

THE MILLENNIUM DECLARATION TO END HUNGER IN AMERICA

MEMBERS OF THE NATIONAL ANTI-HUNGER ORGANIZATIONS (NAHO)

WE CALL UPON OUR NATION'S LEADERS AND ALL PEOPLE TO JOIN TOGETHER TO END HUNGER IN AMERICA

America carries the wound of more than 35 million people – more than 12 million of them children – whose households cannot afford an adequate and balanced diet. Hunger should have no place at our table. It is inconsistent with our nation's commitment to human rights and objectionable to the American values of fairness, opportunity, family and community.

Our nation is committed to leaving no child behind, but children who are hungry cannot keep up. They cannot develop and thrive mentally and physically; they cannot learn or play with energy and enthusiasm. Hunger also impacts adult health – increasing sick time and diminishing productivity at work – and adds significant emotional stress as they struggle to provide for their family's most basic needs. Hunger stains the soul of America.

Many different points of view unite us in this declaration. Some of us work to end hunger because of deeply held religious beliefs. Others are motivated by hunger's impact on health and cognitive development. Still others are driven by the long-term economic, human and ethical costs of hunger. But all of us are moved by the recognition that America's moral authority in the world is undermined by so much hunger in our midst. Regardless of our religious beliefs or political commitments, we share the conviction that we as a nation must act to end hunger—now.

Ending hunger is a two-step process. We can make rapid progress to feed all who are hungry by expanding and improving effective initiatives like federal nutrition programs and strengthening community-based charitable efforts to fill the gaps in public nutrition programs. This combined effort has the capacity to feed all in need. But we need to go even further, by attacking the root causes of hunger.

Our nation's own experience, and the successes of other countries, demonstrate that this two-pronged strategy can work.

ENDING HUNGER

America made great progress in reducing hunger during the 1960s and 1970s, as the economy grew and the nation built strong public nutrition programs – food stamps, school lunches and breakfasts, summer food, Women Infants and Children (WIC) and elderly nutrition programs. These and other vital nutrition programs provide the fuel for children to develop and learn, and for adults to succeed at work and as parents.

As a country we did not sustain that momentum. One response has been the emergence of a strong private anti-hunger sector: food banks, pantries, soup kitchens, food rescue and other emergency feeding programs have become a key bulwark against hunger for many Americans. Volunteers, businesses, non-profits and religious organizations now help millions of needy Americans put food on the table.

But emergency feeding programs alone cannot feed all who are hungry. They cannot reach the scale necessary to address the desperate need many people face, nor can they provide long-term security for the families they serve. Our country's experience over the past 20 years shows that charity can fill gaps and ameliorate urgent needs. But charity cannot match the capacity of government to protect against hunger.

Ending hunger requires a sustained public commitment to improve federal nutrition programs, and to reduce red tape to reach every household and every individual in need:

- We can begin with the millions of at-risk children who start their school days without food, or who miss meals during the summer months when they lose access to regular year school meal programs. Expanding programs for school lunch, breakfast, summer food, afterschool meals for school age children, and childcare food and WIC for pre-schoolers is essential, cost-effective and a moral imperative.

- The Food Stamp Program, the cornerstone of the nation's hunger programs, has the capacity to wipe out hunger for millions of families. We should reduce the red tape that often keeps working families and others from getting essential food stamp help. We should end arbitrary eligibility excursions that keep out desperately needy people. And we should ensure that the help families get is enough so that they do not run out of food toward the end of each month.

- We also must better protect elderly citizens whose frail bodies and meager incomes make them susceptible to hunger and nutrition-related diseases. Improving food stamps, home delivered meals, congregate feeding programs and commodity donations will ensure that increasing age does not also mean an empty cupboard.

Access to these and related nutrition programs can be improved through the support of innovative community efforts across our country. And all programs can be strengthened to deliver adequate healthy, nutritious meals.

ENDING THE CAUSE OF HUNGER

The root cause of hunger is a lack of adequate purchasing power in millions of households. When individuals and families do not have the resources to buy enough food, hunger ensues. As a nation we must encourage work and also assure all who work that the results of their labor will be sufficient to provide for the basic needs of their families. For those unemployed or disabled, or too old or young to support themselves, other means can ensure sufficient resources to protect them from hunger.

Many steps can be taken to help families achieve independence and security: a strong economy; an adequate minimum wage that, like the one a generation ago, lifts a small family out of poverty; private and public sector provision of jobs and job training; strategies to create and increase assets among working families; affordable housing initiatives; social insurance protection for the unemployed and retired; and health insurance, child care, and refundable tax credits that recognize the importance of meeting basic human needs and that reward the work efforts of low-income families.

A sustained and comprehensive investment in the economic security of all American families will ensure that inadequate income never again results in lack of needed nutrition for the children and adults of our country.

Policies to reward work and savings, along with the ready support of nutritious food programs, will ensure that residents of the United States are not hungry tomorrow or any time in the future. Ending hunger in America will dramatically improve the lives of so many of our children and families. Ending hunger will make us a stronger nation.

This goal is achievable. The time is now. We call upon the President, Congress, and other elected leaders in states and cities to provide decisive leadership to end hunger in America. Let us all work together, private and public leaders, community, religious, business and charitable groups, to achieve an America where hunger is but a distant memory and we live true to the values of a great nation.