

Hunger expert says government must lead the fight

By Alfred Lubrano Inquirer Staff Writer
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Fighting hunger without the weapon of big federal dollars is like fighting drought without water.

That's nationally known hunger expert Joel Berg talking, championing change in how America helps the poor.

"The belief that charity does it better than government only ensures hunger will persist," Berg says. "When people get food from a pantry, that's not a success. It's a failure of American policy."

Berg, 44, is the executive director of the New York City Coalition Against Hunger and a Clinton administration antihunger official who's written a new book, *All You Can Eat: How Hungry Is America?*

He'll be all around town tomorrow and Wednesday, visiting a West Philadelphia food cupboard, speaking at the University of Pennsylvania, and participating in a hunger and homelessness discussion at the Central Library of the Free Library of Philadelphia, among other events.

Berg is prone to saying things like, "We are a country that's giving nearly a trillion dollars to Wall Street. How about a few bucks to keep people from being hungry?"

It's pure Berg: pointed and up-to-the-moment, with a hint of lefty anger that makes him the darling of hunger fighters everywhere.

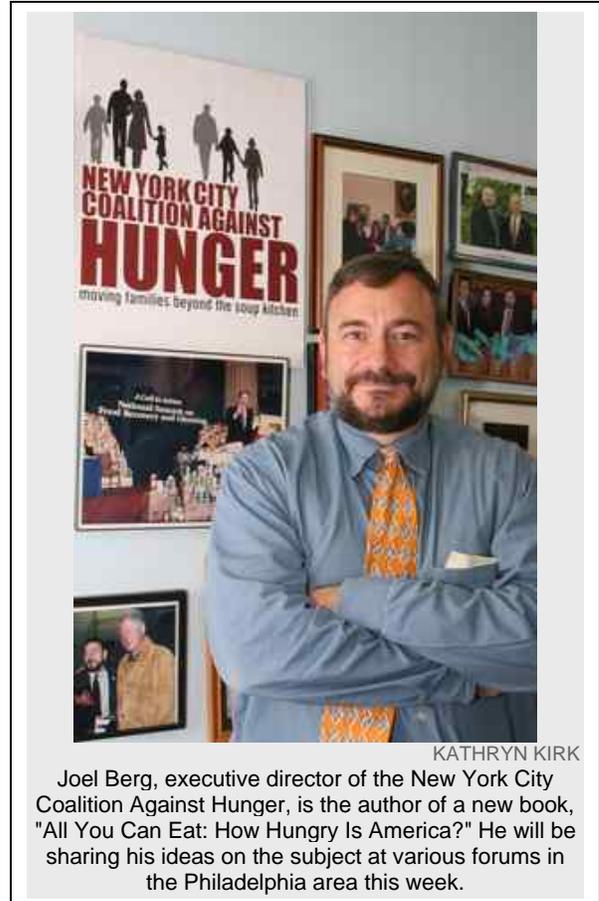
Berg makes it clear that he wants one thing: to end hunger in America. Really.

He says it can be done with an approximate 41 percent increase in federal nutrition-assistance programs (about \$24 billion) - mostly in food stamps.

"It's a big deal that he's visiting," said Rachel Meeks, director of the food-stamp enrollment campaign at the Greater Philadelphia Coalition Against Hunger. "In a way, he's a catalyst for all the work we've been doing lately."

"His coming to town is a spark, and it's getting hunger awareness going," said Bill Clark, executive director of Philabundance, the largest hunger-relief agency in the area.

Berg is seizing on the change in administrations to make his push. President Obama, who has used food stamps, is already on record pledging to end child hunger by 2015.



KATHRYN KIRK

Joel Berg, executive director of the New York City Coalition Against Hunger, is the author of a new book, "All You Can Eat: How Hungry Is America?" He will be sharing his ideas on the subject at various forums in the Philadelphia area this week.

"You can't *misunderestimate* having a president who cares about this," Berg said in his mischievous fashion during a phone interview last week, using an old George W. Bush malaprop to illustrate the difference in Oval Office occupiers.

All kidding aside, that difference is real, Berg insists. He cites Bush's much-quoted preference for using charities, not government, to help the poor. Obama, on the other hand, has said he's open to using more government monies to battle poverty.

In granular detail, Berg's book shows that even if all charities in the United States could double food distribution, the number of food-insecure Americans (a new way of saying *hungry*) would diminish only from the current 35.5 million to 32 million.

Yet, reliance on religious and social-service agencies such as food pantries and food kitchens is growing, Berg said.

This is akin to using bucket brigades of private citizens to put out fires, while eschewing government-bought fire trucks, he added.

Instead, Berg said, if the federal government boosted its nutrition safety net - more money for school breakfasts and lunches, women and infants, and the most important antihunger tool of all, food stamps - then "we would entirely eliminate food insecurity."

That wonkish term, by the way, is meant to help people understand what hunger really means.

Many Americans hear the word *hunger* and flash on Biafran babies with bloated bellies and flies in their eyes.

That's starvation, and it rarely happens here. But that doesn't mean we're not in trouble, advocates say.

Food insecurity is the lack of access to enough nutritious food for an active, healthy life. In any given year, a food-insecure person has had to skip meals because the food wasn't there.

Even the mildest forms of food insecurity are associated with poor child development and health, higher child-hospitalization rates, and maternal depression, according to Mariana Chilton, a professor at Drexel University's School of Public Health, and principal investigator for the Philadelphia GROW Project, which deals with nutrition among poor children.

In Philadelphia, 145,000 people are considered food insecure, according to 2006 estimates, Meeks said. Newer figures will only be higher, she added.

"Expanding food stamps is the single best way to fight hunger," Berg said. "And it's better for people to receive \$239 a month in food stamps than getting \$50 in groceries from a pantry in a month."

Besides, he said, food cupboards are meant to be for emergencies, not frequent use, as has lately been the case.

Clark can testify that supplies are dwindling while demand skyrockets in the dismal economy. "This economic meltdown has us pushed against the wall," he said.

Currently, 24 percent of Philadelphians - nearly 352,000 people - are on food stamps, Meeks said, but an additional 100,000 are eligible and not getting them - in part because the application process is complex.

"Americans believe government can't do big things," Berg said. "But between 1960 and 1973, the poverty rate was cut in half. You need money to do it. Our best solution is for the government to ensure that people never go hungry."

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http://www.philly.com/inquirer/local/pa/20090209_Hunger_expert_says_government_must_lead_the_fight.html?viewAll=y