By Abby J. Leibman

The Oct. 1 deadline is approaching for Congress to finish work on what is commonly called the "Farm Bill." However, for millions of Americans, it's actually the "Food Bill" — the difference between being able to put groceries on the table and going hungry.

And lawmakers seem content to let those folks go without enough food. The Senate has tentatively approved a \$4-billion reduction in funding for food stamps — formally known as the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP). This month, the House passed a bill that slashes 10 times as much. Both courses of action are unconscionable.

Rather than shredding the food stamp program, Congress must bolster its funding. That's the only way to ensure that all Americans, including the 50 million who struggle to get enough to eat, can enjoy what should be a right in this country - freedom from hunger.

For 40 years, food stamps have been an integral part of the federal Farm Bill. SNAP's inclusion represents a frank acknowledgment that too many Americans go hungry in spite of the huge bounty our farms produce.

But in July, for the first time, the House of Representatives turned its back on those in need and stripped food stamps entirely from the bill.

The chamber's leaders promised to deal with SNAP separately. But they don't mean to do any favors for the nearly 47 million Americans who receive critical assistance from SNAP.

The House's recent approval of \$40 billion in cuts to food stamps is double the \$20 billion

reduction it sought back in June.

The Center on Budget and Policy Priorities analyzed both proposals: \$20 billion worth of cuts would kick nearly two million Americans out of SNAP; the newly approved cut of \$40 billion will turn away as many as six million.

Defenders of the cuts claim that they are trying to preserve the program for "families who truly need help."

But there are many more folks who "truly need help" than SNAP presently reaches. Indeed, we should be doing more to eliminate hunger in America — not less.

According to the U.S. Department of Agriculture's Economic Research Service, nearly 50 million Americans live in "food-insecure households, "unable to afford sufficient food for themselves and their families. These households include more than 16 million children.

Worse, the food insecurity crisis is growing. From 2007 through 2011, the number of people unable to afford adequate food increased by more than 10 million. Those living in food insecurity now represent the highest share of the population since the agency began tracking in 1995.

In the wealthiest country in the world, such widespread hunger is unacceptable.

It was also unacceptable more than 70 years ago, when President Franklin Roosevelt delivered his historic "Four Freedoms" address to Congress, asserting that Americans had a right to "freedom from want." He understood that a lack of access to basic nutrition undermines a person's ability to enjoy other fundamental rights.

It's a scandal that our lawmakers have done so little since then to make good on that promise of "freedom from want."

The right to food was included in the United Nations' Universal Declaration of Human Rights, which was ratified in 1948. More than 140 countries have approved an international agreement directing states to enshrine this right into law. Many have amended their constitutions to acknowledge their citizens' right to food, including India, the world's largest democracy, and South Africa.

Yet U.S. leaders have gone the other way - stubbornly refusing to address growing hunger in the United States.

No country is better equipped to guarantee its citizens a right to food than the United States. What's needed now is not the means but the political will to ensure that all Americans have enough to eat.

Unfortunately, the uncertain fate of food stamps on Capitol Hill casts grave doubt on whether our leaders possess that will.

Lawmakers must understand how much is at stake. More than one in seven Americans deals with hunger every day. Congress must spare SNAP from any cuts and protect the millions of low income Americans - children, seniors, military families, working poor, and unemployed - who are in desperate need of a just "Food Bill."

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