

Mike Bloomberg's stamps of approval could help feed more

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First, the good news: [Al Yeganeh](#), the Original Soup Man of "Seinfeld" fame, joined forces with World Hunger Year and the [New York City](#) Coalition Against Hunger to donate 800 gallons of the famous soup to help feed the swelling ranks of hungry New Yorkers.

Now, the not-so-good news: [Mayor Bloomberg](#) still refuses to implement a federal stimulus bill provision that would give more people in need greater access to food stamps and bring millions of federal dollars to the city.

The Original Soup Man's nonprofit charity, Al's Feed the [Hungry Foundation](#), (headed by baseball [Hall of Famer Reggie Jackson](#)), [Joel Berg](#) of the coalition and others last week announced their donation to three soup kitchens: New York City Rescue Mission, [Union United Methodist Church](#) and Bowery Mission.

They made clear, though, that donations - even as generous as the Soup Man's - can never solve the hunger problem. The government, they said, must increase the availability of food stamps.

Precisely, that was what [Public Advocate Betsy Gotbaum](#); [Councilmembers Eric Gioia \(D-Queens\)](#) and [Bill De Blasio](#) (D-Bklyn); [Controller William Thompson](#); [David Jones](#) of the [Community Service Society of New York](#); Berg, and [Doreen Wohl](#), of the West Side Campaign Against Hunger, reminded the mayor at a City Hall press conference last week.

"Food stamps are an essential part of the stimulus because the money ultimately goes to our city's small businesses: grocery stores and bodegas, green markets and vegetable stands," Gotbaum said.

Yet the mayor - the economic crisis be damned - will not go along with the stimulus plan provision that does away with the limiting three months of food stamps in a three-year period for able-bodied adults without dependents while they are looking for work. If he did, the stimulus bill would extend the benefits of 47,000 currently receiving food stamps, and 14,000 more would have access to the program.

But City Hall reasserted its long-held position last week: It will not extend benefits to anyone not enrolled in the city's Work Experience Program, a workfare plan that provides temporary unpaid jobs.

"We understand food stamps as support for people looking for work, but [workfare] is only 20 hours per month and affects only a small fraction of recipients," said Human Resources Administration [Commissioner Robert Doar](#), who seemed to be in denial about unemployment in the city.

"There are jobs out there," he said. "Last year we placed 80,000 people in entry-level jobs mainly in retail, tourism and health care. If you apply for public assistance, we can help you find a job."

Something to keep in mind for the thousands of New Yorkers who - hard as they try - cannot find work.

The mayor's stubborn refusal is also bad economics. According to Gotbaum's estimates, it could cause the city to lose nearly \$155 million.

Doar denies it, saying, "the advocates are grossly exaggerating."

Whatever the figure, the city is bound to miss out in getting the federal food stamps dollars, each of which is said to generate \$1.70 in economic activity, according to Thompson.

"We must act boldly to improve our implementation of the food stamp program," Gioia said in a Feb. 16 letter to Doar. "It's time that we put away the stale old arguments that penalize the poor and place bureaucratic hurdles in the way of federal dollars intended to feed the hungry."

After all, the Original Soup Man, as generous as he is, cannot do it on his own.

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