

The Des Moines Register

Guest columnist: What they're not saying about hunger in America

August 30, 2011

Written by

NEIL SALOWITZ of West Des Moines is a member of the board of directors of MAZON: A Jewish Response to Hunger

My father, an avid observer of the political process, once gave me some advice while we were watching a televised debate between two presidential candidates. "Don't listen to what they say," my dad suggested. "Listen to what they DON'T say."

During the recent Republican presidential candidate debate in Ames, and in subsequent campaign statements, I've been listening to what the candidates aren't saying — and it makes me both sad and angry.

Not once have I heard one candidate talk about how they intend to help the least fortunate among us get back on their feet in the wake of the ongoing economic challenges. On the other side of the aisle, both the Democratic leadership and President Obama have also been far too quiet in terms of addressing the real, immediate needs of Americans who have been battered by the current economic crisis.

As a board member of MAZON: A Jewish Response to Hunger, I am aware of the horrifying statistics that show the prevalence of hunger in America. Nearly one in four U.S. households with children struggled to afford enough food for themselves and their families in 2010. For households without children, 49 of 50 states reported food hardship rates higher than 10 percent in 2009-2010 and five states reported rates of 20 percent or higher. Fifty million Americans — including 17 million children — are unsure if or when they will have their next meal.

Here in Iowa, over 382,000 residents are receiving assistance from the federal Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) — an 11 percent increase in the past 12 months.

So where is the outrage from our politicians? Where is the outrage from all of us? Are we so occupied with our own problems that we can't — or won't — assist our fellow citizens who need our help? Is this who we've become as Iowans? Is this who we've become as Americans?

No one can predict with certainty where the economy is headed, but it seems clear that things are not going to get better quickly. For many of us, it amounts to simple belt-tightening on discretionary spending like meals at restaurants or family vacations. But for large and increasing numbers of our fellow Americans, continued hard times means cutting back on what most of us take for granted: three decent meals a day.

Our elected officials are in the position to help alleviate this shameful situation. With the current focus on reducing federal and state deficits, however, programs like SNAP that are instrumental in preventing mass hunger in this country are at risk of being eliminated. We must take action to help those who struggle to put food on their tables and those who are slipping out of the middle class and into a lifetime of poverty and despair.

It is critically important that we keep pressure on our elected officials. Write letters. Send emails. Make phone calls. Visit their offices.

With each effort we not only bear witness to this tragedy, but can demand that our legislators refrain from balancing the budget on the backs of the least fortunate among us. By raising our voices, we can prevent our elected officials from looking away and ignoring this devastating problem.

Economic hard times bring out both the worst and the best in people. It's clear we're seeing the worst from our leaders in today's hyper-partisan political environment.

But we can summon the best in each other and in ourselves by working to alleviate hunger in our communities. We must continue to stand up and say to those in power, "We're listening to what you're saying — and to what you're not saying."