

On eve of Thanksgiving holiday

## Hunger rises in US capital

Our reporters

28 November 2013

As the Thanksgiving holiday comes this year, thousands of US families are forced to live in a state of hunger. As of November 1, over \$11 billion has been eliminated from the Supplemental Nutritional Assistance Program (SNAP) over a period of three years.

In the District of Columbia, where over 144,000 individuals rely on food assistance, the impact of the cut has been devastating. Nearly one in eight homes in the District of Columbia has been classified as “food insecure,” a condition defined by the US Department of Agriculture as a shortage of nutritionally adequate food, in which the ability to acquire such is considered “limited” and “uncertain.”

More than a third of this group is classified as having “very low food security”—an even more precarious food situation involving the regular skipping of meals for both adults and children. According to the nonprofit organization DC Hunger Solutions, entire neighborhoods in city Wards both 7 and 8 are considered to be “food deserts,” in which fully-functioning supermarkets are not present.

Reporters from the *World Socialist Web Site* spoke to individuals affected by the food crisis in the District of Columbia, including several food bank operators. The Capitol Area Food Bank (CAFB), which helps to provide meals to over 500,000 individuals in the Washington DC region through its distributing partners, is the largest of these facilities.

“We have seen demand for food increase by 25 percent since the onset of the recession,” said CAFB spokesperson Paige Crosland. She explained that the elimination of food stamps, and the increasing levels of income inequality in general, would only contribute to “more in lines at food pantries.”

“These are the working poor,” said Crosland,

relaying the story of a personal acquaintance who worked several part time jobs while volunteering at the Manna Food Center, a pantry in suburban Maryland, only to find that she was dependent on the center for food as well. The Manna Food Center has seen the number of households it serves nearly double since the 2008 financial crisis, from 2,000 to 3,600 monthly.

Washington DC is one of the most unequal cities on the planet. The average income of the city’s top fifth is nearly \$260,000 yearly, a figure which is second only to San Francisco. Key in the increase of hunger and poverty has been the rapid rise in rent and the disappearance of affordable housing for many working class families. From 2000 to 2008, the number of rental units under \$750 a month decreased from roughly 65,000 in the city to fewer than 50,000. In the same period, the number of homes valued below \$250,000 fell from 58,000 to fewer than 15,000. This trend has only continued in the aftermath of the financial crisis. (See “Widening social inequality in US capital”).

Alston Greene spoke to WSWs reporters while waiting outside a food kitchen in northwest DC: “I wish it could change,” he said, referring to the wealth disparity afflicting the US.

Many of Greene’s friends had been affected by the cut to food stamps, and he wished to know how society might change that. When it was explained to him that it was a question of class and who would run society and to what end, Greene became animated, saying “I want to be a part of this!” He thanked the reporters and promised to speak to friends about the WSWs.

Reporters also spoke to workers and passers-by outside of the Minnesota Avenue metro station in the impoverished southeast section of the District. Many workers were eager to speak to reporters about their food situation, as well as give their thoughts more

broadly about issues of inequality.

Keith, a young father out with his son, stopped to speak to reporters. “Things are crazy. I know people whose food stamps didn’t come through. Mine did, thank God, but they were still reduced from \$200 to about \$150. I work minimum wage and try to take care of my son. I really need the help just to get by.” Addressing the question of wealth in society, Keith said, “Yeah, it’s clear to me that there’s a battle going on. People need to stand together, like you say, to fight back. I’m so glad I met you guys today.”

Steve, a hardwood floor installer, also spoke about how cuts to assistance programs had affected his family. “Yeah, I know people who have been affected. I was on the phone the other day with my mom, and she was telling me about it. It’s one cut after another, really. My brother is on SSI [Supplemental Security Income] and gets less money now, too. In fact, they’re both going to be moving in with me now. They can’t afford to live on their own anymore.”

“I’ve definitely noticed changes in this neighborhood,” continued Steve, speaking about attempts to gentrify poorer areas in the city. “They’re putting up all these high-rises and condos that weren’t here before. No way the people who live here now will be able to live in those places. It really seems like America is a place where the little man always suffers, but the big guys are never affected.”

Another woman who preferred to go unnamed said, “I see all these new buildings in areas where my family has lived for decades. They’re all over the place, right alongside these cuts you’re talking about. And this process of gentrification,” she added, “isn’t fair for the people who can’t afford to stay here and [are] going to get kicked out to Maryland and Virginia. Then they’ll probably have to commute to work, which will be more money.”

Stephanie, who receives both SSI and SNAP, expressed disgust with the state of society. “What you’re saying about these billionaires, that’s just a f----- crime. That’s what that is. We need to kick these people out. People in this neighborhood are fighting just to get by and have a little something for themselves.”

Speaking of her own circumstances, she said, “I’m having some trouble getting things together for Thanksgiving this year. With some hunting around,

I’ve finally got some ham and some turkey, but nothing else, really. I’m going to be dependent on what my relatives can give me to help out. A lot of us here used to have just enough. Not anymore.”

Explaining her views on politics, Stephanie said she was tired of being told to “kiss the presidents’ a--.” She added, “People sometimes judge me when I tell them I don’t vote. Well, I tell them they shouldn’t, because they know better. Nothing changes that way.”



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