Irene Relief: Forecasting Danger for Hunger Relief?

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Earlier this month, when one of the worst storms in recent history laid waste to large swaths of land from Virginia to Vermont, thousands of families were dislocated, experienced flood damage or lost power for several days. Some Congress Members, including House Majority Leader Eric Cantor, suggeste suggested that disaster aid distributed by the government should be offset by an equal amount of federal spending cuts.

You may be asking what this has to do with the Food Bank For New York City. Well, first, Congress passed a major, $2.4-trillion deficit reduction bill this summer that puts funding for programs that provide assistance to our most vulnerable neighbors at risk, so when discussion turns to additional federal spending cuts, we pay close attention. Second, as a key piece ofour city's disaster response network, we care deeply about the operations of government relief programs.

But perhaps most importantly, this move to require spending cuts in order to provide emergency relief for Americans hurt by a natural disaster is a poignant example of the importance of our country's entitlement programs – including food stamps (SNAP) – which could be threatened in D.C.'s de D.C.'s deficit reduction talks.

The annual budgets of entitlement programs are not set in stone. The reason for this is that entitlement programs are designed to respond to changing conditions, growing when need increases and shrinking when no longer needed, unencumbered by budget limitations or political infighting.

In the days after the storm, as families assessed the damage, New York and other affected states began issuing replacement SNAP benefits to food stamp recipients who lost food purchased with their food stamps as a result of the storm – an effort that the Food Bank worked hard to support in areas of New York City that experienced power outages. . In the hardest hit areas, Disaster SNAP extended benefits to households that suddenly found themselves in need of food assistance.

If SNAP were not an entitlement program, this immediate response to a spike in need would not be possible. If the SNAP budget were limited or cut so that it could no longer have this flexibility, it would take an act of Congress to authorize emergency spending – and families in need would have to go without food assistance while waiting for that process to conclude. If your county was hit by a sudden storm like Irene, if large layoffs were experienced after an unexpected recession or if you simply fell on hard times, programs like SNAP are there to make sure you and your family will have enough to eat.

While the similarities between hurricane relief and the relief the Food Bank provides year-round to New Yorkers in need may not be immediately apparent – both must be able to assess the level of need in affected communities and respond in kind. If this is not allowed to happen without obstruction, people could be forced to go without the food they need to get by and recover.

Want your elected officials to protect important food assistance programs? Send a message to Congress now!