



From bare soup kitchens to nutsy government cuts

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If you are not sure of how strong the impact of the economic downturn is on the people of [New York](#), just ask the [Rev. Elizabeth Maxwell](#), the executive director of the Holy Apostles Soup Kitchen in Chelsea.

"The economy is in a bad situation and the need is growing," Maxwell said. "In July we served the highest number of meals in the 25-year history of the Holy Apostles Soup Kitchen, and this month we are on track to break that record. Only yesterday [Aug. 20] we served 1,691 meals."

The numbers for July were staggering: 31,123 people sought emergency food help at Holy Apostles.

Yet, despite the rapid rise in the number of people seeking help, [Gov. Paterson](#) and the state Legislature slashed funding to soup kitchens and food pantries, for the second time in five months.

Everyone agrees that balancing the state budget in these difficult economic times - with no jobs, a foreclosure crisis and two wars sucking American wallets dry - is no piece of cake. But for the governor and the Legislature to try to do it on the backs of the most vulnerable is a failed and morally shameful economic strategy.

"It's hard to imagine a higher budget priority than ensuring that all families have enough to eat," said [Joel Berg](#), the executive director of the New York Coalition Against Hunger, an umbrella group for the city's pantries and soup kitchens.

The increased demand at Holy Apostles is far from being a unique situation, as confirmed by the [New York City](#) Human Resources Administration.

According to the HRA, nearly half of all the feeding agencies in the city that receive public funding saw the demand for their services go up 9%. While in March and April 2007 they served 1.788 million meals; during the same months in 2008, they served a total of 1.946 million meals - that is, 158,000 more. Agencies across the rest of the state have been reporting similar increases.

The irony is that cutting 6% more from hunger funding amounts to "saving" \$1.2 million, not even a drop in the bucket of the \$121.5 billion state budget.

"Surely a much better alternative would have been restoring previous, fairer levels of taxation to the very wealthiest people who earn income in New York," Berg added.

The new cuts come on top of the 16% that were taken in April from the Hunger Prevention and Nutrition Assistance Program (HPNAP) budget, the main source of state funding for emergency food aid.

Certainly, punishing the poor and sheltering the millionaires does not fit the bill of what good government is called to do.

"They are not willing to talk about increasing taxes, but at a certain point it becomes the responsibility of government to care for the common good," said Maxwell, who added that she is seeing people in the soup kitchen line that she had never seen before.

According to Maxwell, now there are many more younger people, families with kids, the newly unemployed and even people with jobs - a lot of people who had never been in a soup kitchen before but now have no choice other than to stand in line waiting for help.

"We are in trouble as a society and we need to have a larger discussion about what the common good is, what are the responsibilities of elected officials and stop pretending that hunger and homelessness do not exist," Maxwell said.

And, she added: "People need education, skills, opportunities. No one likes to stand in a soup kitchen line."

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