

SOUTH FLORIDA SunSentinel

This year, politicians must resolve to do more for the hungry | Opinion

By TED DEUTCH AND ABBY LEIBMAN

SPECIAL TO THE SUN SENTINEL | FEB 02, 2022

For many, the recent holidays were a time of charity. But in the first few weeks of the year, the holiday food drives have vanished along with the seasonal decorations and New Years' resolutions. While the holiday tradition of giving is a beautiful, important custom that helps meet the enormous immediate need in our communities, food insecurity cannot be addressed with fleeting kindness and charity at the end of the year. Systemic challenges require systemic solutions.

Over the nearly two years of the pandemic, as the economic impacts of COVID-19 exacerbated existing inequities in our society, we have seen overwhelming evidence demonstrating the efficacy — and necessity — of strong governmental programs. According to recent USDA figures, the number of Americans experiencing food insecurity did not grow significantly between 2019 and 2021 — a testament to the critical investments we made as a nation in nutrition safety net programs during the pandemic's upheavals. Millions of families across the country avoided severe hunger during the initial COVID-19 crisis because of our government's actions in the pandemic's early days: boosting critical initiatives like the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP, formerly food stamps) and creating the Pandemic Electronic Benefits Transfer (P-EBT) program, as well as instituting the Child Tax Credit, which directly increased families' purchasing power.

Only with decisive government action were we able to avert further deterioration of an already dire crisis during the pandemic. But some 38.3 million Americans — 10.5% of all American households — still face food insecurity. Approximately 2.5 million Floridians face hunger today, including about 800,000 of our children and nearly 300,000 of our seniors. With this in mind, the course of action is clear: From local to state to federal governments, every leader must act to ease the burdens of food insecurity facing their constituents, not just in Florida, but nationwide.

We know what works. Now policymakers at all levels of government must support and strengthen the safety net programs that have so recently again proven to be effective. SNAP has long been established as America's most effective tool in combating hunger; the P-EBT nutrition assistance expands on and leans into this success. The Child Tax Credit shows the power of simply allowing families greater freedom to buy the food they need. The programs included in the Build Back Better Act, which was passed by the House of Representatives but remains stalled in the Senate, would be another critical step toward meeting American families' most basic needs.

These are common-sense, proven policies and programs that will make sure families know when and from where their next meals are coming. Such policies and programs also reflect the kind of communal accountability that stands at the heart of the Jewish teachings that guide us both. When it comes to feeding hungry families, we are both compelled by a deep-seated understanding of civic duty, as well as a shared moral compass. As long as 5,000 years ago, our Jewish tradition taught that caring for the vulnerable is a communal obligation, incumbent not just on good-hearted neighbors, but on the most powerful among us. The same spirit is found across all faith traditions, as well as in the very best of our shared American ideals.

The responsibility that we share for one another cannot be cast aside, left to the goodwill and varying fortunes of individuals. It must come from the American people and our representatives.

Holding elected office is a privilege and comes with responsibility, to constituents and country. Elected officials can, and should, use the power of their offices to lift up those who struggle; to ensure that laws, policies and opportunities are fair and available without bias; and to implement the solutions that we know work to tackle the urgent issues in our communities. As we move further into 2022, our leaders must do their part to give all Americans the security of knowing they'll be able to buy food and feed their families today, tomorrow, next month and next year.

Congressman Ted Deutch represents Florida's 22nd District in the U.S. House of Representatives. Abby J. Leibman is president and CEO of MAZON: A Jewish Response to Hunger.