise last year. The Governor's budget does however include funding to improve the school breakfast program

and promote increased purchasing of locally grown food such as fruits and vegetables. The Governor will reintroduce the Healthy Schools Act, which sets stronger nutritional standards for school meals while banning junk food. The bill came close to passage last year but was blocked by disputes related to funding and expansion of the existing school breakfast mandate.

There is also a new staff person for the Office of Community Gardens, as well

as funds for upstate food processing and farmland preservation.

Spitzer does propose a number of important health care reforms. He wants Medicaid payments to better reflect the actual cost of helping patients, while putting more resources into primary care, especially in underserved areas. The Governor wants the state to pick up the federal share (about \$20 million) of expanding Child Health Plus coverage to 400% of poverty; this was recently blocked by the Bush administration. He also proposes ending the practice of providing tax reductions to HMOs.

The various cuts in overall health care spending traditionally leads to major fights. However, the state may benefit from increased federal funds for Medicaid as part of the planned economic stimulus package.

The Governor failed to change the rules for the state's elderly pharmaceutical assistance program (EPIC) to allow New Yorkers with severe disabilities that receive SSI and meet the program's income requirements to participate. He

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Notes from the Executive Director..

2008 is a time of transition for Hunger Action.

We had been looking forward to a Governor who cared enough about poverty to finally raise welfare benefits after 18 years. Unfortunately, that was not the case with Governor Spitzer's budget. And while he argues that he faced a big deficit, it is always a difficult budget for the poor. The poor are always at the end of the line in terms of being helped.

The Governor acts like the \$4 billion plus state budget deficit is an act of God or an act of nature. Instead, it is a political decision that can be corrected by politicians. The large tax cuts for the rich given in the state budget over the last decade or so now costs the State more than \$15 billion annually. Going back to the state tax system of 30 years ago, adjusted for inflation, would give 95% of us a tax cut – while raising more than \$7 billion in additional funds.

There are some good things in the budget (see the front page article) but it is long past time to raise welfare benefits. We hope to convince the Governor to include a grant increase in the 21 day budget amendment due out in mid-February – especially since he supports raising pay for legislators and judges.

A big internal transition is the departure of **Bich Ha Pham** from Hunger Action after 11 years, the last five or so as Executive Director. We will still be working closely with Bich Ha in her new position with the Federation of Protestant Welfare Agencies but her leadership has been invaluable. Fortunately, **Deb Catozzi**, who worked for Hunger Action for 13 years in a variety of positions, including Associate Director, will be rejoining us in Albany. **Wendy Ramadar** will be our new policy person in the NYC office.

Unfortunately, as we went to press, we learned that **Nancy Newall**, one of our long time Board members from Poughkeepsie, had passed away. Nancy came to us from her work with the Rural Migrant Ministries. The chair of our membership committee, she was a co-founder of the Faith and Hunger Network and hosted a regional conference each year at her home Presbyterian Church in Wappinger Falls. She was active in the Dutchess Interfaith Council. Nancy had a zest for life and justice. At a time when her peers were settling into retirement, she decided to go to law school to sharpen her advocacy skills. And when we faced a long ride home after a Board meeting, Nancy was the one you wanted behind the wheel so you got back a lot faster.

On our front page, we profile **Craig Murphey**, who was tragically killed in a bike accident the day after he attended our 25th anniversary event in NYC.

I agreed to step back in as Executive Director because I believe we can finally win the struggle for a welfare grant hike and single payer universal health care. I hope you will join us in Albany on March 4 for our annual legislative action day. Speak truth to power.

In peace and hope

Mark



Grassroots is published four times a year by the Hunger Action Network of New York State.

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Living on a Welfare Grant for a Week

By Trudi Renwick,

My two teenage daughters and I tried to live on a Saratoga County welfare grant for a week. First, we need to begin with a huge disclaimer. If we really had to depend on welfare to live we would need to spend more than the entire monthly grant just on our mortgage payments (\$1,000 per month vs. the shelter allowance of \$316 and a total monthly grant of \$665).

On top of the mortgage payment, our monthly National Grid “budget plan” payment is \$300 while our Fuel for Heating Allowance (\$58) and Home Energy Allowances (\$53) combined are only \$111. We looked for apartments to rent in the classifieds but in the entire week found only one efficiency apartment within our shelter allowance budget.

But we said that we would look at non-shelter, non-food expenses just to focus attention on the basic grant that has not been increased for 18 years. My two daughters and I had \$46.20 to spend for the week. The basic grant for a three-person family is \$238 per month but families are expected to contribute \$38 of this towards their food budget — with food stamps covering the rest. That left us \$232 per month or \$46.20 for the week for the three of us. A single individual would get about half that amount — \$112 per month.

Just my daughter’s music lessons (piano @\$20.00 and bassoon @\$30.00 per week) exhausted our basic grant. I guess kids on welfare don’t get to study music. My daughter had her father write checks the night before we started to get her through the week so we will start by “cheating” and not counting her music lessons.

We decided to spend half our grant to be able to keep watching cable. My daughter was invited to the movies but we lucked out and found a free ticket. (Welfare family would not have had the money to buy the 10 tickets to get the freebie, but oh well!)

With \$20 left for the week after “paying” the cable bill, we had nothing left to cover our regular phone, Internet service or cell phones. That is when both my daughters decided they had learned enough from the experiment.

I quickly exhausted half of my \$20 with travel expenses to and from work. Saratoga County would give me 10 cents a mile for work-related transportation expenses if I live further than four miles from my workplace. I drive about 25 miles each way so that would give me an additional \$5.00 a day for gas but it costs me about \$7.00 a day so I need \$10 of the \$20 just to get to work. Good thing I have free parking at work.

That left me \$10 to cover laundry, toilet paper, toothpaste, deodorant and cleaning supplies. I cheated and depleted the stock we had on hand in order to use my \$10 to take my Girl Scout troop to an activity on Saturday (20 miles) and buy the Sunday newspaper. There was nothing left for a coffee, fast food, school supplies, class trips, or clothing.

Seems like every week we read about the “plight” of New York State judges who have not had a pay raise for almost nine years. I agree that they deserve a raise but let’s start with the neediest New Yorkers who have not had a basic grant increase for 18 years. It is time to raise the welfare grant.!!

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Welfare Hike, Single Payer Healthcare, Fair Taxes

More than 60 anti-poverty advocates gathered at the state Capitol the day before the Governor's formal State of the State address to urge him to take stronger action to confront the growing problems of poverty and hunger.

Raising the welfare grant, enacting a single-payer Medicare for All health care program, and making the wealthy pay their fair share of taxes were central messages in the annual People's State of the State rally.

Speakers included Marcia Pappas, President of the NYS National Organization for Women; Ron Deutsch, Director of New Yorkers for Fiscal Fairness; Dr. Richard Propp, Capital District Alliance for Universal Health Care; Mark Dunlea, Hunger Action Network; Matt Funicello, CEO, Rockhill Bakehouse; Linda O'Brien, President of the NYS Nurses Association; Bro. Nassir; and Michael Kings of Housing Works.

Lawmakers have not raised the state welfare grant for 18 years and its value has declined to less than half of the poverty level. Litigation over the inadequacy of the shelter allowance has been tied up in court for nearly two decades, even though the courts have ruled five times that the benefits are illegally low. Groups have been focusing on getting the Governor to include a hike in the welfare basic grant, which has stood at \$291 for a family of three since 1990.

"We applaud the efforts Governor Spitzer has made in increasing funding for emergency food programs and helping the working poor on issues such as food stamps. But welfare is our state's most basic safety net. NY is unique in having a state constitutional requirement to care for the needy. A generation of poor children has grown up since the

grant was last raised in 1990. The federal government is even giving us more than a billion dollars in surplus welfare funds that a lot of other states have used to raise the welfare grant. It is time for New York to act, starting with Governor Spitzer proposing a hike in his upcoming budget," stated Mark Dunlea, Executive Director of Hunger Action Network.

More than 2.6 million New Yorkers are living in poverty. One in five children (858,000) and one in ten families (575,000) had incomes below the official federal poverty thresholds in 2006. An estimated two million New Yorkers use emergency food programs.

"Women and children make up 80% of all people who are living in poverty. Without good health care and financial assistance, people who live in poverty are unable to make decisions that will increase their ability to lead productive and fruitful lives," added Marcia Pappas, President of NYS NOW.

The speakers urged Governor Spitzer to embrace a single payer health care system, which could save the state's taxpayers and consumers tens of billions annually while providing quality health care to all New Yorkers.

"Small business owners in New York want single payer health care for themselves and for their workers. Everyone I know who has researched this issue understands that single-payer is the way to go. It is far cheaper and much more efficient than the system of, so-called, privatized care we all currently suffer under. Single-payer results in universal coverage which every other industrialized nation already has," noted Matt Funicello, CEO of the Rock Hill Bakehouse



The groups have been supportive of Governor Spitzer's efforts to expand access to programs like Medicaid and Child Health Plus, and hope that the Governor will make proposals this year to increase state control over rate hikes by insurance companies; expand the bulk purchasing of prescription drugs; extend mental health parity rules to the state's own programs; ensure adequate staffing of nurses; and, take steps to increase utilization of primary care physicians.

"New York nurses pick up the pieces of our broken healthcare system every day. Our current non-system, controlled by for-profit, private healthcare insurers, has failed to prevent disease, promote healthy old age, or protect the future of our children," said Linda O'Brien, president of the New York State Nurses Association - the nation's oldest

Dr. Richard Propp, chair of the Capital District Alliance for Universal Healthcare, said. "We have women who have had to cancel their insurance because they could not afford \$500 monthly. Some get diagnosed with cancer. We are spending on average \$7000 for every NY state resident on healthcare, and yet on any given day 2.7 million are uninsured and many are underinsured. Why would anyone want a system like that?" asked Propp.

Budget ...from p. 1

does propose a new state prescription drug discount card program that will help the uninsured.

The Governor adopted a number of the revenue strategies promoted by human service groups such as increased savings from bulk purchasing of prescription drugs; recapturing the unclaimed deposits from the bottle bill (about \$160 million a year); and closing of corporate tax loopholes.

“For the poorest of the poor, the good news is largely that there is not bad news like we saw annually with Governor Pataki. And Spitzer does make a number of good investments in areas such as housing, and increasing the child support pass through for welfare participants from \$50 to \$100 a month. But overall this budget fails to make the investments needed to begin to overcome two decades of neglect of poor New Yorkers,” noted Mark Dunlea, Executive Director of Hunger Action Network.

Hunger Action supports the \$400 million Housing Opportunity Fund to develop affordable, supportive (e.g., for the disabled) and workforce housing. At the moment, this is only a one year program, with \$300 million to come from selling the Jacobs Convention Center in NYC.

The ES2 campaign has been calling for commitment of \$13 billion over the next ten years to create and preserve 220,000 units of affordable housing paid for though \$9 billion in capital and expense funding and \$4 billion through dedication of 75% of the NYS Housing Finance Agency bond insurances.

Hunger Action also raised concern that the Governor is seeking to raise by 2% the contributions that counties and NYC pay for the TANF (from 25%) and Safety Net (now 50%) programs.

“New York is unusual in that it requires local counties to pay part of the cost of welfare. This provides a financial incentive for district to deny services, a problem that seems to be increasing. Changing the contribution formula is likely to make the situation worse, with more poor families unable to access needed services,” added Dunlea.

Hunger Action and other human service groups have also been pushing for reforms in how the TANF surplus is spent. Due to the changes in federal welfare in 1996, NY now receives about a billion dollars more in funds than they provide in benefits. Rather than being used to raise benefits as other states have done, NY has used the funds for programs that normally would come out of the general budget.

One concern is the \$800 million spent from the TANF program to fund the Earned Income Tax Credit. While a great program, tax credits should be funded out of general revenues. Spitzer actually wants to increase TANF funds for EITC by \$100 million. Groups are also concerned that Spitzer wants to increase the size of the Flexible Family Fund given to the counties to spend as they see fit to \$1 billion, including rolling \$370 million of formerly targeted child care funds into this.

Several of the welfare reform initiatives proposed by the Governor will primarily be paid by the federal government (e.g., child support pass through) or will primarily help public housing authorities rather than recipients. Thus there is very little additional state dollars going to directly help welfare participants.

Advocates are pleased that the Spitzer administration is discontinuing the effort started during the Pataki era to reduce welfare benefits for households with SSI recipients.

Faces...from 1

Craig knew that his job was not to tell people what to do, but to listen and connect folks, pull resources together and make things happen.

Each week Craig also sent out the “Feed the Solution” newsletter about was going on with social policy issues on hunger and the advocacy work needed for systemic change. He participated in lobby days in Albany and DC. He testified about his own experience with the Food Stamp program in front of the City Council’s welfare committee.

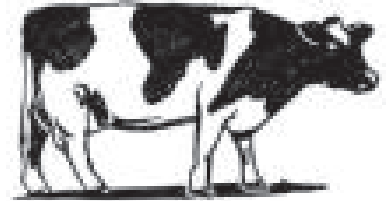
He worked tirelessly to make sure that these small emergency food programs had the tools necessary to do their job as best as possible. This included sending out pleas on “Craigslist” for things like computers, volunteers and materials.

He served as a mentor to many VISTA volunteers at the NYC Coalition Against Hunger. He always took the time to explain to them the projects he was working on and how they could create similar opportunities for others. In his free time he even started a volunteer service to make sure that someone was available to walk women home late at night in his neighborhood.

Craig Murphey’s inspiring personality did not stop with his life. More than a hundred people lit candles and walked in silence along Union Ave. to remember Craig and commemorate his tragic death.

What happened was a tragedy—senseless and unfair. But let us realize how precious life is, and be inspired by Craig’s story to do better in our own lives. Simply by respecting others, always putting a positive spin on things and trying to be a good person, Craig was able to move hundreds of people. **(partially from a letter by Raquel Granda)**

Hunger Action Network Green Space



EFPs Praise the “Local Produce Link” Program

Last harvest season seven members of a network of Emergency Food Providers (EFPs) in West Harlem participated in the West Harlem CSA (Community Supported Agriculture). They were able to receive these vegetables free of charge using grant funding from the state HPNAP program through United Way NYC.

Once a week, Cascade Farm from Patterson NY delivered a load of fresh, organic, produce to the Cathedral St. John the Divine (W 110th St. and Amsterdam). Each EFP came to pick up their “institutional share”. United Way also provided cooking demonstrations for how to prepare and cook the seasonal vegetables they received as well as nutritional info for the vegetables. Once termed a hub and spoke model (the Cathedral being the hub and each EFP is a spoke), this food program model has been renamed “Local Produce Link”

The United Way of NYC recently held an evaluation meeting for the network of soup kitchens and food pantries involved. The results were extraordinarily positive. All of the programs said they enjoyed the program and wanted to participate in the program again. One program coordinator commented: “Absolutely, we are so sad it’s over!”

100% of the programs would recommend this program to other Emergency Food Programs as a means of getting

farm fresh produce: “Absolutely. It’s an amazing program and FREE!!!!”

When asked what was the most memorable aspect of the CSA program coordinators said: “Enthusiasm of clients for the fresh produce, and cooking demonstrations” Another added, “The excitement in the client’s eyes as they saw the beautiful bounty arrive each week and the sharing of recipes and the tips it generated”

Members said that they enjoyed having the variety of vegetables and the opportunity to cook different vegetables every week.

Clients were often surprised by how much they liked certain items like beets they had never tried or thought they disliked. The produce allowed the food programs to diversify their menus and veer from the regular regimen of canned and processed food - which is often saturated with sodium and preservatives – or the rotten, inedible produce they receive from unreliable donors.

Before reaching a kitchen table, the vegetables may have been shipped across the country and traveled into and out of supermarkets, leaving the clients of emergency food programs with old, poor-quality vegetables.

When asked to compare the CSA produce to the other produce they received program wide the majority of food pro-



grams rated the produce as being of “much better” quality: “You can not beat the taste and freshness of CSA produce, as well being organic is a huge plus.”

This was the pilot year for the West Harlem CSA Local Produce Link Program. As members of the West Harlem CSA, EFPs received an average of 44 pounds of farm fresh food each week. The West Harlem EFPs only complaint they had was that they wished there was more food.

Next year United Way of NYC has agreed to increase their HPNAP funding and each of the programs involved in the West Harlem CSA will receive 100 pounds of fresh produce per week. Also next year Hunger Action will assist in the development of new Local Produce Link program in Long Island City Queens.

For more information on Local Produce Link programs, contact Hunger Action Network, 212-741-8192 Ext 4#, or info@hungeractionnys.org or contact Just Food in NYC (www.justfood.org)

Bread Update on Farm Bill

In mid-December the Senate passed its version of the farm bill. This legislation must now be reconciled with the House version through a conference and is likely to come up for a vote in February.

The Senate version and the one that passed the House in July each contain important new investments in the Food Stamp Program and TEFAP. These include: increasing and then indexing both the Food Stamp Program \$10 minimum monthly benefit and the standard deductions for households of three or fewer; lifting the cap on the child care deduction; raising food stamp household asset limits and then indexing them; and boosting TEFAP commodities purchases.

Bread for the World will continue to campaign for reform as the House, Senate and administration negotiate the final version of the farm bill next year.

Bread for the World and many religious bodies joined forces with environmental and taxpayer groups to campaign for reform of the farm bill. We have shaken up traditional farm bill politics and made the House and Senate farm bills better than they would have otherwise been. About 300 newspapers have editorialized in favor of reform, and surveys show that most voters now understand that there are serious abuses in the farm bill.

Unfortunately the Senate bill: fails to make farm support programs fairer; proposes increases in trade-distorting commodity programs.

These programs have a negative impact on prices and earning opportunities for poor farmers in the developing world. Savings from much-needed reforms to these programs could be better used to

fund nutrition and conservation programs and help U.S. farm and rural families of modest means.

A majority of senators voted for two reform amendments – no more than \$250,000 in annual payments per household and no subsidies to households with incomes above \$750,000. But the Senate's leadership caved to a filibuster threat from Sen. Blanche Lincoln (D-Ark.), whose family received big farm subsidy payments worth \$715,000 between 1995 and 2005.

Because Senate Democratic leaders did not want to be blamed for further delay of the farm bill, they changed the rules to require 60 votes for passage of those three amendments, rather than a simple majority. The Dorgan-Grassley and Klobuchar amendments received the support of a majority of the senators voting, but they were defeated as they fell short of the manufactured 60-vote requirement.

The best feature of the Senate bill is an increase in food assistance to hungry families, but unfortunately this increase would expire in 2012. This budget gimmick represents a false promise to millions of families who struggle to put food on the table. On the positive side, the Senate bill includes the Hunger-Free Communities Act, which requires the next administration to develop a plan for cutting U.S. hunger and strengthen community anti-hunger coalitions across the nation.

The House of Representatives passed its farm bill in July. The House also failed to curtail subsidies and raised support levels for certain crops, though it did not increase them as substantially as the Senate did. On a positive note,

the House bill increased funding for: domestic food assistance; school meals in developing countries; and assistance to minority farmers.

The House and Senate bills do include good things for hungry people, the environment, rural communities and minority farmers, but the funding for these improvements is not secure. Congress should finance the improvements by capping subsidies to affluent farmers.

BFW 2008 Agenda

Bread for the World's 2008 Offering of Letters is pushing for more and better poverty-focused development assistance—funding for programs in the U.S. budget that give people in poor countries the skills and opportunities to break the cycle of poverty permanently. These include long-term investments in things like education, agriculture, nutrition, health and clean water.

The United States should provide more of this kind of assistance because we are not on track to meet the goals and fulfill the promises our country has made in recent years. And we must improve the way U.S. assistance is packaged and delivered so that it reaches those in greatest need with the maximum impact.

More and better poverty-focused development assistance is a critical component of the effort to meet the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs). The MDGs are a set of eight achievable objectives adopted by the nations of the world in 2000 to improve the quality of life of hundreds of millions of poor people around the world. All nations promised to fulfill these goals by 2015.

Can Incrementalism Be the Path to Universal HealthCare?

The Spitzer administration, along with many health care reformers, argue that the best way to universal health care is a series of incremental steps that build upon existing programs to bring targeted populations of the uninsured into the “health care” system.

Yet no evidence has been provided to show that an incremental approach can achieve universal health care. The experience in states that have tried a variety of “incremental approaches” objectively shows the opposite, with such efforts falling apart often in only a few years.

The media coverage over the new “universal” health care system in Massachusetts failed to mention similar pronouncements from Gov. Dukakis two decades previously that fell apart in a few years. Maine’s patchwork approach to universal health care - the Dirigo plan - is not working. Nor have the plans in Vermont, Minnesota, Washington and Oregon. Tennessee’s noteworthy TennCare program to help the poor and uninsured is in the process of being dismantled. NY has added targeted programs such as Child Health Plus and Family Health Plus yet more than 5 million New Yorkers annually lack health insurance.

In contrast, the experiences in the rest of the industrial world provide ample evidence that a comprehensive approach to universal health care will succeed. Not only do the other major industrial countries spend far less on health care than we do, they cover everyone with better health outcomes, even though we have among the best medical professionals, infrastructure and equipment in the world.

Incremental approaches evade the fundamental problems that are causing the ongoing crisis in our health care system. Real change requires addressing the

entire structure of financing — in which employer-based private health insurance dominates. Without facing this, the problem of costs cannot be solved. As Gov. Spitzer has pointed out, NY’s system of health care financing is often not directly tied to the services being provided, its complexity and irrationality a result of the backroom deal making at the State Capitol.

Incremental approaches have done little to nothing to control costs, while adding more people to the system, thus causing more financial strain on both the government and private sectors, especially in bad economic times. The various stakeholders such as hospitals and insurance companies often extract more resources via the political negotiations.

Costs increase over time as health care costs in general continue to rise above the rate of inflation and more people utilize the new programs. Thus states find that they simply cannot afford incremental improvement. They end up pushing the costs of the health crisis problem back onto individuals by raising premiums, co-pays and deductibles, through roadblocks to limit participation and by whittling away at health services.

The shortfalls of incrementalism would be more apparent if there was a more accurate acknowledgement of the extent of the problem. The number of “uninsured” is generally understated. The statistics cited are normally limited only to that one day, rather than looking at a more representative period of time such as a year. For instance, while the number of uninsured is usually cited as over 47 million, that number balloons to well over 80 million during any one year.

Then there is the problem of people who have inadequate insurance. A 2003 Commonwealth study estimated that 16 mil-

lion adults have inadequate insurance. Many people don’t realize they have inadequate insurance until they need it. Private insurance companies increase their profits when they deny services to those they insure.

Perhaps the most fundamental difference between the US and the rest of the industrial world is that we allow health care to be treated as a commodity to be bought and sold for a profit. The profit motive propels the US towards a “sick care” system, even though it is more expensive to cure people once they are ill. Incremental approaches fail to address these basic problems.

By definition, incremental approaches fall far short of universal coverage. Having everyone “in” one system provides a variety of ways to save costs (e.g., reduction in costs impacted by health care such as workers’ comp and automobile insurance). There are basic reforms such as computerized medical records that everyone agrees would lower costs. Yet in a fragmented, for profit system, individual “players” such as HMOs won’t make such common sense investments since the financial savings often will occur years after a patient leaves the HMO. In contrast, a true universal health care system will build in incentives to keep the population healthy.

Most experts who study health care admit that a single payer Medicare for all Style program does best at achieving the goals of providing quality, affordable health care to all. Single payer proposals, by eliminating the cost and bureaucracy of private health insurance, manage to bring everyone in while actually saving costs. Single payer has been rated best by every state that has studied the issue. Yet many elected officials and health care reformers contend that single payer is not politically feasible, largely

Incrementalism... continued

due to the opposition of special interests starting with the private health insurance companies that would no longer be needed. Many argue that the massive amounts of money spent by the insurance industry to defeat the Clinton health care plan in 1994, highlighted by their Harry and Louise ads, shows that they can't be defeated. This argument however ignores that Clinton explicitly rejected a single payer approach, deciding instead to try to buy the support of the various stakeholders by throwing money at them. The result was so complex and convoluted that many single payer advocates agreed that it should be defeated. The lesson arguably is not that a single payer proposal has no chance but rather that half-baked, flawed incremental approaches are doomed to failure.

A number of industrial countries do have multipayer systems. What they don't have is our system of private health insurance, where doctors are forced to navigate a maze of companies, many of them for profit, with their own rules and paperwork. As much as a third of every health care dollar touched by private insurance firms goes to pay for their existence, paperwork and profit. In America, we allow private health insurance to dictate much of the terms of the health care system. In all other industrial countries, if private insurance is allowed, it plays a minor supplemental role, operating under strict rules determined by the government, with no role for profit.

The chorus of calls for incremental reform has fallen badly out of tune with respect to what the people of New York want for their health care system. When Governor Spitzer weighs the evidence he will find that only a single payer system can provide affordable, comprehensive health care for all New Yorkers.

Working Families Food Stamps Reforms

In June of 2007, Eliot Spitzer announced the Working Families Food Stamp Initiative, which aims to bring benefits to 100,000 new households.

NYS' food stamp participation has gone up steadily in the past several years, but the participation of working households has remained stagnant at 21%, almost 10 percent under the national rate. New food stamp program improvements include a lift on the food stamp resource limits, which were previously \$3,000 in cash assets for elderly and disabled households and \$2,000 for all other.

Under this new reform, individuals and families can establish or maintain a savings while they work to escape poverty. Tom Hedderman, Food Stamp Bureau Chief noted "Clearly, the resource limit waiver will particularly benefit working families and seniors – the groups most likely to have a savings." Those that have worked their whole lives to establish a savings will not have worry about spending that savings on food expenses.

Another change to the program will take place this May, when 12 counties in NYS will be piloting an online application. This is the beginning of the rollout of a two year plan to eventually allow



households that qualify to bypass the office altogether.

In 1998 former Gov. Mario Cuomo's administration initiated a finger imaging requirement in a effort to prevent fraud and abuse. This measure instead has created a barrier to the participation of working people, and has proven largely ineffective in preventing fraud.

As of January 1st, under the Working Families Initiative, families with one adult working 30 hours per week, or those with two adults each working 20 hours per week will be exempt from the finger imaging requirement. This waiver only applies to upstate NY. NYC residents will still need to comply with the requirement. The Human Resources Administration plans to enroll 62,000 additional households to meet its portion of the 2 million enrollment target of the Spitzer administration.

Still, only a household that earns under 130 percent of the poverty line will be eligible for food stamps.

Contact Veda Myers, Hunger and Food Stamp Coordinator for more info.



Will Spitzer Embrace Dr. King's Message?

Ironically, the state budget is released the day after we observe Martin Luther King Jr. Day.

Elected officials spoke to the moral leadership provided by Dr. King. Most focused on Dr. King's role as a civil rights leader. Most however failed to acknowledge how Dr. King's message changed in the crucible of the struggle for equality. King became an outspoken critic on the war in Vietnam. And shortly before his assassination, he embraced the fight on poverty.

When he was killed in Memphis supporting the striking garbage workers, he was organizing a massive march in DC to launch a new campaign to end poverty.

If he was alive today, Dr. King would speak out against the failure to once again raise welfare benefits after 18 years of inaction. While he might be heartened by some of the efforts to improve health care, he would be concerned that the Governor still believes it will be a long road to universal health care. "Of all the forms of inequality, injustice in health care is the most shocking and inhumane," Dr. King wrote. And he would be very upset that our state spends more money to incarcerate its citizens, overwhelmingly people of color, than we do to provide a college education to our youth.

Shortly before he was murdered, Dr. King had come to the conclusion that a guaranteed annual income was needed as the prime step to end poverty in our country. Surprisingly, this was actually proposed a number of years later by President Nixon as a replacement for welfare, but it was rejected by Congress.

Instead, welfare benefits in New York now come to less than half of the federal poverty level. Almost a third of the

residents of upstate cities live in poverty. Four decades after King's murder, poverty still disproportionately impacts people of color.

Sadly, the war on welfare and the poor dramatically escalated in 1991 following the electoral success in the Louisiana gubernatorial primary of David Duke, the former KKK leader. Duke used welfare as a code word for race, even those most welfare participants nationally are white. Duke's impact unfortunately is enduring. Even New York Governor Mario Cuomo notably shifted to the right, dividing the poor into the deserving and undeserving. President Clinton in 1992 campaigned on the promise to end welfare as we know, and along with House Speaker Newt Gingrich, ended the entitlement status of the Aid to Dependent Children that was part of FDR's New Deal.

Its replacement, TANF (Temporary Assistance to Needy Families), "promoted work" but failed to create jobs and has lagged in providing child care, job training and education. New York has done particularly poorly, ranking almost at the bottom (47th) in the overall effectiveness of its welfare to work programs. As King noted, "New forms of work that enhance the social good will have to be devised for those for whom traditional jobs are not available."

The poor are virtually never discussed by our political leaders anymore. Even in the Democratic Party they have been eliminated as a core constituency. Poverty was not once mentioned in Governor Spitzer's recent State of the State Message. When the Governor does mention poverty, it is invariably limited to the working poor. The poorest of the poor are invisible. Yet as Dr. King noted, "no matter how dynamically the

economy develops and expands, it does not eliminate all poverty."

Here is what Dr. King wrote about poverty in his final book: "Up to recently we have proceeded from a premise that poverty is a consequence of multiple evils: lack of education restricting job opportunities; poor housing which stultified home life and suppressed initiative; fragile family relationships which distorted personality development. The logic of this approach suggested that each of these causes be attacked one by one. In combination these measures were intended to remove the causes of poverty.

"While none of these remedies in itself is unsound, all have a fatal disadvantage. The programs have never proceeded on a coordinated basis or at a similar rate of development... Each seeks to solve poverty by first solving something else.

"I am now convinced that the simplest approach will prove to be the most effective — the solution to poverty is to abolish it directly by a guaranteed income."

Our political leaders like to sanitize Dr. King, glossing over the challenge that he presented to the power structure not only in the name of racial equality but in economic justice and the concept of non-violence.

King stated that "The whirlwinds of revolt will continue to shake the foundations of our nation until the bright day of justice emerges." As King implored, "Let us be dissatisfied until from every city hall, justice will roll down like waters and righteousness like a mighty stream... I have a dream that one day this nation will rise up and live out the true meaning of its creed: "We hold these truths to be self-evident: that all men are created equal."

NY Needs Tax Fairness to Resolve Deficit

Over 100 community, religious, education, labor and human services organizations have called upon Gov. Spitzer and lawmakers to adopt a series of common sense “revenue” approaches to resolve the state’s \$4.4 billion budget deficit.

The Better Choice Budget Campaign urged the Governor and legislature to provide property tax relief by restoring revenue sharing with local governments, creating a property tax circuit breaker program to replace the ill conceived STAR rebate checks, and restoring progressivity to the personal income tax so we can ensure that the wealthiest NYs pay their fair share of state taxes.

The coalition released a 6-point platform that supported:

- **Closing loopholes** that allow large, profitable corporations to avoid paying their fair share of state taxes.
- **Stopping sweetheart deals** with high-priced consultants who are being overpaid to do jobs that state workers can do better and cheaper.
- **Lowering drug prices** for state and local governments by using New York’s purchasing power to get a fair deal from the drug companies.
- **Reforming economic development programs** by improving the effectiveness and accountability of Industrial Development Agencies (IDAs), the Brownfield Clean Up Program (BCP) and the Empire Zones program.
- **Enacting the Bigger, Better Bottle Bill** and making the beverage bottling industry return unclaimed bottle deposits.
- **Making NY’s tax system fairer** and more equitable by increasing the top marginal tax rates on the highest income households.

According to Mark Dunlea, executive Director of the Hunger Action, “All too often, state budget deficits have been balanced on the backs of the poor. At the same time, the state’s tax policies of the last three decades have provided major tax cuts for the wealthy while shifting more of the tax burden onto the regressive local sales and property tax.”

“It is unfair that while lawmakers refuse to invest in programs to help the poor they have created a tax system where the poorest NYers pay twice as much of their income in state and local taxes than the wealthy. The end result is that almost a third of the residents in our upstate cities live in poverty. It is time to stop using the mantra of no new taxes as a way to hide the fact that our state tax and budget policies help the rich at the expense of low and moderate income families.”

The Governor has appointed a commission to study whether or not to impose a cap on local property taxes. The Better Choice Budget campaign agrees with the need for relief but insists that any property tax reforms must be looked at in the context of the overall tax burden faced by NYers in different income brackets.

In 2003, the Legislature, over the veto of Governor Pataki, increased the top marginal rates on the personal income tax for wealthy filers for three years to help balance the budget during a period of large budget deficits. During those three years, New York saw a substantial increase in the number of high income taxpayers and in the amount of their income despite Governor Pataki’s claim that the temporary increases in the top PIT rates would have the opposite effect. These top rate increases have since been phased out.



“We must look at the overall tax burden in this state and realize that over the last two decades, as we have continually cut the top rate of the income tax, we have seen dramatic increases in property taxes across the state,” said Frank Mauro of the Fiscal Policy Institute.

“New York’s leaders could relieve the pressure on the property tax, increase funding for critical services, restore revenue sharing and make sure that working families are not shouldering the tax burden for the rich by restoring some of the personal income tax’s lost progressivity. We must start undoing the damage that has been done to the tax system over the last 20 years.”

The Campaign praised the actions by the Governor and the Legislature last year to close several major loopholes that allowed many multi-state companies to avoid paying their fair share of corporate.

Ron Deutsch of NYers for Fiscal Fairness noted, “There are still a number of corporate tax loopholes that need to be closed. And the Empire Zone and Industrial Development Agencies (IDA) programs, both of which were designed to use public monies to subsidize job creation, need to be reformed so that they deliver on their original promise. If not the Governor and Legislature should eliminate them.”

Tues. March 4 Legislative Action Day

Please join us on Tuesday, March 4th for our Legislative Education & Action Day in Albany.

Join us to fight for:

- Universal Health Care;
- Raising the Welfare Grant;
- Real Jobs for Low-Income NYers;
- Improving the Welfare Program; and,
- Tax reform.

We will also be urging the legislature to support funding for **emergency food** programs, affordable **housing, educa-**

tion and training opportunities, and affordable **childcare**.

We will meet at the Westminster Presbyterian Church, 82 Chestnut St., in Albany. At 9:30 is registration, from 10 to 11 is a briefing, lunch is at 11, and a rally at the Capitol at noon. We will meet with legislators from 1 to 4 PM.

We will have buses from NYC and hopefully Buffalo and Rochester. Call our offices to find out more info about buses and carpooling.

Our **Annual Feast for Famine** will take place once again at the Egg in the Empire State Plaza in Albany, on **Wed. May 14th** at 5:30.

Last year, more than 300 individuals had the opportunity to sample the wares of the more than 30 restaurants, coffee-houses and microbreweries. This year we will be adding some food products for our own new Hamilton Hill Food Processing project which will provide new markets for local farmers while helping with job creation and training..

HUNGER ACTION NETWORK OF NEW YORK STATE MEMBERSHIP AND DONATION COUPON

- Yes, I want to help end the root causes of hunger by becoming a member:
- \$30 Individual \$5(low/fixed income) \$35small organization
 \$60 mediumorganization \$120 large organization
- Here is my donation of _____ in support of the Winter Appeal.
- Please send me information about volunteer opportunities

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Phone (day) _____ (eve.) _____ (FAX) _____ (E-Mail) _____
Credit care info: MC VISA Card No. _____ Exp Date. _____
signature _____

Please make checks payable to and return to Hunger Action Network of NYS, 260 W. 36th St., #504, NY NY 10018

**Hunger Action Network
OF NEW YORK STATE**

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