What the Supercommittee's "Failure" Means

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By Triada Stampas

Though it does not seem likely that the Congressional supercommittee in charge of reducing the national deficit by $1.2 trillion over ten years will be able to come together with a solution, they have not actually failed yet.

The supercommittee has until this Wednesday – the day before Thanksgiving – to produce a bill.

What are the stakes if the supercommittee is able to mend their differences? In their negotiations, *all federal government programs will be fair game for cuts, restructuring or elimination*. This would include the programs that are the foundations of our country's hunger safety net – the food stamp program (SNAP), and the federal emergency food assistance program (TEFAP), which is the single largest source of emergency food in New York City and has comprised approximately half of the food distributed by the Food Bank For New York City in recent years.

So, then, what if the increasingly likely prospect that the supercommittee is unable to agree on a bill comes to pass? In that case, automatic across-the-board cuts of $1.2 trillion will take effect on January 1, 2013. Half of those cuts will be in non-defense programs, with certain exemptions (including programs such as TEFAP, SNAP and the Section 8 housing benefit). However, other essential programs that low-income Americans rely on including WIC (Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children) and community development block grants would be included in the cuts.

Right now, the leadership of the Agricultural Committee has provided a proposal to the Supercommittee that would restrict the ability of states to coordinate LIHEAP, the home heating subsidy, with food stamps. This "Heat or Eat" program, allows the 14 states that currently implement it to adjust the formula used to calculate food stamp benefits in order to provide Americans who struggle to keep the heat on over the winter months with a greater food stamp benefit so that they do not have to chose between keeping the heat on an keeping food on the table.

This proposed restriction would result in $4.2 billion in cuts to food stamp benefits nationwide. It would primarily affect people in public housing, seniors and people with disabilities. It would affect approximately 90,000 households in NYC alone, each of which would lose on average more than $100 in monthly food stamp benefits.

Both options put low-income Americans in distinct danger at every step of the deficit reduction process. It is important that we tell our legislators now that they need to protect our most vulnerable neighbors during deficit reduction. Help the Food Bank remind those in Congress that cutting these programs and forcing low-income individuals to choose between food or heat in the winter months is not an option.

Triada Stampas works to inform government officials, policy makers and the general public about the needs of the city's network of emergency food organizations and the more than 1.3 million people who rely on them; and to advance public policy that meets those needs.