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Past time to solve hunger in America

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The U.S. Department of Agriculture recently released its annual figures on food security—a scientifically rigorous term used to describe American households' ability to provide reliable access to food to its members. What it reports is that, while food security declined marginally since 2011, 15.8 percent of Americans (nearly 50 million individuals) are still struggling to afford enough food to lead healthy, productive lives.

Hunger in America is a solvable problem. In the richest, most agriculturally-productive nation on earth, it should stand as a point of national shame that we have any households struggling to put food on the table at all. Ensuring access to nutritious food is essential to productivity, health, and social functioning for those in all stages of life. Nutritious food means higher academic performance for kids, healthier workers for America's businesses, and a senior population that can age independently in their own homes instead of in hospitals or institutions.

Hunger in America is a solvable problem, if we don't undermine the federal food safety net. The patchwork of non-duplicative programs that enables Americans to mitigate the ill-effects of hunger, including the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP, formerly known as food stamps), the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program for Women, Infants and Children (WIC), the National School Lunch Program, and Older Americans Act Nutrition Programs (such as Meals on Wheels), are more politically vulnerable than ever.

Despite persistently high hunger rates, the Agricultural Act of 2014 reduced SNAP funding by \$8.55 billion over a decade. In Fiscal Year 2013, both WIC and Older Americans Act programs faced the indignity of sequestration cuts, which could happen again in Fiscal Year 2016 if Congress fails to act. In the long-run, these reductions in public spending will result in a less educated, less productive workforce and in far more costly healthcare spending on both chronic disease mitigation and long-term care.

Hunger in America is a solvable problem, but government isn't the only answer. While the federal government provides the financial bedrock for much of our country's response to hunger, private organizations and citizens have stepped up to solve the problem, as well. Millions of volunteers dedicate time every day to the cause of eradicating hunger in their communities. Whether it's advocating for healthy school breakfasts and lunches for kids, providing supplementary groceries at a food bank for working families who just can't make ends meet, or delivering a nutritious hot meal and a safety check to isolated, homebound seniors, this virtual army of volunteers and advocates works tirelessly to close the gap that keeps millions of Americans hungry.

Hunger in America is a solvable problem through the collaboration of government, industry, nonprofits and generous individuals—but we must do more. Our networks remain dedicated to solving hunger every day, but we cannot do it alone. We must urge Congress to join us in the fight to solve hunger by protecting and reauthorizing the Older Americans Act this year and strengthening programs that feed our children through next year's Child Nutrition Reauthorization Act. We hope you'll join us in becoming a voice for the voiceless and ending hunger in America; it benefits us all.

Aiken is the president and CEO of Feeding America, Hollander is the president and CEO of the Meals On Wheels Association of America, Nelson is the president of Share Our Strength and Ryerson is the president of AARP Foundation.

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