

Statement of Representative James P. McGovern  
FRAC/A2H/CACFP Conference  
March 3, 2008

Thank you, Jim, for the introduction. Let me also thank Vicki Escerra and everyone at FRAC, America's Second Harvest, and the National CACFP Forum for inviting Jo Ann and me to speak to you today.

Before I begin, let me also thank my good friend and colleague, Jo Ann Emerson. Jo Ann and I serve as Co-Chairs of both the Congressional Hunger Center and the House Hunger Caucus. We've partnered together on the Food Stamp Challenge and on many other efforts to end hunger here in America and around the world. She is a tremendous champion for the hungry and I'm honored to call her my friend.

Jo Ann, thank you for all you do.

Many of you have heard me say this before, but I simply can't say it enough – Hunger is a political condition. And it is past time we end this scourge once and for all.

We are the most abundant nation in the history of the world. We have the means to end hunger in America. Unfortunately, we have lacked the political will to make it happen. All of us -- the political establishment, the business community, educational institutions, and individuals – can and must do more.

We know the facts.

Almost 36 million Americans go hungry every year. 12 million are children.

Food banks are finding it difficult to stock their shelves because of rising food prices and increasing demand.

Year after year, we have the same budget fights over the Commodity Supplemental Food Program, WIC, summer feeding programs and other anti-hunger programs.

The average food stamp benefit is one dollar per meal per day, and the minimum benefit hasn't changed since 1977.

Yet – collectively – we have decided not to take the necessary steps, and to make the necessary investments, to put an end to hunger.

Shame on us.

The excuses are as familiar as they are tiresome – not enough resources; tight budgets; other priorities.

That's simply not good enough. Not anymore.

For too long, the hungry have been cast aside in political and policy battles in Congress.

The best opportunity we have to do something right now is sitting before us. The Farm Bill is still being negotiated and the nutrition title sits right at the center of the debate.

We don't have a lot of soy or cotton fields in Central Massachusetts. So the nutrition title is the only reason I have for supporting the Farm Bill. To be frank, I wouldn't vote for the Farm Bill if it weren't for a strong, well-funded nutrition title.

And I won't vote for any temporary extension of the Farm Bill if it doesn't include a dramatic increase in funding for the nutrition title.

Many of you may know this, but House and Senate negotiators are trying to work on a deal that will pave the way for a full reauthorization of the Farm Bill, yet the Bush Administration continues to oppose any attempts at compromise.

Let me be clear – there are many aspects of the Farm Bill that I am not fond of and, if it were up to me, the nation's farm policy would be dramatically different. But I'm willing to swallow some of what I don't like as long as there is a strong nutrition title in the reauthorization.

The House- and Senate-passed Farm Bills include the biggest expansion in the food stamp program in decades. Now, I wish both bills included more funding than they did, but they were both good starts and the nutrition policies that made up these bills – increasing the standard deduction, increasing the minimum benefit, addressing ABAWDS and asset limits, and indexing food stamps and TEFAP, just to name a few – are all good common sense provisions that should be included in the final bill.

Even though there are very good provisions in both the House- and Senate-passed versions, there is one thing that is sorely lacking. Unfortunately, neither bill lifts the requirement that legal immigrants must wait five years before being eligible for food stamps.

I don't understand the moral reasoning behind that decision – but it is something that we must eventually fix.

You should know that when this process started last year, a major expansion of the nutrition title wasn't even part of the conversation. In fact, there were many of my colleagues who couldn't tell you what the average or minimum food stamp benefit is today.

That's why we decided to act.

Jo Ann and I, along with other Members of Congress, took the Food Stamp Challenge to raise awareness of the challenges facing food stamp recipients and we introduced the Feeding America's Families Act to show what a strong nutrition title would really

look like. They were important actions that unified the nutrition community and rallied action on Capitol Hill. The result is what we have today – the strong nutrition titles in the Farm Bill.

We wouldn't have these improvements if not for all of you. You helped make the difference. Your activism, your phone calls, your letters and your visits to both Members of Congress and their staffs helped us get to where we are today.

We've come a long way as an anti-hunger community over the past year. The anti-hunger community is stronger and more unified today than I've ever seen it.

But our work is not done.

We need to finish this Farm Bill. It must have significant funding for the nutrition title. Without significant funding, I will not only oppose the bill – I will work to defeat it.

And you should too.

But the Farm Bill is not the only thing we need to do. There are rumors that another stimulus package may be moving through Congress in the next few months. If there is a second stimulus package, it must include Food Stamps.

We all know that Food Stamps are an excellent economic stimulus, and we know that a temporary expansion of the program should have been part of the first economic stimulus package. You have my word that I will continue to fight for the inclusion of Food Stamps in any new economic stimulus package.

We must also start looking for the next opportunities. The Child Nutrition Reauthorization Act will start to move soon, and we need to gear up for that. For example, we need to educate Members of Congress, the press and the public that there are children who receive meals during the school year but don't receive food during the summer when school isn't in session.

We've made significant gains over the past year – with the inclusion of the simplified summer food program and increased funding for WIC in the appropriations bills we passed at the end of last year. We're close with the Farm Bill and I truly hope there's a deal soon.

But whether there is a deal or not, we must still work to end hunger in America.

You know, I've never met any Member of Congress who's for hunger. But – having said that – there are many Members of Congress who don't always do the right thing. Our goal needs to be to make it clear to our elected officials – “you're either with us or against us. And if you're against us – there's a political price to be paid.”

I don't want any Member of Congress to feel comfortable in neglecting initiatives that help end hunger – or that any one of them has a pass on this issue.

It really is stunning – when you think of it – we have money for war, tax cuts for the wealthy, and corporate subsidies but we're told we don't have enough to make sure no one in America goes hungry.

One of my college history professors used to tell me that the world will not get better on its own. It requires good, like minded people to get things done.

We are those like minded people.

You are the movement.

Let's get to work and let's end hunger starting today.

Thank you.