



Where not to cut the budget

By Lois Frank

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It has been said that the budget of government is a moral document — one that reflects the values and priorities of the people it represents. Today, as budget debates rage, we face a test of our moral fortitude as a nation. Take the 2012 farm bill, the structure and funding of which our members of Congress are in the midst of negotiating.

Calling this legislation the “farm bill” is a bit of a misnomer, as it includes provisions that cover much more than just farms. In fact, the most important title in the farm bill is not about farms at all, but about federal nutrition programs, a vital safety net preventing millions of Americans from devastating hunger.

Today, 50 million Americans — including 17 million children — are uncertain if or when they will have their next meal. In Georgia, where we boast the 10th-highest poverty rate in America, the numbers are more heartbreaking. A staggering 1.7 million Georgians — nearly 18 percent of the state’s population — struggle to put food on the table every day. Hardest hit are the 610,722 young children whose futures are at risk. Recent research shows that poverty and lack of adequate nutrition not only affects children’s achievement in school, but also reduces their potential earnings as adults.

Enter the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP, formerly food stamps), which is the largest and, according to MAZON: A Jewish Response to Hunger, one of the nation’s foremost food justice organizations, the most important program in the farm bill. SNAP is the single most effective and far-reaching bulwark against hunger in the United States. Nearly 46 million Americans, including one in four children, rely on SNAP benefits to eat.

For four decades, SNAP has enjoyed strong bipartisan support. Deemed “a government reform that worked” in the National Journal, the program serves as the nation’s first line of defense against hunger. If it is weakened, many millions of seniors, people with disabilities, children, struggling parents and others will suffer. If it is weakened, the nation will see worse health and educational outcomes and higher health costs.

Our elected officials are responsible for safeguarding the strength of our nation. However, programs like SNAP, instrumental in preventing mass hunger, are at risk. It is critically important that we let our elected officials know that they should refrain from balancing the budget on the backs of the least fortunate among us. We must help those who struggle to put food on their tables and those who are slipping into a lifetime of poverty and despair.

By raising our voices, we can prevent our elected officials from looking away and ignoring this devastating problem. Write letters. Send emails. Make phone calls. Visit their offices. No one can predict

with certainty where the economy is headed, but it seems clear that things are not going to get better quickly. We cannot allow our continued hard times to destroy the lives of millions of families who make up the very fabric of our nation. This is our moral choice.

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