

Hunger stalks America—Part 1

Unity 2012: The Feeding America Network Summit

Lawrence Porter
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The following article is the first of a three-part series on hunger and food banks in America.

US President Barack Obama was in Detroit last month to collect over \$1 million for his election campaign from wealthy donors.

Significant numbers of Detroit's movers and shakers signaled their appreciation for services rendered, shelling out \$40,000 a piece to attend the Obama campaign cocktail reception April 18 hosted by Little Caesar's Pizza heiress Denise Ilitch. Others ponied up the reduced rate of \$10,000 for dinner and a stock photo, in what was dubbed a "\$1 Million Pizza Party."

Indeed, auto executives had good reasons to "pay back" Obama. After all, the administration's bailout policy stipulated a wage reduction for new hires to half that of established auto workers, down to about \$14 an hour. Some auto workers are now making as little as \$9 per hour, while Ford and GM are posting record profits of \$20 billion and \$7.6 billion, respectively.

Across town that same day, another conference convened at the Renaissance Center. Its subject was the reverse side of the social divide—the overwhelming numbers of Detroiters who don't know where they will get their next meal.

The Unity 2012 conference was sponsored by Feeding America (FA), the leading hunger-relief charity in the US. Through 50,000 local agencies operating 90,000 programs that include pantries, soup kitchens and after-school programs for children, the organization feeds 37 million people, including 14 million children and 3 million seniors.

In 1962, Michael Harrington shocked the nation when he wrote *The Other America*, estimating that 40 million to 50 million Americans—one quarter of the population—lived below the poverty level.

Today, the numbers are more than three times higher.

Recent statistics show half the American population—over 150 million people—are either poor or near poor. Millions are forced to turn to food banks to feed their families.

Feeding America's Maura Daly, chief communications and development officer, and Lucio Guerrero, vice president of communications, spoke to the WSWs about the charity's decision to come to Detroit for the annual conference.

Daly said FA wanted to highlight the record-level food need in Detroit. "We are always interested in bringing our resources to communities in need of help," she stated, explaining the summit brings together executive directors of 202 food banks.

"Additionally, we have two fabulous members serving this area," she said, "Forgotten Harvest and Gleaners Community Food bank," the two largest food charity organizations in Michigan, which also served as hosts of the event.

Forgotten Harvest specializes in rescuing food that would otherwise go to waste. They rescued or collected 23.2 million pounds of prepared and perishable food from grocery stores, restaurants and caterers last year. Gleaners, the largest food bank in Michigan, delivered 40 million pounds of food to over 600 soup kitchens, pantries and shelters.

"This is an annual event that brings together executives of our 202 food banks across the country," stated Daly.

"One in six Americans, 49 million people, including one in five kids, are struggling with hunger," Daly said. She added that while poverty is the single predominant factor in food insecurity, unemployment is the largest contributor to the condition. "There are so many people already in what we traditionally call the 'near-poor' that any loss of a job translates directly into food insecurity.

"Unemployment continues to be at record-level highs. Yes, it has gone down a little in the last two years, but the number of people who are unemployed remains very high."

Daly pointed to high food and fuel prices and the fact that many people are still suffering from the foreclosure crisis.

“We have serious threats to the safety net,” she added. “Congress is considering drastically cutting SNAP (Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program—food stamps), while at the same time we have seen a 40 percent decline in the amount of food coming in to food banks.”

Daly pointed to a drastic decline in the amount of food available for distribution. She said the government provides 25 percent of the 3.3 billion pounds of FA food. Last year, she said, there was “almost a 50 percent decline in what we call bonus commodities” available to Feeding America.

Daly told the WSWS how the system works: the US Department of Agriculture purchases surplus food when commodity prices drop, to provide a price floor. However as of late, when prices are steadily rising, the government reduces its buys of cheese, flour, corn and other surplus commodities.

As of February 2012, food prices had risen 4.4 percent for the year, with meat, coffee and peanut butter up 9 percent, 19 percent and 27 percent respectively. This has resulted in a significant decline in the food flowing to charities.

“Because food prices are high, the USDA has been making fewer purchases of commodities and therefore there is less food from the federal government flowing through food banks. We have seen about a 50 percent increase in the number of people who need help over the last four years; while at the same time there is less food available from these steady sources.

“That combined is what we in our network call a perfect storm. Need is up, availability of food is down, and the people that we are serving are struggling with more and more challenges in meeting basic needs.

“We have to be careful in discussing food insecurity because we know that two-thirds of those who are food insecure actually are not living below the poverty line.”

The threshold for SNAP is 130 percent of the poverty level. The threshold for WIC and other child nutrition programs is 185 percent of poverty. Daly said that one-quarter of the people in the US who report they are food insecure make more than 185 percent of the poverty income, meaning they don’t qualify for any form of federal assistance. The only place they have to go for food assistance is through the charity system.

“The federal programs are really targeting the poorest of the poor,” she said. “There are millions of people who are

living in the ‘near poor’ category and many of those folks are unemployed or underemployed. This is driving the increase in the number of people who are hungry.”

Daly said FA is seeing an increase in food need in every demographic group: “It is happening across the board. Statistically, we feed almost one in four African Americans in the US. We also see a large number of white workers.

“One of the biggest misnomers is that people see hunger as an urban issue, when the reality is that 55 percent of the counties in the US with the highest rate of food insecurity are rural. Unfortunately, there is no such thing as a hunger-free community. This is an issue that exists in every county in America.”

Lucio Guerrero emphasized that the cuts in government programs, as in Michigan where a five-year limit was recently imposed on cash assistance, are having a profound impact on food insecurity.

“It’s a total impact,” he said. “If there is a cut in housing or a cut in government assistance towards utilities, families have to decide what to cut and it is usually food. That’s the unfortunate thing.

“You can’t make a decision to cut rent or heat, but you can say, ‘Well, I’ll skip a meal.’ Or, ‘I won’t eat so that my kids can eat.’ We see those types of decisions on a daily basis. Obviously, it shouldn’t come down to deciding if you can eat or not.

“It’s a shame that this is happening in a country with so much abundance. One in six is the average number of children who are food insecure, but there are communities where it is 50 percent of kids, in some parts of Texas or in the rural South.

“It really is affecting every community. Even in places like Palm Springs [California], there are people who are hungry.”

To be continued



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