What is a trigger?

- A trigger is a mechanism intended to force Congress to pass bills to reduce federal deficits.
- If Congress fails to significantly reduce deficits, a trigger automatically cuts spending across the board. The cuts are designed to be so unpleasant that they force both parties to compromise on tough issues and pass a deficit-reduction bill.
- A trigger was included as part of the Budget Control Act, or the debt deal passed by Congress the summer of 2011.

How does the debt deal trigger work?

- The Budget Control Act established a joint congressional committee (the “Super Committee”), which must approve recommendations to reduce the deficit by $1.2 trillion over 10 years. If the committee or Congress fails to pass a law that reduces deficits by $1.2 trillion, then across-the-board spending cuts are triggered.
- The across-the-board cuts are split 50-50 between defense and non-defense programs.
- Key entitlement programs for poor and hungry people, such as the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP, formerly food stamps) and refundable tax credits such as the Earned Income Tax Credit and child tax credit, are exempt from the cuts. These are called entitlement programs because anyone who qualifies can participate and spending is determined by participation, not Congress. The across-the-board cuts would take effect January 2013 and continue for nine years.

What does this mean for hungry and poor people?

- Across-the-board cuts set off by the trigger put many programs for hungry and poor people at risk. While important entitlement programs are exempted from cuts, all discretionary programs that Congress votes to fund every year are not. This includes WIC, food aid, international poverty-focused development assistance, Head Start, and many other programs.
- If the across-the-board cuts take effect, non-defense discretionary programs would be cut by an average of 9.3 percent in fiscal year 2013.

How can the Super Committee protect programs that are vital to hungry and poor people?

- If the triggers went into effect, the consequences for discretionary programs for hungry and poor people would be devastating. However, a set of recommendations from the Super Committee that only cut spending and fundamentally changed effective programs such as SNAP and the EITC would also be devastating.
- The Super Committee and Congress must take a holistic approach to deficit reduction and consider all areas of the budget, including revenues, defense and mandatory spending.
- The major commissions and groups that produced comprehensive, bipartisan deficit reduction proposal over the past year have included a principle to protect poor and vulnerable people. Congress and the Super Committee must follow this principle.

To reduce our nation’s deficit, the federal budget must be considered in its entirety. Congress must create a circle of protection around funding for programs that are vital to hungry and poor people in the United States and abroad.