

# States of the Union

## HUNGRY IN THE EIGHTIES

BY RICHARD J. MARGOLIS



**S**TROLLING UP Sheridan Road in Chicago one April morning, I come upon a silent queue of elderly women and men leaning into the chill wind that blows off Lake Michigan a block to the east. Nearby a hump-tumpy dumpty of a man, no younger than the rest, stokes a trashcan fire with emp-

ty cardboard cartons. The boxes bear a warning: "Not to be sold or exchanged—USDA."

The city is getting ready to distribute Federal surplus cheese to some of its down-and-old citizens. The cheese comes in five-pound bricks. It is yellow, pasteurized and loaded with cholesterol.

"What's everybody waiting for?" I ask Humpty Dumpty.

"They're waiting for the police lady to open up. She's got the key."

I ask if the police lady is late.

"She's not late and she's not early," he tells me. "When she comes, she comes. And please don't ask me more questions. I'm just a part-time person."

There is some muttering and jostling at the rear of the line. A black man with gray hair is feebly defending his turf. Humpty Dumpty makes a megaphone of his pudgy hands. "Randy," he shouts, "you better behave or you don't get no cheese."

Second in line is a woman with a metal cane. She wears a shabby yellow coat that reaches down to her shoe tops. "I can't hold out much longer," she says to no one in particular. "My legs hurt something awful from the arthritis." She catches my eye and goes on: "I got a

good spot here 'cause I woke up early. I been in line maybe an hour. Wish that police lady would come."

I offer to stand in her place but she shakes her head. "There's nowhere to sit. Anyway," she adds, gazing at my tie and jacket, "they wouldn't think you're eligible." A moment later she slips out of line and hobbles away.

The police lady arrives soon after. Within 30 minutes everyone has received some cheese and started home. I walk north alongside a woman wearing a kerchief on her head who is clutching her five-pound box. She turns out to be a brisk walker and talker. "My name is Marie Finley," she says, "and I turned 78 last month. It was a very nice birthday. A neighbor made me a small cake. I'm going to give some of this cheese to my neighbors. It's too much for one person, that's for sure, but I can use some of it. I missed getting the cheese this winter because it was too cold to stand in line. Didn't pick up my food stamps either—afraid I'd catch pneumonia."

"Then what did you do for food?" I inquire.

"That's easy. I went without."

Miss Finley says all her life she has had difficulty making ends meet. "I've always been single and I've always supported myself," she tells me, "till I got too sick. I worked in restaurants and I did maid's work at that college in Evanston. It was just a living but I worked hard." Now Miss Finley gets \$25 a month in food stamps and another \$373 from Social Security. She used to get more stamps, before Ronald Reagan slashed antihunger expenditures by more than \$12 billion. Miss Finley understands that the President wants her to tighten her belt another notch now through annual reductions in her Social Security cost-of-living adjustment. These COLAS constitute her sole protection against the wear and tear of inflation, but Budget Director David A. Stockman has assured everyone that the proposed cut-backs would be "a very small sacrifice to make."

"I can't see it," says Miss Finley, who voted for Reagan both times.

I have come to Chicago to learn more about the spread of hunger in America

—especially among the aged—and one thing I have learned is that if you are hungry, you must get in line. That is how we and our government have arranged matters at soup kitchens, food stamp centers and surplus commodity depots. The message seems clear enough: Queue up or waste away.

“Members of this distinguished panel,” pleaded a Chicago psychiatrist, Dr. John Weliczko, in recent testimony to a group of Illinois state legislators, “... someone needs to reinforce the idea that it is painful to stand in line for cheese. Psychologically, people hurt when they wait in line. Ask them.” But isn’t that precisely the point? Don’t we impose these lines on the destitute in order to punish them, to control them, to reduce their egos to those of children? “You better behave or you don’t get no cheese.”

Since Reagan began supping at the White House the hunger lines have lengthened. Last year a Harvard-based Physician Task Force on Hunger conducted a firsthand investigation in most regions of the country, and in February we all got the bad news. “Hunger in America is a national health epidemic,” the Task Force reported. “While no one knows the precise number of hungry Americans, available evidence indicates that up to 20 million citizens may be hungry at least some period of time each month.” The victims, moreover, fall “disproportionately at the ends of the age spectrum—the young and the old.”

In Chicago I have concentrated on the elderly end of the spectrum. Here are a few of my findings.

- Elderly devout Catholics who do not get enough to eat often say they are “fasting for spiritual strength.”

- One way to get through hungry days is to sleep exceptionally late—right through mealtime. “What do you dream about?” I asked a late-sleeper on the South Side. “I’ll give you three guesses,” she replied.

As health costs for the poor go up, food consumption goes down. Susanne Strassberger of the Chicago Council for Jewish Elderly has described a sample case: “Mrs. Y receives only \$284 a month

in Supplemental Security Income [SSI]. When the cost of her clinic visits increased and the cost of her medication went up to \$30 a month, she began to spend less money on food.” The same holds true for rising rent and utility bills. A report written by a coalition called the Chicago Hunger Watch notes that “food is often the need that is flexible and can be reduced. In fact, the need for cash sometimes leads the poor to sell the food that has been given to them.” A social worker in Miss Finley’s neighborhood tells me the aged poor often use food stamps to pay their rent. Fifty cents on the dollar is the going exchange rate.

- The cutbacks in food stamps have been especially hard on the elderly frail and infirm. To cite again the Chicago Hunger Watch: “Mr. Selly R., suffering from a pituitary tumor, hypertension and diabetes, gets \$300 from Social Security, of which \$200 is now spent for rent.... He needs nutritional meals; his food stamps have been cut from \$90 to \$60. Helen S., age 83, with severe rheumatoid arthritis, gets \$284 from SSI.... Her food stamps stopped coming; when reinstated they had been cut. Another 83-year-old woman, who cares for a retarded son and a mentally ill daughter, pays \$250 a month for substandard housing with no hot water. She also has had her food stamps cut.”

- The major public agency serving Chicago’s older population is the Office for Senior Citizens and Handicapped. Among other things, this agency provides “congregate meals” at senior centers as well as home-delivered meals to those who can’t get out. Federally funded through a 1972 amendment to the Older Americans Act, the programs were meant to focus on “those with low incomes.” In most places, though, they have chiefly served the elderly middle class. In Chicago, only 18 per cent of the aged poor benefit from congregate or home-delivered meals.

**A**T THE CORNER of Sheridan and Eastwood Marie Finley and I prepare to part company. She is anxious to get back to her room, to slice up her cheese and give it away. “There are people in my building who

haven’t eaten since Tuesday,” she says. Today is Thursday. I have been astonished at the generosity of the aged poor. In Hartford I met an undernourished woman who every day put aside half her lunch, provided by Meals-on-Wheels, in case her grandson should return from school hungry. In Jackson, Mississippi, a 64-year-old black woman named Susan Green showed me her garden—beans, lettuce, okra, collards; she regularly feeds her impoverished neighbors.

The wind off Lake Michigan is picking up now in classic Chicago style. Quickly I walk the three remaining blocks to the Uptown Ministry, where I have an appointment with the director, Jerry Riemer. A young, soft-spoken Lutheran minister, Riemer sits me down in his tiny office and tells me about the neighborhood he serves. It was once a substantial Jewish enclave, but after World War II people began moving out to the suburbs and the poor began moving in. The Uptown Ministry was established 15 years ago by the Lutheran Missouri Synod as a vehicle for distributing food to street people.

“We’re still giving away food,” Riemer says. Each Monday and Wednesday groceries are donated to 40 families—canned vegetables, fruit, eggs, milk, tuna fish, peanut butter. Riemer says a bagful “may get a family through three or four days.”

I ask Riemer to talk about the older residents. “There are 18 nursing homes in the area,” he begins, “mostly for poor people.” He speaks movingly of elderly poverty, not only the low incomes but “the poverty of their days, their loneliness and isolation.”

There was an old woman, he says, who was sent to a nursing home in an ambulance. Riemer went along to help. Before they had gone very far the woman demanded that they turn back. “I have to get my things,” she explained. “There’s a letter I want to keep.”

Her things did not fill a small paper bag, but at least she found the letter and took it along. It was brown and brittle at the edges.

“Did you get a look at it?” I ask.

“Yes. It was a Christmas card—from a local bank.”