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Cutting food stamps is a bad way to balance the budget

by David Beckmann by Religion News Service

Commentary

Washington — "Whoever has two coats must share with anyone who has none; and whoever has food must do likewise." (Luke 3:11)

Many of us are blessed enough to not know what it is like to be hungry, to regularly miss meals, or to consume a diet void of essential nutrients for a healthy life. But now, millions of our brothers and sisters here in the United States may, sadly, be facing these situations because of a reduction in their food stamp benefits.

As of Friday, all households receiving food stamp benefits will see their food budgets shrink as a temporary increase expires. A family of four could lose up to \$36 a month in food stamps (also known as the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program, or SNAP).

For many Americans, \$36 a month may not seem like much, but if you are a family of four with an income of \$22,000 per year, \$36 a month means several missed meals or increased difficulty in providing for your children.

SNAP effectively and efficiently helps more than 47 million low-income Americans put food on the table. Even as unemployment and poverty have remained high, the number of families at risk of hunger has not increased since 2008. Contrary to popular belief, the average individual receiving food stamps is on the program for only nine months until he or she manages to get back on their feet.

And if this \$11 billion reduction in the food stamp program isn't devastating enough, members of the House and Senate have begun to finalize a farm bill that will impact vital anti-hunger programs. Additional reductions to the food stamp program, as proposed in the House and Senate versions of the bill, range from \$4 billion to \$39 billion.

We must remind Congress that God calls our leaders to deliver the needy when they call, the poor and those who have no helper. Gutting programs like SNAP shows a blatant disregard to this divine call.

The farm bill debates don't stop at American shores. Congress will also consider changes to life-saving international food aid programs. International food aid reached more than 66 million people affected by famine, disasters and other emergencies last year.

To be sure, our food aid programs can be more efficient while also better targeting the nutrition needs of women and children in the critical 1,000-day window from pregnancy to age 2. The Senate-passed farm bill begins to address these improvements through important changes that increase the flexibility, cost-effectiveness and efficiency of the current food aid program structure so it can better respond to the complex challenges of global hunger in the 21st century.

Forty-nine million Americans live at risk of hunger, and more than 1 billion people around the world live in extreme poverty. Any policies that create additional poverty among the working poor or further impoverish hungry people around the world are reprehensible. It is unacceptable for lawmakers to take vital food stamp benefits away from millions of Americans who are struggling to recover from the ongoing impacts of the recession. And it is reprehensible for our nation to turn away from people starving in Central America, East Africa and Southeast Asia. In doing so, we break Jesus' commandments of loving God and loving our neighbors.

The solution to these problems isn't complicated. We live in a time where God has granted us the ability to end hunger and poverty. We pray that our lawmakers put an end to political brinksmanship so the economy can function.

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As Congress begins these important discussions, we must hold them accountable. This debate is about more than simply balancing our federal budget -- it's about our values as a nation. It's about our relationship with Christ and how we treat the least of these. It's time we support a farm bill that doesn't increase hunger at home and abroad by protecting food stamps and improving international food aid.

As the Book of Revelation tells us, there will be a time when they will hunger no more, and thirst no more. Now is that time.

[The Rev. David Beckmann, president of Bread for the World, is a Lutheran minister and an economist. He is also a 2010 World Food Prize Laureate and author of *Exodus from Hunger*.]

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