



*Getting to the  
Root of the  
Problem*

# Hunger Action Network OF NEW YORK STATE

## Media Release

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For Immediate Release: January 5, 2009

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## Hunger Action Calls for GOOD JOBS NOW in Response to Recession

### Urges Lawmakers to Support Affordable Housing, Minimum Wage Hike, Ethics Reform, Single Payer Health Care

ALBANY - The Hunger Action Network today called upon State officials to increase funding for job creation programs in a Good Jobs Now campaign for average New Yorkers, taking advantage of numerous federal funding sources.

The group called upon the Governor to support at least \$100 million in new funding for a jobs initiative. The group said that the Paterson administration needs to take more advantage of the 4 to 1 matching opportunities under the federal stimulus package for new job initiatives targeting households with children whose income is below 200% of poverty.

The 21<sup>st</sup> Annual People's State of the State rally called upon the Governor to make the state minimum wage a living wage rather than a poverty wage, and to finally pass legislation to expand unemployment benefits. Hunger Action is calling for a hike in the state minimum wage and unemployment benefits; strong ethics reform, including strong independent oversight of legislators, nonpartisan redistricting, and public campaign financing; and, enacting a state single payer health care program.

"We are facing the worst economic recession in a generation. Every politician runs on a platform of job creation. We need them to deliver on that promise right now. They need to be living wage jobs and some of the need to be targeted to the communities that need them the most. And part of the way we are going to get a jobs program it to stop the wheeling and dealing that dominates the political culture in Albany. A first order of business should be to enact strong ethics and campaign finance reform," said Mark Dunlea, Executive Director of Hunger Action Network.

The groups noted that due to increasing welfare caseloads, the state will apparently be able to draw down an additional \$638 million in TANF (welfare) funds for programs that provide jobs and higher benefits to low-income New Yorkers. This figure includes job programs eligible for a 4 to 1 match from the stimulus. The State Senate has been fighting with the Paterson administration over whether or not they had agreed to seek

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an additional \$80 million in federal funding for several jobs initiatives; advocates believe the extra funds should be used to resolve the dispute.

Rev. Edward Smart, Pastor of Israel AME Church in Albany, head of Israel Community Services, Inc. said that “My congregation sees the urgent need not to let our young people fall through the cracks. Right now far too many kids, especially in communities of color, are not finishing high school, leaving all their talents and abilities on the economic junk heap of our society. Using stimulus money, my church and our community partners have developed an intensive program to reach this population and make sure they find a way into good jobs and careers. We call on the Governor to increase the Career Pathways funding so more people like our Albany youth can have this kind of opportunity.”

Rev. Victor Collier, President of ARISE and leader in the NY Stimulus Alliance, added “I was part of the NY Stimulus Alliance meeting with the Governor’s Recovery Cabinet. I said there and will say again: the state, from the Governor’s Office on down to local administrators, needs to connect with community leaders to implement job programs. Too often programs are funded but they never reach the people they are supposed to help. We encourage the Governor to embrace community-government partnerships to make this happen.”

Marian McCaskill, former public assistance recipient now receiving training through VESID, noted “I am a single mother with three children. I did not complete high school and for years I have been trying to get the education and training I need to get a good job. It has been hard. For years I have been on and off public assistance, sometimes I have had to go without meals so my children could eat. Now I am finally in a good training program. I think the Governor should make good training programs and new jobs a big priority, so parents like me can get good work and feed their families.”

Hunger Action said it had collected enough signatures to require the State Labor Commissioner to commence a formal proceeding to determine whether or not the present state minimum wage of \$7.25 an hour is enough to support workers. “Many of the people who use pantries and soup kitchens, even some who use shelters, have jobs but they aren't making enough to pay rent and the utility bills and buy food. When the minimum wage was established during the Great Depression, the idea was to lift workers at the bottom out of poverty. Not only so they could keep a roof over their families head but they could spend money to help stimulate the local economy,” noted Andreas Kriefall, upstate director of the Hunger Action Network. Hunger Action Network is seeking to raise the state minimum wage to \$10 an hour, and then index it to inflation. It is presently \$7.25 an hour. The purchasing power of the minimum wage was \$9.92 (in 2009 dollars) in 1969.

Groups are urging lawmakers to raise state unemployment (UI) benefits (e.g., raise the maximum from \$405 per week to \$475 per week). New York should phase in an increase in the maximum weekly benefit until it reaches half the state’s average weekly wage, and then index the maximum so that its purchasing power does not erode over time. Today’s maximum benefit amount replaces significantly less than half of the average weekly wage, meaning that families relying on UI benefits during a spell of joblessness struggle to get by on less. Thirty-four states and the District of Columbia have already indexed their maximum benefit amounts; it’s time for New York to do the same. New York should also configure its UI benefit systems so that lower wage workers – those making less than \$15 an hour – qualify for higher wage replacement rates.

Rally speakers also talked about the need for the state to invest in more affordable housing programs, including one to assist tenants and to protect individuals from foreclosures. “Too many low-income families are forced to spend 60 to 70% or more of their income on housing. That is unsustainable. And many of the households facing foreclosure are the victims of the faltering economy or the deceptive practices of the housing finance industry that politicians allowed to occur. We need political reform so that the campaign contributions of real estate lobbyists isn't what determines our housing policies in New York,” added Roger Markovics, of United Tenants of Albany.

“As we enter a legislative session in a depressed economic environment, we need the State’s lawmakers to support legislation that ensures New Yorkers can meet their basic needs such as, access to jobs, a livable wage, and safe, affordable housing.” Jessica F. Vasquez, Esq., Executive Director of the Neighborhood Preservation Coalition of New York State.

Hunger Action said it supported the Empire State Housing Alliance campaign to win a \$500 million affordable housing fund, with at least 10% going to rent subsidies.

At its annual membership meeting this fall, Hunger Action’s member voted to make political reform a major priority for 2010, believing that poverty will not be ended until the culture of political corruption and special interest deal-making was eliminated from the state capitol. The group also wants to see reform to make it easy for low-income people to participate in elections, such as same day voter registration since lower income households are far more likely to be forced to move on a regular basis, often disenfranchising them from voting.

Blair Horner, legislative director of the New York Public Interest Research Group, called upon the Governor and lawmakers to quickly act on ethics reform once the session starts.

“The political ‘crime wave’ that has rolled through the state Capitol demands a response. The incidents of unethical conduct, self-dealing and outright corruption has to lead to new policies that rely on establishing independent agencies to police ethics, better disclosure requirements and clear standards for what’s right and what’s wrong,” said Horner.

Hunger Action has been a supporter of a single payer Medicare for All since the early 90s. It is disappointed that the national health care bill has become primarily an insurance mandate that will leave tens of millions with either no insurance or inadequate insurance, while doing little to control the excessive costs of health services. Hunger Action called upon Governor Paterson and lawmakers to enact a state single payer system. A recent study by New York State found that a state single payer system would lower overall health care costs by \$20 billion annually by 2019.

Hunger Action also said that the solution to the state’s budget crisis was not to cut essential services to the state’s residents but rather to rescind some of the \$16 billion in tax cuts for largely wealthy New Yorkers in recent decades. Hunger Action also urged state officials to make Wall Street speculators to bear at least part of the burden for resolving the recession their misdeeds created. This will include halting at least part of the annual \$9 billion rebate of the state stock transfer tax to speculators.

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