Feeding the hungry

Study: 464,000 Bay Staters, 7% of population, at risk

NO PLACE AT THE TABLE - PART 1 OF 4

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Anti-hunger advocates are working as hard as ever to feed the increasing millions of Americans who are chronically undernourished or at risk of going hungry.

Despite their well-intentioned efforts, though, hunger persists, as if it were a necessary component of the human landscape, a product of a society that has decided it is acceptable to have big winners and big losers.

The situation lends itself to assessing blame. But the villains are elusive, hidden amid a complex and disjointed system that perennially falls short of its promise.

However, there is evidence that anti-hunger advocates are beginning to be heard. The Spotlight on Poverty and Opportunity, a project co-initiated by the Boston-based nonprofit Eos Foundation, has just released a poll showing that 50 percent of Americans believe the hunger problem in the United States is getting worse, up from 38 percent in 2002.

When it comes to world hunger, it is 63 percent, up from 44 percent in 2002.

The disparity shows that many Americans who would acknowledge hunger in the poorest nations of Africa, for example, do not see the same condition in their midst.

Worcester’s Grace C. Ross, who has spent her adult life running nonprofits and working with people who live on the margins of society, believes the first step to awareness is to admit that hunger exists. Too many people, she insists, will not go there.

“We must first acknowledge that this is a citywide, and systemwide, problem and then take proactive policy action: increasing food-stamp use and drawing down food-stamp outreach money, which Massachusetts is almost last in accessing; looking at local policies that will increase local jobs; supporting living-wage policies and the right to organize; and taking on a more aggressive long-term approach to affordable housing,” Ms. Ross said. The fact that we, as a society, can end hunger makes it a moral imperative that we do so, she said.

Worcester’s representative in the U.S. Congress, Democrat James P. McGovern, is one of the most vocal and influential anti-hunger voices in the country. He wants to make his hometown ground zero in the fight against hunger. He, too, uses language such as “moral imperative” when he calls for a sea change in the way America views this issue.

Mr. McGovern is one of a growing number of anti-hunger advocates who believe the issue needs to be viewed through the lens of rising costs that are crushing people on the lower economic rungs. The stereotype narrative about hunger is that it only applies to the homeless. Mr. McGovern said that those who work in food pantries know that the numbers are high because a growing number of working families and senior citizens cannot meet basic needs.

An October report by the Children’s Sentinel Assessment Program, based out of Boston Medical Center and supported by Citizens Energy, explored that theme. C-SNAP’s report tied recent increases in fuel prices to the inability of low-income families to keep pace with those costs and to the resulting poor health of their children.
Last year, anti-hunger forces received a jolt when they learned that the Worcester County Food Bank had delivered food to 71,000 people in Worcester County in 2005, up from nearly 51,000 in 2001, the last time a comprehensive study of hunger had been conducted.

The federal study put the number of hungry in Massachusetts at 464,000, about 7 percent of the state’s population. The nationwide figure was 25 million.

The local statistics reflect a growing number of people unable to cope with a rising cost of living that is no longer confined to greater Boston and the wealthiest pockets of the state, according to Jean G. McMurray, executive director of the Worcester County Food Bank. She said the situation had been exacerbated by a declining state and federal contribution to hunger eradication.

Mr. McGovern and others would like to assess blame for all of this, but he says that federal funding for the hungry comes from so many different sources that it is difficult for Congress to grab hold of the issue in a substantive way.

As co-chairman of the Congressional Hunger Center, Mr. McGovern has championed ending hunger in his district, throughout the country and around the world. In setting such a seemingly impossible goal, Mr. McGovern attempts to illustrate the manmade nature of the situation.

"I tell people all the time that hunger is a political condition. What has been lacking is the political will to end it," Mr. McGovern said. "This problem can be solved. We have the resources. We have the food. What we don’t have is the political will."

According to the Spotlight on Poverty and Opportunity poll, a majority of Americans agree that politicians need to focus more on the issue of hunger. It found that 54 percent of Americans do not believe that "political candidates have spent an adequate amount of time discussing hunger and poverty issues."

Mr. McGovern was the impetus behind the Hunger Free Network, a cooperative effort throughout Worcester County of food pantries, churches and shelters working to establish a new system.

The 3-year-old effort is a product of Mr. McGovern’s belief in the importance of aiming high and refusing to accept any hunger in the fabric of American life. The Worcester County Food Bank partners with about 200 food pantries and other agencies to reach the farthest corners of the county.

Besides food pantry and meals programs, the neediest residents of Central Massachusetts are eligible to participate in the federally funded food-stamp program. For various reasons, though, many are not taking advantage of the program. State officials say many people who work and make a low income are not even aware that they are eligible for food stamps, so the state is stepping up efforts to seek out such people and sign them up for the program.

Mr. McGovern took some ribbing in some quarters when he publicly tried to eat for a week on a $3-a-day food stamp subsidy, a challenge Ms. Ross also undertook. But Mr. McGovern said the stunt caught the attention of some of his colleagues and resulted in an additional $4.2 billion in food and nutrition program spending in this year’s farm bill. He said many of his colleagues admitted having no idea just how stingy the food stamp program had become.

"Because of that food-stamp challenge, Congress was shamed into fixing the food-stamp program in the area of indexing the benefit," Mr. McGovern said. "The Republicans removed the indexing, and there was no adjustment for inflation or a cost-of-living increase. That has been fixed."

Mr. McGovern is careful not to come down too hard on the Republicans in the blame department, however. That’s because he is going to need them. His Congressional Hunger Center co-chairman is a Republican. The occupant of the White House, of course, is a Republican. And Mr. McGovern is not content to wait until January 2009, when a Democrat might or might not take over the presidency, to take the hunger issue to the next level.

"If we’re going to end this problem, we’re going to need leadership at the very top saying this is a priority, setting goals and benchmarks that can be measured, and going about systematically and methodically ending hunger in America," he said.
Far from hopeless about the prospect of accomplishing such a large task, Mr. McGovern contends, “Some issues we are not going to be able to solve while I’m in Congress, or while I’m still alive. Hunger is not one of them.”

Mr. McGovern and Ms. Ross are not alone in believing hunger is a solvable problem. J. Larry Brown, director of the Center on Hunger and Poverty at Brandeis University, for example, insists that the United States could permanently eradicate hunger at an annual cost of $10 billion.

Mr. McGovern touts the Boston Medical Center’s approach to hunger as a promising model.

“Boston Medical Center treats hunger as a health issue,” he said. “You show up and if you’re not eating properly, or are food insecure, there is a food bank at that hospital. You do not leave unless there is a plan to get you the foods you need. It is a model that every hospital should emulate.”

At present, Mr. McGovern’s staff is playing a lead role in organizing a White House summit to raise hunger from a fringe issue to a major policy discussion. Mr. McGovern and his supporters want the bulk of Americans to become uncomfortable with the idea that hunger is so intertwined with life in the bottom rungs of society.

In the meantime, however, it remains exactly that.

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