'The hungry need to be heard,' Georgia bishops tell Congress

by Catholic News Service

Savannah, Ga. — Atlanta Archbishop Wilton Gregory and Savannah Bishop Gregory Hartmayer called on lawmakers in Washington to listen to the needs of the hungry at home and abroad as they negotiate the 2013 farm bill.

"At stake in this political wrangling are programs that help the hungry here at home and abroad," the two prelates said in an op-ed published Nov. 13 in the Savannah Morning News daily newspaper.

One of the most contentious issues is the bill's nutrition provision, which includes funding for the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program, or SNAP, once known as food stamps.

The Senate version of the farm bill would cut $4 billion from the program over the next 10 years, and the House version would cut nearly $40 billion over the same period.

A 13.6 percent increase in SNAP, approved in 2009 as part of the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act, expired Nov. 1. It's the first cut in the program since it was started in 1964.

"SNAP is one of the most effective programs to combat hunger in our nation. It is also one of the best-run programs that targets seniors, children, persons with disabilities, unemployed and underemployed workers," Gregory and Hartmayer said.

"The Catholic Church runs many food pantries and other programs that help the hungry. However, all the food pantries out there are not going to be able to fill the hole that cuts to SNAP will leave," they said.

They added, "This is why the Catholic Church has joined other faith communities in opposing changes to
SNAP that would result in cuts that harm the poor and vulnerable."

Their remarks echoed the priorities outlined in Nov. 1 letters sent to House and Senate members by the chairmen of the U.S. bishops' committees on domestic and international issues, in conjunction with the heads of the National Catholic Rural Life Conference, Catholic Relief Services, Catholic Charities USA, and the Society of St. Vincent de Paul.

Another domestic nutrition program covered by the farm bill is The Emergency Food Assistance Program, known as TEFAP. Other funding provisions of the bill cover crop insurance, conservation, commodity subsidies, support for dairy farmers and international food aid.

The Georgia prelates also addressed global food aid, saying the U.S. "must not forget the hungry around the world. Overseas food aid programs in the farm bill are just a tiny fraction of spending, but have a huge impact on the lives of millions of people, supporting farmers in other countries, enabling them "to grow more food, build wells, and organize to negotiate better prices for their crops. This work transforms communities and puts them on the path to self-reliance."

Cutting such funding is a mistake, they said, urging rejection of a Senate proposal to do just that and adoption the House approach that maintains funding for programs that help poor people grow more food today, so they don't need emergency help later."

Gregory and Hartmayer added: "There are too many people these days with a knee-jerk reaction against programs that help the hungry, whether in the U.S. or overseas. We would ask these people to really listen to those in need -- to hear the hungry."

"The hungry are not seeking help because they want to, but because they have to. They are desperately seeking the dignity and honor that comes from providing for themselves and their families, but need a little help to get through these tough times," the prelates said. "They are our brothers and sisters and we must answer their call."


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