

Advocates lobby to save hunger programs from budget ax

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September 8, 2011

WASHINGTON (RNS) Anti-hunger advocates are racing to save federal programs that feed needy families from being automatically slashed if Congress can't agree on a deficit reduction plan this fall.

As Congress resumes deficit-reduction talks this month, advocates for the poor worry that programs such as the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) will suffer drastic cuts and hurt families that are already struggling.

One in five Americans receives SNAP benefits.

"Despite major gains made for hungry and poor people in 2010, millions of households are still struggling to put food on the table," said Rev. David Beckmann, president of the ecumenical anti-hunger group Bread for the World.

Congress's Joint Select Committee on Deficit Reduction -- commonly known as the "Super Committee" -- must agree on deficit reduction measures by Nov. 23 or automatic across-the-board cuts will be implemented.

The U.S. Department of Agriculture reported Wednesday (Sept. 7) that 59 percent of all "food-insecure" households in 2010 participated in at least one of the three largest nutrition assistance programs.

USDA also reports increased participation in these programs in recent years due to high unemployment.

USDA data show that 14.5 percent of U.S. households suffered from food insecurity in 2010, a figure that's been virtually unchanged for

the past three years.

"The fact that the overall figures remain unchanged but SNAP participation is at an all-time high speaks to the necessity of safety-net programs," added Beckman. "The Bible calls on us to protect the `least of these."