

HOLYOKE

Sp. Repub 9/11/18
Page 1

Hungry for change

Coalition launches awareness
campaign about food insecurity

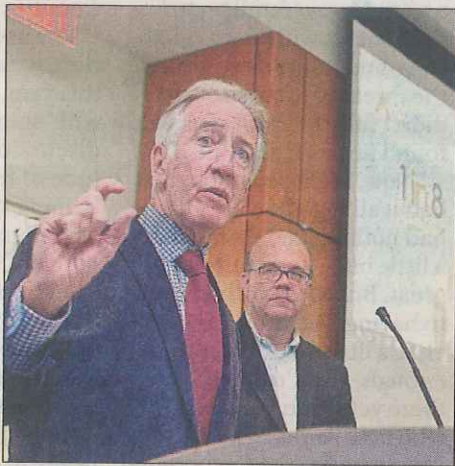
BY SHANNON YOUNG

syoun@repub.com

For Shannon Yaremchak, hunger and homelessness aren't abstract concepts, they're realities she and her four children have faced in the years since her husband "abandoned" them.

Yaremchak, a former teacher who ended up living in a hotel as she sought to get back on her feet, said while she struggled

SEE **HUNGER**, PAGE A2



Congressmen Richard Neal, left, and Jim McGovern spoke yesterday at the launch of a campaign aimed at raising awareness of hunger in our region and erasing the stigma associated with seeking food assistance. (DON TREEGER / THE REPUBLICAN)

Hunger

CONTINUED FROM PAGE A1

to provide her family nutritious meals with just a microwave and dorm-sized fridge, the threat of food insecurity didn't fully hit until after she found her own place in 2015.

"Now, I realize, I thought I had it all together, because I had nothing and then I had a little bit — and I felt this is great. But when you get used to having a little bit, you realize a little bit isn't quite sufficient — you're not quite there yet," said Yaremchak, who now works as a HiSet instructor for the Corporation for Public Management. "I'm sitting in a position where, if something happens to me and I lose my job tomorrow, my kids go hungry."

With an estimated one in eight Western Massachusetts residents facing similar risks of hunger on any given day, the Food Bank of Western Massachusetts' Coalition to End Hunger launched a campaign yesterday that highlights stories like Yaremchak's in an effort to raise awareness around food insecurity and to reduce stigmas associated with it.

Julia Sorensen, chief marketing and communications officer at Cooley Dickinson Hospital, a coalition member,

said the campaign will use print, digital, radio, outdoor and social media to show "the real faces of hunger," with an initial focus on Hampden County.

Sorensen said the coalition, which formed earlier this year, hopes the effort will "spark broad public discussion about the magnitude of food insecurity, while helping to debunk the myths and stigma associated with hunger."

Andrew Morehouse, executive director of the Food Bank of Western Massachusetts, said the awareness campaign represents the latest phase in an anti-hunger initiative that began in 2016.

The coalition hopes to roll out the campaign in other counties by next spring, Morehouse said, adding that the ability to expand likely will come down to fundraising.

"It costs a lot of money to get the word out. But we'll do as much as we can with the scarce resources that we already have committed," he said in an interview. "We hope that other leaders of the business community — in particular — will see that this is worth investing in and agree to put their support behind it."

Morehouse said the effort likely will cost a total of \$200,000 to \$250,000.

Sponsors have already contributed more than \$50,000.

In addition to the awareness campaign, the coalition is also focused on developing a network of wraparound services for those at risk of hunger, like housing, child care, job training and other supports. It is also working to promote public policy changes on Beacon Hill and in Washington that address the underlying causes of hunger.

U.S. Rep. Jim McGovern, who joined coalition members at Holyoke Community College for the awareness campaign's launch, argued that such initiatives are important, particularly as lawmakers eye cuts to the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program and other federal supports.

The Worcester Democrat, an outspoken anti-hunger advocate who has vocally opposed such cuts — including those proposed in the House-passed "farm bill" — said he regrets that hunger has become a political issue.

"Hunger is a political condition. I say that because we have the resources, we live in the richest country in the history of the world. We have the money, we have the resources, we have the capacity to produce the food, we have the infrastructure, we have everything but the political will

to end it," he said. "And that's why this issue is so maddening. That's why this coalition, this effort here today with all of you coming together, is so incredibly important."

McGovern, who stressed that hunger and food insecurity are "solvable," agreed that stakeholders "need to raise the profile of this issue."

"We need to make it toxic for anybody who's in politics to be indifferent on the issue of hunger. We need to fight harder, and we need to find creative ways to advance solutions that make sense and that will help solve the problem," the congressman continued. "We need to be a model here in Massachusetts for the rest of the country."

U.S. Rep. Richard Neal, D-Springfield, noted that while economic indicators suggest a rosy picture for most Americans, they often don't measure the child who goes to bed hungry, a father who was laid off or a mother who's helping treat a relative with an opioid addiction.

"Those are the real issues that are in front of us. ... In a country that has been blessed with such bounty, everybody ought to have food and shelter," he said. "And I think that those ought to be minimum standards for our lives, as to how we pursue those challenges."