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# Effectively Using a Town Hall Meeting to Call for a Circle of Protection

Town hall meetings with your members of Congress are excellent venues to ask them questions about creating a circle of protection around programs vital for hungry and poor people in the U.S. and abroad. This could happen any time your member of Congress is back at home or when Congress is in recess.

## Tips for effectively making your voice heard at town meetings:

- **Get there early.** Sometimes members of Congress try and pack their town meetings with supporters and prevent those who have differing views from getting in. If you're worried this may be the case, plan to be there at least an hour early.
- **Sit by the microphone.** If a microphone is set up, plant yourself near it so you don't end up on the back of the question line. If other people start lining up to ask questions before they are invited to, you should as well.
- **If you come with friends, don't all sit together in a clump:** There is strength in numbers, even perceived numbers.
- **Come with questions written down on index cards.** Some members will try to control the questions by taking them in writing. If you have yours all ready to go when you get there, you have a far better chance of getting it read.
- **Refuse to take a non-answer for an answer.** Ask your question, then wait for the response. If you don't get an actual answer to the question, say so, while standing up. Don't be afraid to say "Congressman, that doesn't answer my question," then repeat it. Remember, these people work for you!
- **Wear brightly-colored clothes.** That will further draw attention to you when raise your hand to ask your question. Raise your hands high.
- **Don't let yourself be interrupted.** Sometimes other town meeting participants can interrupt people who are asking questions. Depending upon how contentious the meeting is, some audience members could start booing and hissing over the sound of your voice. Don't be surprised if they start yelling at you mid-question, but don't stop asking your question. Keep talking. You have every right to ask your question and be heard. If you still have something to say, by all means, keep talking.
- **Have a few facts at your fingertips.**
  - One in four children is at risk of hunger in the United States.
  - In 2009, 43.6 million people were in poverty; this is the largest number in the 51 years for which poverty estimates have been published.
  - Nearly 14 million people are unemployed.
  - Between 2008 and 2009, while poverty and unemployment in the United States reached record rates, the rate of food-insecure households did not rise.
  - WIC prenatal care benefits reduce the rate of low birth-weight babies by 25 percent and very low birth-weight babies by 44 percent, saving the nation huge sums in healthcare costs.
- **If there is no chance to ask questions, ask them anyway.** A new tactic by members of Congress who don't want to answer tough questions is to essentially filibuster with a PowerPoint presentation that offers a slanted picture of the issues rather than taking questions from the audience. Raise your hand if there is an appropriate place for a question. Go ahead and question the information being presented.



Bread for the World Photo

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## Raising the Issues:

Here are some questions you may want to ask during a town hall meeting. The questions are followed by some background to set up the question or asks the question in a different manner. They also present the issues in a different context should a similar question have already been raised. Choose any of these questions:

### ■ Will you join people of faith in creating a circle of protection?

Over the past few months, an unprecedented group of faith leaders from across the religious spectrum have come together in response to potential budget cuts. They called for our elected leaders to form a Circle of Protection around funding for programs for hungry and poor people. Thousands of people across the country support this effort. In the budget decisions before Congress, will you join people of faith and create a Circle of Protection around funding for programs for hungry and poor people both here and abroad? If so, please explain how you will do that. If not, explain why not.

### ■ Will you urge your fellow members of Congress to protect key anti-hunger programs such as SNAP?

The recent debt ceiling deal creates a new joint committee that will recommend \$1.2 trillion of deficit reduction. Given that one in four children in this country is at risk of hunger and we still have nearly 14 million people unemployed, will you strongly urge your colleagues appointed to the new Joint Committee on Deficit Reduction to protect key anti-hunger programs like SNAP (formerly food stamps), WIC, and key tax credits for working families from cuts? Please explain in what ways you plan to accomplish that. If not, explain why not.

### ■ Will you ensure that the burden of deficit reduction does not fall disproportionately on hungry and poor people?

The recent debt ceiling deal creates a new joint committee that will recommend \$1.2 trillion of deficit reduction. Given that one in four children in this country is at risk of hunger and given that we still have nearly 14 million people unemployed, will you strongly urge your colleagues appointed to the new Joint Committee on Deficit Reduction to make the balanced recommendations that include revenues in addition to spending cuts so that the burden of deficit reduction does not fall disproportionately on poor and vulnerable populations?



Margaret W. Nea

### ■ How will you ensure that any deficit reduction package is balanced and includes both program cuts on social and also raises revenue?

The recent debt ceiling deal requires Congress to enact a \$1.2 trillion deficit reduction package or else face across-the-board cuts of the same amount. Congress cannot reduce our deficits through spending cuts alone without dismantling important safety-net programs like SNAP (formerly food stamps), WIC (nutrition assistance to low-income women and children), and emergency food assistance programs. How will you ensure that Congress ultimately enacts a deficit reduction package that is balanced and includes revenues so that deficit reduction does not fall primarily on programs serving poor and hungry people?

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■ ***If your member of congress voted to pass the FY2012 Budget: Why did you vote to cut funds to SNAP which millions of children rely on?***

If the member of Congress voted in favor of the House-passed FY 2012 budget: In April, you voted for a budget proposal that would cut SNAP (formerly food stamps) by \$127 billion and turn it into a block grant, which would prevent the program from being able to respond to future recessions, natural disasters, or spikes in need. At a time when one in four children in the United States is at risk of hunger, why did you vote to cut SNAP benefits for millions of low-income children considering that budget had no calls for additional revenues in addition to the huge spending cuts?

■ ***If your member of congress voted to pass the FY2012 Budget: Why did you vote cuts funds to vital programs that saves the lives of our neighbors abroad?***

If the member of Congress voted in favor of the House-passed FY 2012 budget: In April, you voted for a budget proposal that would have cut vital international assistance programs by 30 percent. These cuts would have threatened our national security and placed millions of lives at risk by denying needed HIV/AIDS treatment, food aid, and vaccinations. At a time when nearly 1 billion people around the world live with chronic hunger, why did you vote to cut funding for vital programs that save lives for mere pennies on the dollar?

■ ***Given the likelihood of more emergencies like the Horn of Africa famine, will you urge the protection of such anti-hunger programs?***

The recent debt ceiling deal creates a new joint committee that will recommend \$1.2 trillion of deficit reduction. Given that nearly 1 billion people in this world suffer from chronic hunger and nearly 30,000 children have died in the last three months in the Horn of Africa due to famine, will you strongly urge your colleagues appointed to the new Joint Committee on Deficit Reduction to protect international anti-hunger programs like food aid, agricultural development, and international disaster assistance from cuts? Please explain in what ways you plan to accomplish that. If not, explain why not.



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**After the town meeting, follow up and spread the word:**

- Write a letter to the editor of your local newspaper.
- Schedule a meeting with your member of Congress to discuss the issue further.
- Record your representative's/senator's response to your question by video, photo, or notes, and share this information via Youtube, Facebook, other forms of social media, or email with your friends. Encourage them to go to a town meeting and ask a similar question or tell them to contact their member of Congress about the issue.