



Getting to the Root of the Problem GRASSROOTS

The Newsletter of the Hunger Action Network of New York State

May 2007

Faces of Hunger Action Network

Mark Quandt & the Regional Food Bank of Northeastern New York.

The Food Bank was founded in 1982 by a group of food pantry coordinators and anti-hunger advocates. Originally, the Food Bank occupied space in a commercial warehouse and distributed 400,000 pounds of food in its first year. Today, it occupies its own 62,000 square foot warehouse and distributes nearly 50 times that amount of food, up to 20 million pounds each year.

The RFB collects donations of food from the food industry that is perfectly good to eat but cannot be sold (overproduced product, production flaws, close-to-code items, etc.), and distributes this food to over 1000 member organizations, including 350 food pantries, 75 soup kitchens, 55 homeless shelters, and hundreds of other programs such as

continued on p. 7



Assembly Pushes Welfare Grant Hike

New Social Services Committee Chair Speaks at Lobby Day

Several hundred low-income individuals and advocates rallied at the Capitol in March in favor of a hike in welfare benefits and universal health care. Both issues were included in the Assembly budget proposals, including a 10% increase in the welfare basic grant over a two year pe-

riod.

The event was sponsored by the Hunger Action Network of New York State and the Empire State Economic Security Campaign (ES2). Assemblymember Keith Wright, the new chair of the Social Services Committee, addressed the group for more than half an hour at Westminster Presbyterian Church.

While the final budget did include \$200,000 for a universal health care study (see related story), the welfare grant was rejected. However, we generated much needed momentum on this issue. We will now focus on convincing

Governor Spitzer to include it in next year's state budget. The groups had called for an increase in the Basic Grant of the Public Assistance grant from \$291 to \$435 for a family of 3 to reflect the increase in the cost of living since the last adjustment in 1990.

Advocates were also hoping to see increased funding for the Hunger Prevention and Nutrition Assistance Program and the establishment of a NYS Food Policy Council. While the legislature failed to allocate more funds for HPNAP, the \$5.15 million increase proposed by Gov. Spitzer was enacted. Commissioner Pat Hooker of the Department of Agriculture and Markets has told groups that the Governor will shortly make a proposal on the Food Council.

In response to the Assembly's welfare grant proposal, the Governor's office instead proposed improving the Earned Income Disregard (EID), since their focus presently is to "help those who are working". While it is a good proposal, it is a not a substitute for a grant hike.

continued on p. 7

In This Issue of Grassroots...

Ban Junk Food in Schools	3
Farm Bill: Hunger & Farmers	4
CSAs - Farm Fresh	6
Summer Food	7
Strengthen Food Stamps	8
NY Universal Health care	10
Feast for Famine May 23	12

Hunger Action Network of New York State
 275 State Street, Albany NY 12210 - (518) 434-7371; Fax 434-7390
 260 W. 36th St. # 504, NY NY 10018 - (212) 741-8192; Fax 741-7236
www.hungeractionnys.org - email info@hungeractionnys.org

Notes from the Executive Director..

In 2007, Hunger Action Network is observing its 25th anniversary. Celebrate of course is not the appropriate word, because we would have been dismayed if someone had suggested back in 1982 that we would still need emergency food programs 25 years later. Much of the demand for emergency food came after the initial budget cuts during the Reagan administration. We all thought we would soon be out of business once Congress realized the negative impact of what they had done.

Hunger Action has always pursued dual goals: to do what we can to feed hungry New Yorkers today, while working to eliminate the root causes of hunger and put EFPs out of business. Our motto has been: from charity to justice.

To feed people today, we have worked to increase state funding for emergency food programs (an annual increase of over \$25 million) and improve access to federal nutrition programs such as food stamps and school meals. We have embraced the community food security movement, helping to teach people to grow their own food and bringing Community Supported Agriculture to low-income communities. And we have worked for long-term solutions such as living wage jobs, access to education and training, and universal health care.

We hope that our 25th anniversary will be an opportunity to spur real change. With a new Governor, we want to put hunger back on the political agenda. Particularly in the world's richest country, hunger shouldn't be viewed as some unsolvable problem and EFPs shouldn't be viewed as permanent institutions. From Day 1, we have asked to speed up the issuance of expedited food stamps and re-establish the NYS Food Policy Council

Hunger in America is solely a political and economic problem; we have the ability to grow enough food to feed everyone. What we lack is the political will to address problems like inequality.

Hunger Action Network appreciates the work of the tens of thousands of New Yorkers who have worked to end hunger, from the volunteers at food pantries, to the community organizers in the streets, the folks who donate to keep our doors open, the many great people who have dedicated their lives as Board members, staff and guests of the anti-hunger groups, emergency food programs and service organizations.

We appreciate our many friends in the labor and faith movements. We express our gratitude to all our funders, starting with Robert Sterling Clark Foundation, Public Welfare Foundation and Presbyterian Hunger Program for well more than a decade of support. We express our admiration of the millions of NYers who have worked valiantly to support their families, friends and neighbors against often daunting odds, especially those who have been willing to stand out by speaking out.

End hunger now.

Bich Ha Pham, Executive Director



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

Bich Ha Pham
Executive Director

DOWNSTATE OFFICE

260 W.36th St. #504 NY NY 10018
(212) 741-8192
Fax (212) 741-7236

Susannah Pasquantonio
Downstate Community Food
Coordinator

Francisco Mercado
Hunger & Summer Food Program
Assistant

Veda Myers
Hunger & Food Stamp Assistant

Alexis Stevens
West Harlem CSA Coordinator

UPSTATE OFFICE

275 State Street
Albany NY 12210
(518) 434-7371/Fax (518) 434-7390

Mark Dunlea
Associate Director

Jessica Oppenheimer
Community Food and Garden
Coordinator

Rob Attardo
Public Policy Intern

Spitzer Joins Effort to Ban Junk Food in Schools

Momentum is growing to improve the nutritional quality of food in New York schools. Gov. Spitzer recently released a comprehensive Healthy Schools Act that would expand on two prior Hunger Action victories: extending the junk food ban and expanding the school breakfast mandate.

A strong junk food bill (A7086 / S4169) for schools has been in the legislature the last two years, sponsored by As. Sandy Galef and Sen. LaValle.

“In the State of New York, childhood obesity has reached crisis levels,” said Governor Spitzer. “This legislation is an important step in the fight against childhood obesity,” added Lieutenant Governor Paterson. “Because of the amount of time that our kids spend in school, promoting balanced nutrition, physical activity and overall healthy lifestyles during the school day is a clear sign that the State of New York is committed to improving children’s health.”

The Healthy Schools Act will include the following provisions:

The bill would require school breakfast program for middle schools and high schools if such districts already participate in a school lunch program. This is already the case for elementary schools and for low-income middle and high schools.

While the State is limited in its ability to impose restrictions on school meals that are reimbursable by the federal government, this bill will provide that such meals must be trans-fat free and must meet limits on sodium and cholesterol. For entrees sold separately from the reim-



bursable school meals, the bill will set standards for fat, sugar and sodium.

Aside from meals, during the school day, students will be allowed to purchase only fruits, vegetables, whole grains, and low-fat or non-fat dairy items. After the school day ends, high school students can purchase additional snack items that meet particular limits for fat, sugar and sodium.

The bill will limit the types of beverages that may be sold in schools to water, 100% fruit or vegetable juice, low-fat or non-fat regular or flavored milk.

The bill will also improve the school environment in ways that encourage healthy eating behaviors and physical activity by:

Requiring schools to provide students with a minimum of twenty minutes to eat breakfast and thirty minutes to eat lunch; and,

Requiring schools to provide students in eighth grade and under a recess period involving physical activity of up to 30 consecutive minutes on each day when there is no physical education class.

Board of Directors

Nancy Delahunt

William DiFazio
St. Johns University, NYC

Rev. Ozzie Edwards
Harlem Community Employment Orientation Program

Ed Fowler
Neighbors Together, Brooklyn

Dennis Hanratty
Mount Vernon United Tenants, Westchester

Nancy Newall
Dutchess Interfaith Coalition

Bill Peltz
NYS Labor/Religion Coalition

Brian Riddell
Dutchess Outreach, Poughkeepsie

Janet Robinson
Westchester DSS Coalition

Robert Schwartz
Interfaith Voices Against Hunger

Terri Scofield
Universal Living Wage Campaign

Inez Sieben
Skill Center NY

Heidi Siegfried
National Organization for Women, Albany Chapter

David Van Arsdale
SUNY Tompkins Cortland Comm. College

Bread for World: Farm Bill Must End Hunger, Help Family Farmers and End Rural Poverty

(The Farm Bill is up for reauthorization this year in Congress. It helps farmers while funding federal nutrition programs like food stamps.)

A Changing Rural Landscape—And Persistent Poverty

The picture of poverty is grim in rural America. The poverty rate in rural areas is 14 percent—2 percent higher than in urban areas. The number is even higher for child poverty: 20 percent, compared to 17 percent in urban areas. Nearly 400 counties across the United States have experienced poverty rates of more than 20 percent for the past 30 years. Nine out of 10 of these “persistent poverty” counties are rural. Unemployment rates are higher too, and rural America has higher concentrations of substandard housing.

The landscape of rural America is quite different now than during the 1930s, when direct government support for farmers began, yet the farm bill has not kept pace with changing times. Less than 2 percent of the U.S. population is currently engaged in farming, compared to 21 percent in the 1930s.

Today the vast majority of rural residents work in non-farm jobs, such as retail service or factory work. Many farmers, in fact, take second jobs off the farm. Roughly the same amount of farmland is being used, but the farms themselves have grown larger, more specialized and more corporate.

What the Farm Bill Does

The farm bill principally tries to help U.S. farmers. But over time it has become less and less successful at doing so. The



farm bill includes commodity payments, which are cash payments made to farmers growing mostly five crops—corn, wheat, cotton, rice and soybeans. Commodity payments are supposed to protect farmers from low prices by making up the difference between a target price and the actual market price.

In reality, commodity payments are not effective risk management tools for farmers. Commodity payments have shifted dramatically to the very largest farms, which often are the wealthiest farmers. Farmers who need payments the least are receiving the most, and two-thirds of farmers receive no payments.

The portion of the current farm bill devoted specifically to rural development is very small. This is out of balance with the needs of rural America. Some 50 million Americans live in rural communities; only 3 million are farmers. As the main source of federal support for rural America, the farm bill needs to reflect the fact that increasingly the non-farm economy sustains these communities.

In recent years, U.S. farm policy has also become unintentionally devastating for small-holder farmers in the developing world. Because the commodity payment system encourages U.S. farmers to concentrate on the five crops, world markets are being flooded with these

crops, which are sold at prices lower than what it costs to produce them.

For example, in spite of their much lower production costs, cotton farmers in countries like Senegal, Burkina Faso, Chad and Mali cannot survive when world prices are so low. U.S. cotton commodity payments are partly to blame. For these African nations, where 10 million people who earn roughly \$1 to \$2 a day depend directly on cotton, U.S. farm programs shatter hopes of reducing hunger and poverty.

The farm bill is also a primary tool for reducing hunger in the United States. The Food Stamp Program, a major component in the farm bill, is our nation's first line of defense against hunger. The Food Stamp Program served an average of 26 million people per month in 2005. It should be strengthened to provide a nutritious and sufficient diet for hungry people.

How to Improve the Farm Bill

The US needs a broader, more equitable safety net that works better for small and moderate-sized farms. U.S. farmers who want to grow barley, broccoli, pears or pecans, for example, should have the same safety net as those who grow the five program crops the current farm bill now supports. Reforming the commodity payment program would also help small-holder farmers in poor countries get a higher price for their own crops and give them a better chance to escape hunger and poverty.

The bill should also promote conservation and improved land use. Strengthened policies can better reward good stewardship of working farms and

ranches, and protect environmentally fragile areas such as wetlands.

Rural development programs should seek to bolster economic development. With greater emphasis on this neglected area, the farm bill can help to generate new jobs and strengthen small businesses in rural communities by investing in rural infrastructure (such as better telecommunications systems and broadband Internet access), supporting rural entrepreneurs, and promoting local initiatives to revitalize rural towns.

An increase in funding for the Food Stamp Program could enable the program to reach more people at risk of hunger. Food stamp outreach should also be improved to ensure that more of the eligible people receive the help they need.

A funding increase could also allow families who receive food stamp benefits to afford a more nutritious diet. 66 percent of Americans are considered overweight; nearly half of those are obese. Overweight and obesity affect all income groups but are most prevalent in low-income communities. ***That's because calories are cheap in the US—it's the nutrients that are expensive.*** The Food Stamp Program could provide incentives for purchase of fruits and vegetables that would also strengthen local and regional farm-to-market connections.

Emergency food assistance to countries suffering famine and humanitarian crises are also included in the farm bill. The bill should ensure ongoing and consistent U.S. assistance to people in need of emergency food and nutrition support around the world. It should also increase the efficiency of U.S. assistance by allowing some purchase of food in markets outside the United States and some flexibility in the transportation of food aid.

Food Stamp Diet Challenges

Over the past year, a number of local anti-hunger and poverty groups nationwide have sparked public awareness about the inadequacy of food stamp allotments by challenging their community leaders to try feeding themselves on those allotments for a few days, a week, or a month.

A “Dear Colleague” letter from Representatives James McGovern (D-MA) and Jo Ann Emerson (R-MO), 4/26/07, urged their colleagues to Live on a Food Stamp Budget for a Week.

“As Members of Congress, we don't have to rely on Food Stamps to feed our families. But that means it is difficult for many of us to imagine what it is like to experience true hunger or to rely on the Food Stamp Program. That is why we are asking you to join us and take the ‘Food Stamp Challenge.’”

“We believe we have a moral responsibility to end hunger in America, and our goal is to raise awareness of the difficulties facing food stamp recipients and demonstrate support for the Food Stamp Program's vital role in providing nutrition assistance to low-income families.”

NY anti-hunger advocates are asking state officials to participate. So far NYC Councilmember Eric Goia has agreed.

The Governor of Oregon was one of the officials who participated in the challenge. “If Gov. Ted Kulongoski seems a little sluggish this week, he's got an excuse: he couldn't afford coffee,” wrote

the Associated Press. “the Democratic governor couldn't afford much of anything during a trip to a Salem-area grocery store on Tuesday, where he had exactly \$21 to buy a week's worth of food—the same amount that the state's average food stamp recipient spends



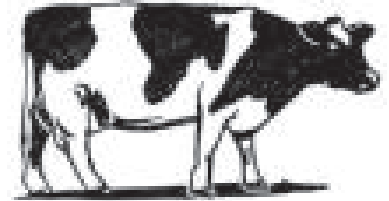
weekly on groceries. Accompanied by reporters and food stamp recipient Christina Sigman-Davenport, Kulongoski headed straight for a display of organic bananas, only to have Sigman-Davenport steer him toward the cheaper non-organic variety.”

Along the way, Sigman-Davenport, a mother of three who works for the state Department of Human Services and went on food stamps in the fall after her husband lost his job, dispensed tips for shopping on a budget.

Scan the highest and lowest shelves, she told the governor. Look for off-brand products, clip coupons religiously, get used to filling, low-cost staples like macaroni and cheese and beans, and, when possible, buy in bulk”.

(see related story on p. 8)

Hunger Action Network Green Space



CSA - Farm Fresh Food at a Great Price!

Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) is a way for people to buy delicious affordable food directly from a local farmer. Each CSA is run differently, but membership is typically open to anyone. There are many wonderful CSAs located throughout New York State. Hunger Action and partners is organizing a new CSA in West Harlem and you are invited to join us!

You become a CSA member by purchasing a "share" of the farmer's harvest. Members receive a variety of locally grown vegetables each week during the harvest season. Some CSAs also provide fruit, meat, or other food items.

***CSA: Good for your
mind, your body,
your taste buds
and your wallet***

The West Harlem CSA is unique in that we are specifically recruiting low-income members, encouraging the use of Food Stamps, and providing CSA shares to several Emergency Food Programs in the area. We also organize cooking demonstrations, a farm trip, and provide a weekly newsletter with cooking and vegetable tips!

Why You Should Join the West Harlem CSA:

It's Healthy and Fresh: Unlike the vegetables you get at the grocery store, the

CSA produce is almost always picked the same day and delivered to West Harlem.

It's Affordable: When you buy a CSA share, you get quality vegetables for far less than you would spend at the grocery store. **Food Stamps accepted! *Scholarships available!*

It Supports a Local Farmer: Our food comes from Cascade Farm, a small local farm, whose produce is naturally grown without herbicides & pesticides. Local farms also benefit the entire region by providing local jobs.

It's Good for the Environment: A well managed farm helps protect our local water supply and preserves local soil for generations to come.

It's Good for the Community: CSA's give neighbors a chance to organize a project together. CSA opens the doors to all sorts of community improvements!

FACT: One fast food meal for a family of 3 is \$16.58, while \$13.50 pays for 3 family members to eat 7 meals of wholesome and fresh food

FACT: Increasing vegetable consumption by one serving per day decreases the risk of a variety of cancers by 30%

The West Harlem CSA is organized by a coalition including Hunger Action, Just Food, NYC Coalition Against Hunger, West Harlem Action Network Against

Poverty & also supported by United Way of NYC.

If you're interested in joining the West Harlem CSA, contact Alexis at 212-741-8192, ext. 4# or astevens@hungeractionnys.org. To find other CSAs in NYC, go to www.justfood.org or for outside NYC, go to www.locaharvest.org or www.csacenter.org.

MARK HAYES, 1958-2007

Mark served as the Housing Works State and Federal Issues Organizer since 1999— part community organizer, part advocate and activist, and part den mother. During his eight years at Housing Works, every day the State Legislature was in session, Mark led a team of Housing Works clients in legislative visits focusing on key HIV/AIDS policy, health care, disability and antipoverty issues. He often attended HANNYS events at the Capitol.

Mark was passionate about advocacy, not just about AIDS, but about injustices of all kinds. He fought particularly hard to get legislation passed in Albany to protect transgender people from discrimination. "Mark was a true AIDS warrior, and I will miss him very much, as will his many comrades," said Charles King, President of Housing Works. "He and I spent many hours in jail together, as he participated in almost every civil disobedience action we did."

Help Feed More Children this Summer

The Summer Food Service Program (SFSP) provides free nutritious meals to children 18 and younger during the summer months while school is out. The program is underutilized across the state and we need to reach more kids! Key reasons for low participation are a lack of groups to sponsor the program and provide a site and a lack of education about the program.

Summer meals are typically served by schools, camps, food programs, housing authorities, pools and parks, faith groups, and others who agree to be the local SFSP sponsor or site. Each SFSP spon-

sor receives reimbursement from the USDA for the meals that are served.

If your program serves children during the summer, you may be eligible to distribute meals to the kids. If you can't be a site, you can tell your community about the program.

The key reasons for low participation are that there are not enough program sponsors and sites and a lack of awareness about the program. With your support, we can reach more children!

For more info on being a site or outreach materials, contact Francisco at



Photo by Warren Bernz

fmercado@hungeractionnys.org or 212-741-8192, x 6#.

Queens Groups! Hunger Action is specifically working in the Long Island City, Astoria, Jackson Heights area to promote SFSP, so be sure to contact us if you're in the area.

Faces...from p. 1

low-income day-care, senior, and youth centers. The Regional Food Bank is a member of America's Second Harvest, and one of eight food banks in NYS.

"Unfortunately, the Food Bank sees the need for its services increase incrementally each year," said Mark Quandt, Executive Director. "A low-level retail job is enough to put someone into poverty, depending on family size," he said. "If the refrigerator breaks, they can't afford food," added Quandt, who has been with the Food Bank for nearly twenty-five years.

The Food Bank runs a number of programs intended to help the hungry people in the RFB's 23-county service area. The Moveable Feast program brings in donations of prepared and perishable foods from grocery stores and restaurants. This program provides 500,000 lbs of extra food yearly. The Extra Helpings program allows individuals to pay a relatively small amount of

money for a much greater value in extra food items.

The Regional Food Bank has also founded three Kids' Cafes in Albany, Troy, and Schenectady. These are special soup kitchens designed to serve needy children and to provide them with a safe place to gather.

The Food Bank also serves as a distributor of state HPNAP support for food pantries, soup kitchens, and shelters. It provides the HPNAP Food Grant to eligible programs, which covers the usual handling fee charged by the Food Bank, and also provides eligible agencies with Operations Support Project grants to cover other costs.

In a recent Hunger Study, 94% of the Food Bank's member agencies said elimination of the Food Bank would have a devastating or significant impact on their operations and their ability to feed those who turn to them for help. Quite simply, many people would go hungry if not for the Regional Food Bank.

In addition to distributing food to meet emergency needs, the Regional Food Bank works in partnership with HANNYS and other organizations to advocate for more just state and federal policies for low-income people. The Regional Food Bank is one of the founding members of HANNYS and is proud of the role HANNYS has played over the past 25 years in addressing the needs of the poor and hungry in New York State.

"Congratulations to HANNYS on its 25th Anniversary of fighting hunger in New York State. Thousands of people in New York State have been fed in their times of greatest need because of HANNYS' relentless advocacy over the past 25 years. Thank you, HANNYS, for your work on behalf of the poor and hungry," said Quandt.

The Food Bank provided the first home to Hunger Action when Mark Dunlea was hired as its initial staff person. Cathy Johnson, the Associate Director of the Food Bank, served as the Hunger Action Network Board chair at this time.

Grant ...from p. 1

We hope lawmakers will agree this year to repeal the provision that ties the EID to 185% of the Standard of Need (SON). In agreeing to HANNYS proposal to raise the EID, Gov. Pataki had said that welfare participants should be able to earn their way to poverty before they lost all welfare benefits. Unfortunately, this is no longer true since the SON has not been adjusted for inflation.

In addition, NY should strengthen incentives for welfare participants who work by increasing the Earned Income Disregard (EID) up to the federal poverty level; 50% of income should be disregarded until families reach 135% of the federal poverty guidelines. To help New York meet the increased federal work

participation requirements for welfare, we should establish a wage supplement program for low-income workers and/or a state funded food stamp supplement for working families.

While much has been written about the decline in welfare caseloads in New York State, there has been no concurrent decline in poverty. As a result, New York's cash assistance programs now provide support to a much smaller percentage of poor families than before welfare reform.

Yet there are three groups of New Yorkers who continue to rely on the state to provide income security: low-income workers and their families, public assistance recipients who have not been able

to find or keep a job and those who are unable to work.

The problem is magnified by the fact that the non-rent portion of the public assistance grant has not been increased in more than 16 years, during which time the cost of living has increased by nearly 60%. There is a desperate need to provide enhanced resources to enable poor families to survive.

The groups are also seeking to improve the performance of the state's welfare to work programs to better move people out of poverty. They are seeking expansion of the education and training programs targeted to welfare participants and the unemployed, as well as better screening of welfare applicants for disabilities and other barriers.

Strengthen Food Stamps

Northeast Regional Anti-Hunger Network (NERAHN) recommendations on Food Stamp Reauthorization. (see also pp. 4-5)

Hunger remains a serious problem in our country. USDA estimates that in 2004, 38 million Americans, including almost 14 million children, did not have access to enough food to meet their basic needs. The Food Stamp Program remains our nation's best response to hunger.

Below are some of the key improvements supported by the Northeast Regional Anti-Hunger Network for food stamp reauthorization as part of the Farm Bill.

Improve Benefits. The Food Stamp Program should ensure that low-income individuals can purchase the food they need to stay healthy. The Thrifty Food Plan should be replaced with USDA's Moderate or Low Cost Plan which bet-

ter reflect current market basket values and enable recipients to meet USDA's nutritional standards. Restore eligibility to documented immigrants. Remove the 5 year waiting period for otherwise qualified individuals. Raise the minimum benefit level and index it to inflation. Increase the current \$10 minimum to \$40.

Increase the asset limit and simplify asset tests. Institute a \$5000 resource limit for all households, and exempt all retirement accounts, education savings accounts and Earned Income Tax Credits. Remove the excess shelter cap. Allow households who spend more than half of their income to pay for housing and utilities to deduct the full amount of these excess shelter costs from their income.

Extend transitional benefits eligibility. Currently, households leaving TANF receive transitional food stamps for only 5 months. Remove Barriers to Access.

No other federal nutrition program requires as much documentation and reporting as the Food Stamp Program.

Simplify the application process and streamline documentation requirements, including: Provide for demonstration pilots; make sure every state has a Combined Application Project to increase food stamp enrollment of elderly and disabled SSI recipients; allow states to use a standard medical deduction for elderly and disabled households; and, eliminate the interview requirement at recertification.

Eliminate special rules for: non-citizens (eliminate sponsor deeming & liability); able-bodied adults without dependents (ABAWDs) and those who have been convicted of a drug-related felony. Create additional federal support for outreach. Continue performance bonus awards to states achieving the greatest improvements in program access.

Cut Poverty in Half

Thirty-seven million Americans live below the official poverty line. Millions more struggle each month to pay for basic necessities, or run out of savings when they lose their jobs or face health emergencies. Poverty imposes enormous costs on society. Persistent childhood poverty is estimated to cost our nation \$500 billion each year, or about four percent of the nation's gross domestic product.

The Center for American Progress' Task Force on Poverty calls for a national goal of cutting poverty in half in the next 10 years

In the last six years, the number of poor Americans has grown by five million, while inequality has reached historic high levels. One in eight Americans now lives in poverty. A family of four is considered poor if the family's income is below \$19,971—a bar far below what most people believe a family needs to get by. 12.6 percent of all Americans were poor in 2005, and more than 90 million people (31 percent) had incomes below 200 percent of federal poverty thresholds.

Poverty in the United States is far higher than in many other developed nations. The US ranked 24th among 25 countries when measuring the share of the population below 50 percent of median income.

A strategy to cut poverty in half should be guided by four principles

Promote Decent Work. Work should pay enough to ensure that workers and their families can avoid poverty, meet basic needs, and save for the future.

Provide Opportunity for All.

Ensure Economic Security. Americans should not fall into poverty when

they cannot work or work is unavailable, unstable, or pays so little that they cannot make ends meet.

Help People Build Wealth. All Americans should have the opportunity to build assets that allow them to weather periods of flux and volatility, and to have the resources that may be essential to advancement and upward mobility.

Some of the 12 key steps recommended:

1. Raise and index the minimum wage to half the average hourly wage. At \$5.15, the federal minimum wage is at its lowest level in real terms since 1956. The federal minimum wage was once 50 percent of the average wage but is now 30 percent of that wage. Congress should restore the minimum wage to 50 percent of the average wage, about \$8.40 an hour in 2006.

2. Expand the Earned Income Tax Credit and Child Tax Credit. We recommend tripling the EITC for childless workers and expanding help to larger working families. Making the Child Tax Credit available to all low- and moderate-income families would move as many as 5 million people out of poverty.

3. Promote unionization by enacting the Employee Free Choice Act.

4. Guarantee child care assistance to low-income families and promote early education for all

5. Create 2 million new “opportunity” housing vouchers, and promote equitable development in and around central cities. Our nation should seek to end concentrated poverty and economic segregation, and promote regional equity and inner-city revitalization. We propose that over the next 10 years the federal government fund 2 million new “opportunity

vouchers” designed to help people live in opportunity-rich areas. Any new affordable housing should be in communities with employment opportunities and high-quality public services, or in gentrifying communities.

6. Ensure equity for low-wage workers in the Unemployment Insurance system. Only about 35 percent of the unemployed, and a smaller share of unemployed low-wage workers, receive unemployment insurance benefits.

7. Reduce the high costs of being poor and increase access to financial services. Despite having less income, lower-income families often pay more than middle and high-income families for the same consumer products.

The Task Force's recommendations would cut poverty in half.

Just the minimum wage, EITC, child credit, and child care recommendations would reduce poverty by 26 percent. This would mean 9.4 million fewer people in poverty and a national poverty rate of 9.1 percent—the lowest in U.S. history. The racial poverty gap would be narrowed.

An additional \$90 billion in annual spending would represent about 0.8 percent of the nation's gross domestic product, which is a fraction of the money spent on tax changes that benefited primarily the wealthy in recent years. Consider that: The current annual costs of the tax cuts enacted by Congress in 2001 and 2003 are in the range of \$400 billion a year. In 2008 alone the value of the tax cuts to households with incomes exceeding \$200,000 a year is projected to be \$100 billion.

NY Moves Towards Universal Health Care

Health Care Advocates Applaud Lawmakers for Funding Universal Health Care Study

New York State took an important step towards universal health care by agreeing to include \$200,000 in the state budget for independent studies of the merits of various approaches to universal health care.

This follows on the recent announcement that the Spitzer administration was setting up its own internal task force with the Governor's health care advisors and the departments of health and insurance to explore how to provide universal health care for all.

"We want to thank Assemblymember Gottfried for his long-standing leadership on the issue of universal health care," stated Mark Dunlea of the Hunger Action Network. "New York is joining a number of other states that have taken leadership to resolve the issue of providing health care to all. We believe that we can create a universal health care system that also improves the delivery of services while saving money for taxpayers, employers and consumers."

The legislature adopted part but not all of the language developed by Gottfried, the Assembly Health Committee Chair, to create a Commission on Universal Health Care modeled after similar efforts in a number of other states.

Hunger Action wants to ensure that consumers and not just special interest groups representing the health industry are able to participate in the process. The budget for instance did not require a series of public hearings that had been included in the draft bill. Hunger Action however has been encouraged by its

initial meeting with Department of Health staff.

"This action presents an unprecedented window of opportunity for New Yorkers. By enabling us to assess the pros and cons of various models for assuring health care to all, it can help us find our way toward that objective," said Sid Socolar, convener of Rekindling Reform, a NYC-based health care advocacy coalition that initiated the effort for the commission four years ago.

The Capital District Alliance for Universal Healthcare, a group organized in 2005 with representatives from social action committees from religious organizations, social agencies, advocacy organizations and interested individuals who want to work for universal health care, praised the legislation. Dr. Richard Propp, Chair of CDAUH, stated, "it is an excellent first step toward assuring that all New

Yorkers have equal access to cost effective and comprehensive health care."

In addition to the studies, the Budget did expand the income limits for the Child Health Program from 250% of poverty to 400%, as well as easing the rule for recertifications for the public health benefit programs. The Governor however didn't push to streamline the application process for Medicaid, which is a major barrier. Hopefully we will see these reforms next year.

The reality is that many children who qualify for health insurance through CHP are not getting it. (Partially this is due to the barrier imposed by even low fees at some income levels.) DOH will be launching a campaign to educate working families that they may qualify for such programs. Community groups are needed to help with this education effort.

Drug Gifts Disclosure Bill

The NYS Pharmaceutical Drug Manufacturer and Wholesale Disclosure Act (A 7468 Gottfried / S 2971 Maziarz) would require all pharmaceutical companies to report any gift to a health care provider in excess of \$75.

The large majority of doctors meet with industry detailers frequently. New and costly drugs are explosively introduced by these highly trained sales reps using targeted marketing strategies designed to steer doctors to prescribe what is new, instead of older, better understood and less expensive equivalents. There is evidence from published studies that detailing has an immediate and significant impact on doctors' prescribing practices.

In 2003, the pharmaceutical industry spent more than \$22 billion on marketing, the bulk of which was spent on direct marketing to health care providers. Meanwhile, prescription drug spending tripled from 1992 to 2002, up to over \$162 billion annually. By promoting the prescription drugs with the highest cost the pharmaceutical companies reap a hefty profit while the cost of health care goes up in response.

This legislation allows the public to make more informed decisions about what providers they are choosing, making sure they are getting prescribed drugs based on the best medical practices and not as repayment for a gift.

NYC's New Housing Plan Draws Complaints

Housing and labor market experts joined with NYC officials to caution against adoption of the Bloomberg administration's new homeless housing assistance program, called Work Advantage. The new program comes at the midpoint of the Mayor's five year plan to reduce chronic homelessness after an earlier program, Housing Stability Plus, failed to meet its goals and led to record increases in family homelessness.

Work Advantage reduces the length of time the city will subsidize rent for a homeless person or family from five to two years. It relies on a city-matched savings account and homelessness prevention services after the subsidies run out to keep people from transitioning out of the shelters, into "permanent housing," then back to the shelter again.

"Both programs are built on a faulty assumption the Bloomberg administration has about homelessness," said Patrick Markee, senior policy analyst for the Coalition for the Homeless. "The core of the misguided thinking is that this is a welfare problem and not a housing problem. These families are not homeless because they don't work enough or they're not willing to work, it's because there is a lack of affordable housing."

"This plan is seriously flawed: what are families going to do after this one to two year time limit? We are in the midst of one of the tightest housing markets in New York City's history, and low-wage workers fill our family shelters and continue to fall behind. While the plan makes some improvements on the failed Housing Stability Plus program, it simply fails to address the long-term needs of these working families," said New York City Public Advocate Betsy Gotbaum. The proposed two-year " timeline does not seem to consider the current labor

market in the City or the multiple barriers that families at risk of homelessness face," said NYC Councilmember Bill de Blasio, Chairman of the Council's General Welfare Committee.

"When we consider that the majority of homeless families in shelters are headed by poor women with kids – struggling to get by on \$7.25 an hour if they can find work – it's wildly unrealistic to expect that they will be able to save at a rate double or triple that of regular New Yorkers and have resources to pay New York City market rents in one or two years," said State Senator Liz Krueger, Ranking Democrat on the New York State Senate Housing Committee.

Between 2002-2005 median income in New York City fell by 6.3% while median rent shot up 8.3%. According to Mayor Bloomberg's 2030 plan, the number of apartments available to low and moderate income New Yorkers shrank by 205,000 units in the same time period.

The bottom line is that the housing market will continue to put enormous pressure on low, moderate and middle income working families – with all of them competing against each other for scarce housing resources. In that type of market, formerly homeless families will need rental assistance for far more than two years.

"A better solution would be to provide families leaving the shelter system with Section 8 vouchers as every previous administration has done," said Brad Lander, Director of the Pratt Center for Community Development.

"This is unfortunately a pretty straightforward story. Housing costs continue

to skyrocket while wages on the low-end can't even begin to catch up. This has been the case since the real estate boom began, but in the past year we've really reached a point where thousands of families just can't tread water anymore. That's what's fueling the increase in the shelter population. The idea that one to two years of time limited assistance will overcome the demands of the housing market is implausible and flies in the face of the Bloomberg administration's own research," said Mary Brosnahan, Executive Director of the Coalition for the Homeless.

Recent increases in tax rates and property values contribute to rising rents and the unaffordable rent burdens that eat into the income gains of low-income New Yorkers, as documented in the Coalition's report, "Making the Rent, 2002-2005: Changing Rent Burdens & Housing Hardships Among Low-Income New Yorkers. Once rent is paid, the poor family has an average of \$32 a week per family member to spend on other necessities, like food, clothing, transportation, medical costs.

"In that kind of housing market it is implausible to expect that our poorest families can survive without rental assistance after 12-24 months. These types of time limits – which don't exist in programs like Section 8 and public housing – will lead families to cut back on vital expenses like food, clothing and health care and lead them to double or triple up in cramped apartments or return to shelter," said David R. Jones, President & CEO of the Community Service Society of New York.

Feast for Famine Benefit Albany May 23

Hunger Action Network's annual benefit to end hunger will be held on Wednesday, May 23th, from 5:30PM to 8:30PM at the Egg in the Empire State Plaza, Albany. Hunger Action works to end hunger and its root causes, including poverty in New York State. This year marks Hunger Action Network's 25th Anniversary. As part of the event, there will be a short ceremony to honor some of the key leaders and volunteers for their work through the years.

Feast for Famine is a food and beverage tasting to raise support for our work to end hunger in the Capital District. The

food will be prepared by some of the Capital Region's best chefs, accompanied by teas, microbrews, coffee and a silent auction served to participants.

Some of the participating restaurants, coffeehouses, and microbreweries include: Barcelona Restaurant, Bayou Café, Bongiorno's, Café Italia Restaurant, Capital City Roasters, Cascade Mountain Winery and Restaurant, Dakota Steakhouse, Debbie's Kitchen, DeJohn's Restaurant & Pub, DiviniTea, El Loco Mexican Café, El Mariachi Mexican Restaurant, Fior D'Italia Pasta & Cheese, Grandma's Pies, Jack's Oys-

ter House, Justin's, McCadam Cheese, Miss Albany Diner, Mr. Subb, My Linh, Olde Saratoga Brewing Co., Olive Garden, The Palmer House, Rock Hill Bakehouse, Shalimar, Ta-Ke Japanese Steak House, and The Ginger Man Wine Bar & Restaurant.

The event is co-sponsored by CSEA, PEF, and NYS Nurses Association.

The suggested tax-deductible donation is \$40 per person. For reservations, call Hunger Action at 518 434-7371.

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

Name _____ Organization _____
Address _____ City _____ Zip _____
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**

**275 State St.
Albany NY 12210**

**Non-Profit Org.
U.S. Postage
PAID
Albany, NY
Permit No. 111**