

New domestic-poverty stats a wake-up call, ethicists say

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WASHINGTON (ABP) — New government numbers revealing that nearly one in six Americans lived in households that struggled to afford food at some point in 2008 ought to be a wake-up call for Christians, according to two Baptist ethicists.

An annual USDA [report](#) released Nov. 16 reported that 17 million households — 14.6 percent of all homes in the United States — were "food insecure" and had difficulty putting enough food on the table at times during the year.



Suzii Paynter

That compares to 13 million households — 11.1 percent — who worried about their next meal in 2007 and represents the highest level recorded since the government started taking national food-security surveys in 1995.

"Thanksgiving is coming, and many Americans are struggling to meet their basic food needs," said Robert Parham of the Baptist Center for Ethics. "Being thankful is not enough this year. Christians need to say thanks and seek justice for those at risk of hunger."

The USDA found that one-third of food-insecure households had "very low" food security, meaning that some household members had reduced food

intake and eating patterns interrupted at times during the year. That is 5.7 percent of all U.S. households, or about 6.7 million. The number is 2 million more households than the 4.1 percent of U.S. households with "very low" food security reported in 2007. That was also the highest on record.

"We're calling on the faith community to respond to these hunger needs," said Suzii Paynter, director of the Christian Life Commission of the Baptist General Convention of Texas.

Paynter's agency plans to bring 50 Baptist hunger advocates to a Nov. 19 summit at Baylor University to discuss ways to eradicate hunger in Texas by 2015. In all more than 240 representatives from advocacy groups, social-service providers and state and local governments are expected to attend the event. It is sponsored by the [Texas Hunger Initiative](#), a network born as a result of the annual Texas Baptist Offering for World Hunger.

Paynter said the idea is to coordinate efforts of the public and private sector to make existing programs more effective.

"We have all of these resources in place," she said. "They are not coordinated. They are not working together."

She said the summit would "the first time we've ever had all these people in a room."

"This is a perfect example of federal, state, faith-based, nonprofit, advocacy and a major university working together successfully for the good of the community and the less fortunate," said Bill Ludwig, regional administrator for the USDA. "No matter what the final outcome and results produced by the summit, this adventure has already been a huge success by bringing so many individuals from different walks of life to the table together."

Paynter said the No. 1 priority of the gathering will be to address the problem of children who qualify for free breakfast and lunch programs

during the school year but have nowhere to turn in the summertime. In Texas, about 40 percent of families eligible for free food at school do not take part in the federal Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program.

Paynter said the Texas CLC is asking churches and missions in low-income areas to fill the gap by offering breakfast and lunch feeding programs in their communities during the summer.

"We've had a very good response," she said. "Churches are willing to say, 'We could do that for June, July and August.'"

The day after releasing the USDA report, Agriculture Secretary Tom Vilsack asked the Senate Agriculture Committee to reauthorize nutrition-assistance programs that provide a safety net to those with critical needs.

"The reauthorization of the Child Nutrition Programs presents us with an important opportunity to combat child hunger, improve the health and nutrition of children across the nation, and enhance program performance," Vilsack [said](#). "The scale of these programs means that reforms can have a major impact on tens of millions of school children."

-Bob Allen is senior writer for Associated Baptist Press.