

Hunger After Superstorm Sandy: Why We Need The Kosher and Halal Food Act

by William Rapfogel & Mohammad Razvi

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More than one million New Yorkers are in danger of going hungry every year, according to the National Coalition Against Hunger. Even before super storm Sandy hit, our city's emergency food providers saw a 20 percent increase in the need for their services in 2012 — with the fastest growth in demand from families with children. Since Sandy, the number of people who need food assistance is only increasing.

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Observant Jewish and Muslim families are not immune from this crisis. In fact, an estimated 330,000 Jewish households in New York City and 300,000 Muslim households in the tri-state area live in poverty. Because of the dietary requirements of their faith, many families we serve are unable to rely on the federally funded network of food pantries to feed their families. As social service providers, it is not unusual for us to see dozens of families in a single day who are going hungry because there are no Kosher and Halal options in food pantries. And since the storm, we have had to double our efforts to serve families in the hardest-hit communities while continuing to help those in need outside of Zone A.

The examples are heartbreaking. After Sandy, a Muslim single mother with three young children did not have enough money to go grocery shopping. When she sought help at a public food pantry, none of the food available was Halal. A low-income Jewish family with two children under the age of five lost power during the storm and all of their Kosher food was ruined. Volunteers came to the neighborhood to help out in the only ways they could, but without any kosher food.

For these needy New Yorkers, the resources simply are not there and they are faced with an impossible choice -- sacrificing their faith or going hungry. Imagine looking into your child's eyes and telling him or her that there is no protein for dinner.

Thankfully, Senator Kirsten Gillibrand and Congressman Joe Crowley have introduced legislation that would ensure that some of our state's most vulnerable families will no longer have to go hungry. As part of the Emergency Food Assistance Program (TEFAP), the Kosher and Halal Food Act of 2013 would increase the supply of food for Kosher and Halal food pantries to address this demand, hopefully decreasing the number of New Yorkers going hungry in 2013 and beyond.

The legislation would also require the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) to target, label, and track distribution of Kosher and Halal food to ensure that food bank operators can properly identify the protein for those who need it. Providing these types of meals would help so many in need, and would come at no extra cost to the state.

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We agree with Senator Gillibrand when she says that “we must take steps to help the neediest observant families and children get access to nutritious food during these difficult times.” Now more than ever, as Sandy has devastated our most vulnerable populations and caused even more families to slip into poverty, we must take this simple step to ensure that no one is left behind.

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