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## Ending child hunger in our state

By JOEL BERG - Published: April 27, 2010

In 2008, even before the worst of the current economic downturn, more than 49 million Americans lived in homes that couldn't afford enough food – a number larger than the combined populations of the states of Vermont, Illinois, Missouri, Indiana, Arkansas, Kentucky, and Wisconsin – according to the U.S. Department of Agriculture.

Most shockingly, almost 17 million American children lived in such homes. Child hunger in the world's wealthiest nation is not only morally unacceptable, it costs the U.S. economy at least \$28 billion per year because poorly nourished children perform less well in school and require far more long-term health care spending.

In Vermont, in the years 2006 to 2008, fully 12.1 percent of the state's residents couldn't afford enough food. That represented a massive 42 percent increase over the course of the last decade.

The Vermont Foodbank recently reported that 83 percent of food shelves and 80 percent of soup kitchens in the state served more people in 2009 than in 2006.

More than one in seven households in Vermont with children faced hunger or food insufficiency.

That's the bad news. But the good news is that President Barack Obama made a courageous but realistic pledge in the early days of his presidency to end child hunger in the United States by 2015 as a first step toward ending all hunger in this country. To achieve that goal in America and Vermont, we must:

- 1.) Ensure passage by Congress of a strong Child Nutrition and WIC reauthorization bill. President Obama's budget proposes a down payment on meeting his 2015 promise by proposing an additional \$10 billion in spending over 10 years to pay for strengthening child nutrition programs that are to be reauthorized by the bill, which is being considered by Congress right now. Given child hunger's massive cost to our economy, that additional spending, which would help expand and improve school meals, after-school snacks, and other food programs for low-income children, would be a wise investment in the nation's future.

Yet the current version of that bill, which recently passed the Senate Agriculture Committee, while including some very positive provisions, includes less than half of the funding requested by the President. I hope that anti-hunger champions, Senators Patrick Leahy and Bernie Sanders, can once again provide critical leadership roles by ensuring that the final bill has the funding it needs.

2.) Ensure that more Vermont children receive free school breakfasts. In the 2008-2009 school year, fully 40 percent of Vermont children receiving free or reduced-priced lunches failed to receive school breakfasts, according to the Food Research and Action Center. One way to improve participation is to serve breakfast in first-period classrooms to all children, regardless of income.

3.) Enable more eligible families to receive 3SquaresVT benefits (formerly known as food stamps). About half the participants in this program are children making it one of the best tools to end child hunger. Yet in 2007, fully 29 percent of eligible families – and 33 percent of working families – failed to receive benefits, mostly because the application process is often cumbersome, time-consuming, and dignity-sapping. While Vermont has done better than many states in reducing such barriers to accessing the program, given that a third of eligible families still don't receive the help, it is clear that much work remains to eliminate application hurdles.

We know these strategies are effective because similar efforts worked in the past. In fact, before social service cuts went into effect in the 1980s, we almost entirely wiped out hunger in America. It is time to finish the job.

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