

# Detroit Free Press

## Guest commentary: Americans need supercommittee to maintain food assistance

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The deficit reduction supercommittee which includes U.S. Reps. from Michigan Dave Camp and Fred Upton, must report recommendations to Congress for \$1.5 trillion in debt savings on November 23. The Super Committee's proceedings are behind closed doors, but we assume that nearly every government program will be scrutinized.

MAZON: A Jewish Response to Hunger has been dedicated to fighting hunger nationwide for 25 years. We've experienced economic upswings and downturns and have seen how these events impact the prevalence of hunger in America. Our longevity in this space affords us a unique perspective on the budget process, and we are disturbed by a picture that's coming into focus before our eyes.

For the first time in generations, funding for the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP, formerly known as Food Stamps) could be in jeopardy. SNAP has historically enjoyed bipartisan support and protection. SNAP is one of the government's most effective programs, providing essential resources to a highly targeted group of people who meet very specific eligibility requirements. It also generates millions of dollars in economic activity in the communities where the benefits are used.

SNAP provides food security for 45.3 million Americans, just as Social Security and Medicare provide essential retirement and health care security for the elderly. It is a critical part of the federal safety net, keeping families across the country from starving. So why isn't SNAP also considered "untouchable" the way Social Security and Medicare are? As a nation committed to taking care of the elderly, shouldn't we also be committed to helping people of all ages avoid poverty and starvation? Isn't taking care of our own one of those time-honored values reflecting what we stand for as a nation?

Vocal critics argue that programs like SNAP aren't necessary, and that charitable organizations can step up to make up the difference. If only that were true! The reality is that America's hunger epidemic, one that afflicts one of every six Americans and one in four children, is far too immense for charity to take on by itself.

Charitable organizations – including MAZON's nationwide partners on the front lines – are already doing their best to bear a heavy burden. But how much more can we realistically expect them to shoulder? Last year, what is arguably the nation's largest anti-hunger organization, Feeding America, had a program budget of \$678 million – enough money to provide 403 million meals. That's a lot of meals. But simple math says that same \$678 million – those 403 million

meals - would feed each of the 50 million Americans struggling with food insecurity for less than three days. Three days!

And what about the private sector? Well, Walmart recently committed \$2 billion through the year 2015 to fund anti-hunger programs in America. Theirs is an unprecedented commitment. Unfortunately, that's not enough either. Even if that company donated all of its profits, it would still represent only 25% of the \$68 million funding allocated to SNAP in FY 2011. Not even one of America's largest corporation can fully address hunger in America on its own.

Were it not for SNAP, hunger in America would reach epidemic proportions. Devastating images of malnourished people would no longer come solely from developing nations. They would be a daily reality on our streets, in our communities, all across the nation. We cannot allow that to happen.

And so we assert that SNAP is woven as tightly into the fabric of the safety net as are Medicare and Social Security. SNAP is just as effectively safeguarding millions of people from failing in their efforts to survive. As a nation committed to caring for our own, we have a responsibility to protect all three of these effective federal safety net programs – Medicare, Social Security, and SNAP – to ensure the security of all our fellow Americans.

Reps. Camp and Upton, we know your task is no easy job. But neither is going hungry. MAZON urges you to be strong voices for preserving SNAP – and extending those time-honored American values to all.

*Joel Jacob is Board Chairman of MAZON: A Jewish Response to Hunger, a national nonprofit organization dedicated to preventing and alleviating hunger among people of all faiths and backgrounds. Abby Leibman is president and CEO, MAZON: A Jewish Response to Hunger, and a nationally recognized leader in women's rights and social justice advocacy.*