



Officials: Farm bill would help fight hunger / Durbin's proposal would increase federal resources for agencies

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By JAYETTE BOLINSKI

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The Central Illinois Food Bank could see an increase in food donations - particularly meat, fruits and vegetables - from the U.S. government if the federal farm bill is passed, officials said Wednesday.

Meanwhile, families over central Illinois are having trouble making ends meet and putting food on the table as a result of higher gas prices, hikes in utility costs and other rising expenses.

"For a lot of us, Thanksgiving is going to be a day of celebration with our families and good times and relaxation and more food than we know what to do with. We'll eat more than we should, which is another American tradition," U.S. Sen. Dick Durbin said.

"But for one out of 10 people in the United States, hunger is still an issue. Children who don't have a good meal each morning, as they should, before they head off to school. Families that struggle from paycheck to paycheck to make sure there is something in the refrigerator and something in the cabinets. Food banks all around central Illinois try to reach out and help people."

Durbin, speaking at the Central Illinois Food Bank, 2000 E. Moffat St., said language from his Hunger-Free Communities Act has been included in the farm bill. His proposal increases federal resources available to organizations working to end hunger in their communities.

The farm bill, approved unanimously by the Senate Agriculture Committee during the summer, stalled on the Senate floor just before Thanksgiving recess.

"It is likely to come back to us in December," Durbin said. "It was bogged down not because of the farm bill but because of all the other issues they wanted to include in it to make it a big old Christmas tree."

Pam Molitoris, executive director of the Central Illinois Food Bank, said the increase in commodities from the government will help the agency address a growing need for food, especially in rural areas. For example, she said, a food pantry in Gillespie is serving 30 percent more people this year than last.

"It's not that they have less food, but because the need is higher they're giving out less food," she said.

The public can help, too.

"What we need from the public ... is when there's a food drive to get out and give food. We need people to make donations so we can cover our costs of getting food here and getting food out to our agencies," she said.

"And we also, most importantly, need people to understand we're dealing with hunger every day. This is not a holiday issue."

Durbin said that while things are being done to address the symptoms of hunger, not nearly enough is being done to address the disease.

"It's time for us, I think, to take an honest assessment that in this great and prosperous nation that we live in, that the gap between rich and poor continues to increase. That's not good, it's not morally right, and from a political viewpoint I don't think it's sustainable," he said.

"It means rewriting the tax code to make sure we help families on the lower end of the spectrum rather than to concentrate on tax breaks for the wealthiest people. I think it makes quite an argument for education being improved so that people graduating from school have a chance for a decent job ... There's just a whole spectrum of things we need to do to change this."

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