

Staten Island Advance

Our hungry homes

Wednesday, December 03, 2008

Staten Island Advance

Barack Obama will be the first U.S. president to have benefited as a child from food stamps. This ought to help to focus concern on the growing crisis of hunger in America.

Nearly 12 million Americans went hungry at some point last year, including almost 700,000 children, which was an increase of more than 50 percent from the year before.

The Wall Street meltdown of 2008 is making things even worse for the poorest of the poor. With the economy plunging into recession, charitable organizations across the United States are feeling the chill, particularly food pantries.

On Staten Island, the picture is no less bleak.

"We're in a situation where people need more food," notes the Rev. Will Nichols of Project Hospitality about the growing impact of hard times and the rise in joblessness.

Food is a worry in more and more homes. According to the New York City Coalition Against Hunger, 13 of 15 Island agencies responding to its survey reported an increase in clients in the past year; 11 cited a decline in government money and food.

"It is important to increase funding from government programs because the public can't donate enough to make up for the loss," said Rev. Nichols about what troubles non-profit groups.

Foundations that normally are the financial pillars of charities have seen their stock portfolios plummet. It's a crisis the hungry can least afford.

"Last year, it was truly hard," said Joel Berg, executive director of New York City Coalition Against Hunger. "We said 59 percent of the agencies in New York City didn't have enough food to meet the growing demand. This year, it's 69 percent."

He said wider use of food stamps would help to reduce the strain on food banks. For the first time ever, the number of Americans on food stamps will top 30 million by the end of this year, surpassing by 2 million the high set in 2005 following Hurricane Katrina.

The reason for this is obvious. Over 12 percent of the U.S. population already lives below the official federal poverty line. The number of poor could rise to nearly 50 million before times get a lot better.

"Food bank after food bank tells me it's new faces, people they haven't seen before," said Ross Fraser, spokesman for Feed America, a Chicago-based charity that coordinates corporate donations to more than 200 U.S. food banks. "They will tell you it's the worst it's ever been."

He noted: "Starting about a year ago, we've seen a very significant spike in the demand," adding, "It used to be the poorest of the poor who came to us for help."

But higher food prices are affecting the working poor, he explained, "and the needle is moving up in terms of the income we're starting to serve."

The Capital Area Food Bank, Washington's primary distribution center for food agencies, said calls from needy residents have jumped nearly 250 percent in the past six months. But cash donations are down about 10 percent from last fall, and contributions of food have declined 15 percent.

For his part, Mr. Obama, whose mother briefly made use of food stamps, has vowed to make them more readily available soon. So, as the year-end holidays near, remember the hungry among us. Please do what you can to ease their plight.