

Experimenting with Poverty

Written by James Clingman NNPA Columnist
Wednesday, 12 December 2012 00:00



Newark, New Jersey Mayor, Corey Booker, following the example of Phoenix, Arizona Mayor, Greg Stanton, is accepting a challenge to live on a \$35.00 food stamp budget for one week. Mr. Mayor will add to his resume of shoveling snow and rescuing a woman from a burning house this latest feat that some news reporters are calling an “experiment.” Booker’s background, going back to his youth, includes other out-of-the-box actions, which are admirable and respectable; however, this “experiment” as some are calling it, will not go down as one of them.

A person who earns more than \$13,000 per month going for one week on what is essentially a diet may be a nice news story but does nothing to alleviate the reality of those who are on that “diet” every day. The “bringing to the attention of the general public” angle is worth a 30-second or even a 60-second sound-bite, but it’s not like folks in this country don’t already know the stigma and trauma and futility of feeding one person, much less three or four persons, on a weekly allocation of food stamps.

The “walk a mile in my shoes” angle may demonstrate some compassion and maybe even some temporary empathy, but after the week is over, and even during the week of rationing food, or as some may even call “fasting,” the celebrity goes back to a much better life, as if he or she ever left it at all. Real people on food stamps must stay in that place for much longer than a week.

I don’t know Mayor Stanton or Mayor Booker, but I did some research on Booker and found that he has done several commendable things for others during his young life. Also, Booker drew a lot of attention from his run for office against former Newark Mayor, Sharpe James. Booker’s public profile was raised again during the last Presidential campaign, when he jumped into the fray by defending the work of Mitt Romney and Bain Capital. Thus, I doubt he needs to use food stamps for a week to gain more attention.

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So why is he doing it? Reporters say he is doing it to bring attention to the food stamp problem, to “teach people how to responsibly budget and learn to eat nutritionally on a limited budget.” Just how limited, they didn’t say. The recommendation along with Booker’s actions is that people across the country take part in the challenge as well.

Maybe some need to live for a week on food stamps to know what others are going through; but I don’t. Just like I don’t need to spend a week in prison to know I never want to be there, I don’t need to live on \$1.40 per meal to know that people on food stamps are having a very difficult time doing so. As I said, it’s nothing more than a diet as far as I am concerned, and many people do that every day without the fanfare and drumrolls. Folks on food stamps live every day as guinea pigs for the food stamp “experiment.” So, is the hype about Booker’s one week sacrifice to eat less a publicity stunt, exploitation, or a sincere effort to change the poverty conditions of millions on food stamps? Only Mayor Booker can answer that.

My contention is that living for a week on a food stamp diet, depending upon the reason for doing so, can also be deemed a fast. We are familiar with fasts and the reasons for them, especially those having a religious connection. Moreover, we are instructed to go about our fasts without bringing attention to ourselves, so it will not be “obvious to men” (Matthew 6:16).

Additionally, there are other important points made about fasting in the 58th Chapter of the Book of Isaiah: “Is this the kind of fast I have chosen, only a day for a man to humble himself?...Is not this the kind of fasting I have chosen: to loose the chains of injustice...to set the oppressed free...is it not to share your food with the hungry and provide the poor wanderer with shelter...when you see the naked to clothe him? ...if you spend yourselves in behalf of the hungry and satisfy the needs of the oppressed, then your light will rise in the darkness, and your night will become like the noonday.”

Let’s not make this food stamp issue just another political advantage for election or reelection. People in this country are suffering, and many who have to eat on the food stamp plan would much rather have an alternative – like a job. We should do what we can to help them, and we should do it not for publicity or accolades, but because it’s simply the right thing to do.

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