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Older Adult HUNGER

AMERICA'S Silent Epidemic

By Jo Ann Jenkins

[Editor's Note: The president of AARP Foundation Jo Ann Jenkins's remarks join articles in this special issue by two AARP Foundation attorneys, Barbara Jones and Susan Ann Silverstein. The AARP Foundation itself is a sponsor of the special issue.]

Every day over nine million older Americans are at risk of hunger.

While people of all ages are affected by hunger, older people are particularly vulnerable to food insecurity as they face additional health care costs, increasing lack of mobility, and reduced earning potential. Those aged 50–59 are either too young or too old to qualify for many of the public benefit programs that would help them, and the increase in multigenerational “grand families” has strained the limited resources of many older adults.

In the last ten years, the number of food insecure adults over the age of 50 rose 79 percent. The bulk of this increase occurred after 2007, with the onset of the great recession.

At AARP Foundation, hunger is one of the four priority areas we have identified—along with housing, isolation, and income—where we believe our actions will have the greatest impact. These are the most serious issues facing Americans 50 and older. These issues occur often—and together. By acting on these four priorities at the same time, we can prevent people from falling into permanent crisis.

Older adult hunger is an urgent problem, compounded by the particular vulnerabilities of older adults in today's still shaky job market. Older adults who lost their jobs after 2007 had a much more difficult time finding new work than younger people. When they did, they earned 21 percent less than in their previous jobs.

People 62 and older who have lost their jobs have fared the worst. Only 41 percent found new jobs after eighteen months of looking.

Rather than accommodate ourselves to this bleak landscape of older adult hunger and prolonged joblessness, government and the nonprofit sector must act in ways that will provide immediate relief and sustainable long-term solutions.

The Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) stands today as one of America's most effective antipov-erty programs. However, just one-third of the eligible men and women 60 and older participate in SNAP, compared to two-thirds of those in other age groups who are eligible. AARP Foundation is helping seniors enroll in SNAP. We are also speaking out against proposed funding cuts in the program, and we are emphasizing the need to streamline eligibility and reduce barriers to access.

SNAP is at once a most consequential tool in the fight to end hunger and an economic support program. The average monthly SNAP benefit of \$119 for struggling, low-income people 60 and older boosts their budgets and helps them avoid the impossible choice between feeding themselves and filling their medical prescriptions. Far from being an economic drag, SNAP is a stimulus. Every five dollars spent on SNAP adds \$9.20 to local economies, from jobs at grocery stores to food processors to farming.

Our work on SNAP is one key element of AARP Foundation's Drive to End Hunger. We are also funding Hunger Innovation Grants that help nonprofit organizations develop or expand solution-oriented programs at the community level; these programs combat senior hunger and can be replicated.

We are raising awareness of and fighting hunger through our collaboration with Hendrick Motorsports and the race car driver Jeff Gordon. Last year alone, our involvement with NASCAR races helped us provide almost six million meals and drive corporate and individual donor commitments with an expected value of almost \$15 million. This money is used to support local food banks and to fund AARP Foundation's SNAP enrollment efforts and our Hunger Grant programs.

As we carry out these activities, we are focused on building a research platform that will support effective policy interventions. A report we issued last year, *Food Insecurity Among Older Adults*, is the first in a series of research projects we are undertaking to shed light on the causes and consequences of older adult hunger (AARP FOUNDATION, FOOD INSECURITY AMONG OLDER ADULTS (Aug. 2011), <http://aarp.us/qSD50E>).

Even as hunger among people 50 and older has grown substantially, it remains in many ways a silent epidemic. Solving this problem of hunger—providing short-term relief and long-term answers—requires not only compassionate legal advocacy but also careful analysis. This special issue of CLEARINGHOUSE REVIEW: JOURNAL OF POVERTY LAW AND POLICY makes a notable contribution to that effort.

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