

Attacks on Food Stamps by Republican Presidential Candidates Threaten the Poor

When it comes to programs to aid the poor, some of the leading candidates for the Republican presidential nomination are rushing to the bottom. Newt Gingrich and Rick Santorum have played the race card, implying that Food Stamps and other programs for those in need are programs for Blacks. But the facts are to the contrary -- only one quarter of Food Stamp recipients are African-American. Gingrich has also said that poor children have no one around them who works. In fact, the majority of poor children have working parents. Comments like these cheapen public and political discourse as they distort the facts.

Due to its official renaming as the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program, Food Stamps is now known as SNAP. Gingrich and Santorum have also criticized the growth in SNAP participation in recent years. However, that growth was due to recession and a slow recovery. SNAP and other programs for the needy are designed to expand when economic times are hard. This counter-cyclical increase in spending both aids the poor and helps fuel job growth.

The truth is that the SNAP program provides vitally important food aid to help the needy achieve a nutritionally adequate diet. The program currently serves 22 million low income households with 46 million household members. Three quarters of participants are in households that include children and one quarter are in households that include elderly or disabled individuals. Only low income households are eligible - the vast majority of participants have net incomes lower than the official poverty standard, currently \$18,530 a year for a family of three. Benefits can be used only to purchase food and are meager in amount, averaging but \$135 per person a month. Even with these benefits, about half of Food Stamp households report that they still having difficulty in obtaining enough food and about one fifth report that they have had to reduce their food intake due to insufficient funds.

Mitt Romney, as well as Gingrich and Santorum, are urging SNAP "reforms" based on the "welfare reforms" enacted by a Republican-controlled Congress in 1996. Those reforms "block granted" cash assistance, placing an arbitrary cap on federal spending and repealing national protective standards. Block granting cash welfare assistance reduced benefit receipt from 60% of poor families pre-reform to only about 20% of poor families today, and from over 80% of eligible families pre-reform to less than 40% today. Block granting cash aid also led to sharply reduced benefits that in every state are now less than half the poverty standard.

Because of the cuts in cash assistance, the SNAP program now aids several times more poor children than cash assistance does. In an average month in 2010, Food Stamps aided 8.9 million families with children while cash assistance aided only 1.9 million.

Block granting SNAP would threaten the same result that block granting welfare cash assistance has had: far fewer needy households aided by SNAP and sharply reduced SNAP benefit amounts.

A contraction of SNAP assistance would pose an especially grave threat to poor families headed by single mothers, as the cuts in cash assistance have made SNAP increasingly indispensable to these families. In 2010, about 40% of single mothers were poor and about 40% received SNAP. Only 10% received cash welfare assistance.

Poverty rates are already exceptionally high in the United States compared to other high income countries. A SNAP retrenchment would raise poverty rates even higher. In 2010, SNAP brought combined income over the poverty line for four million individuals whose cash income was below the poverty line.

Public discourse about poverty should be based on fact and not on myth or stereotype. Proposed changes in programs that aid the needy should be based on real evidence that the changes will reduce poverty. These are goals that can be embraced by all candidates and parties.

(Jan. 17, 2012). (For further information, contact Timothy Casey, tcasey@legalmomentum.org)