



To: Obama/Biden Transition Innovation and Civil Society Team

From: Joel Berg, Executive Director, New York City Coalition Against Hunger

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Subject: How the Obama Administration Can Better Utilize AmeriCorps Members and Non-Profit Groups in Ending Hunger and Fighting Poverty

While expansions in federal nutrition assistance and anti-poverty programs will be necessary in order to carry out President-elect Obama's pledge to end U.S. child hunger by 2015, national service participants and civil society could also play vital roles.

### **Legislation**

As you well know, Senators Kennedy and Hatch have introduced the Serve America Act (S. 3487), which is in line with President-elect Obama's plans to expand national service and volunteerism efforts. While the original bill is excellent, it should be improved through amendments that more specifically authorize anti-hunger projects that:

- Provide outreach and application assistance to low-income families applying for federal nutrition assistance, tax refunds, and other anti-poverty efforts;
- Recruit, train, manage, and recognize both long and short-term anti-hunger volunteers;
- Aid food pantries, soup kitchens, food banks, food rescue organizations, and other nonprofit anti-hunger groups;
- Bolster after-school and summer meals programs;
- Provide nutrition education services;
- Distribute senior meals at congregate sites and through door-to-door delivery; and
- Expand community gardens, farmers' markets, and community supported agriculture projects.

It is also important that legislation increase the purchasing power (and end the federal taxation of) AmeriCorps education awards. See: <http://archive.ideasprimary.com/?p=334>. Increasing the value of the award would be one of the most effective ways to achieve President-elect Obama's goal of making post-secondary education affordable for Americans of all backgrounds.

## **Administrative Steps**

In addition to ensuring that new national service legislation includes anti-hunger work as a focus, the Administration could also take the following administrative steps:

**1)** Ensure that the President's Faith-Based and Community Initiative (or any similar initiative launched by the Obama Administration) includes a serious focus on ending domestic hunger and slashing poverty. The effort should aid secular and faith-based agencies evenly and be run in accordance with President-elect Obama's pledge to prohibit discrimination and proselytization. If the federal government wants faith-based and secular organizations to substantially increase their services, then the government must provide them with a substantial increase in resources – including direct funding, technical assistance, staff support, and surplus property and real estate. The government should also overhaul its procedures for running programs and awarding funds by modernizing federal grant, cooperative agreement, contracting, and financial management procedures in order to meet the unique needs of nonprofit groups. Most government grant management systems are the worst of both worlds: they require a mountain of paperwork but do little to ensure that grantees use the money well and run their programs effectively. These systems should be entirely revamped to make tracking performance more important than checking the right boxes on the paperwork.

**2)** Establish a White House Non-Profit Ombudsman Office whose job it is to help NGOs navigate through the federal bureaucracy. This office would work to make federal funding processes both easier and more transparent. It would also create a central repository of required application documents, so that nonprofits would only have to submit each to the government once.

**3)** Re-launch federal agency-sponsored AmeriCorps programs, including anti-hunger projects at USDA. As far as I know, the legislative authority to run such programs, granted by the National and Community Service Act of 1994, has never been repealed. Federally-run AmeriCorps projects are often **more** cost-efficient than privately-run projects because they can use existing staff and facilities. Federally-run programs at USDA and other agencies could also protect the environment, develop rural communities, improve public education, install energy-saving devices, bolster public health, serve senior citizens, protect public lands, aid homeland security, and fight crime.

**4)** Re-establish the government-wide Food Recovery and Gleaning Initiative (see: <http://www.usda.gov/news/pubs/gleaning/content.htm>) and the Community Food Security Initiative (see: <http://attra.ncat.org/guide/am/cfsi.html>). Led by the USDA Secretary and his staff on behalf of the President, these initiatives worked government-wide to fight hunger and bolster small- and medium-sized farmers by recovering excess food, promoting projects that strengthened local food systems (such as farmers' markets, community gardens, and community-supported agriculture projects), increasing the use of federal nutrition assistance programs, and promoting food-related economic development projects.

**5)** Improve the way people volunteer by using more sophisticated volunteer-matching web sites (see [www.hungervolunteer.org](http://www.hungervolunteer.org)) and technical assistance to encourage more Americans (including retirees) to volunteer in long-range projects that use their professional skills rather than in occasional, holiday-time group activities. The USDA-funded 4-H Program and Cooperative Extension System should be vital components of this transformation.

**6)** The Obama Administration should use websites and listservs to create Community Anti-Hunger Empowerment Hubs nationwide to actively engage local citizens in volunteering to fight hunger, improving the quality of meals in their children's schools, supporting Administration anti-hunger proposals, creating community gardens, etc.