

A trip turns into a cause

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By Adam Sichko

WASHINGTON — Rep. Jo Ann Emerson had expected the impoverished Nicaraguan village she visited last summer to resemble what she found in rural Cuba: a community of people who are poor, but who have adequate housing and enough food to eat.

But the "houses" in Nicaragua amounted to tiny cinder-block structures, or shelters fashioned out of black plastic trash bags, she said. And there was hunger.

"These folks had nothing. I know how hard that is to believe, but they had nothing," Emerson said last week.

And yet Emerson, R-Cape Girardeau, called the trip "the best three days of my life." She said that's mainly because she was able to see some positive results of a food aid program that provides school meals and helps children get an education. In the village, children were getting fed, and the older ones were helping the younger ones at school, she said.

"It gives me goose bumps to think about it," she said. "And it all kind of started with the school feeding program."

The program, sponsored by the Springfield, Mo.-based Rainbow Network, mirrors a food aid program started by Congress in 2000 that Emerson says is underfunded. And she wants to change that.

Last week, Emerson, who co-chairs the Congressional Hunger Center, helped start a renewed push to increase funding for the U.S. international food aid and education program, named for former Sens. George McGovern and Bob Dole.

Funding for the McGovern-Dole program, which in 2000 was allocated \$300 million, has dropped dramatically. In 2004, the allocation was just one-sixth of the initial funding. McGovern-Dole is now getting about \$100 million.

Legislation Emerson filed last week seeks to lock in mandatory funding minimums for the program. The bill also calls for an additional \$40 million each year so the program can return

to its high-water mark of \$300 million by 2012.

The U.S. Department of Agriculture operates the program, which has fed more than 26 million children in 41 countries. It has a large presence in Africa.

The program supplies food for schools and pays cooks to prepare it for the children. The program also helps teach families about nutrition.

"It's one of those programs where it does an awful lot of good. It makes a difference," said Ron Croushorn, director of food assistance programs for the department. "But we always face the reality of what we can do within our budget. We make do."

The program works by giving children free school meals. In order to eat, children have to go to the local school. And once they're there, they can be taught.

The ultimate goal is to build a program that a nation can sustain on its own within three to 10 years, Croushorn said. Evidence suggests that the food aid program is working: It has boosted overall school attendance rates in foreign lands by 14 percent — even higher for female students.

"That's the nice thing — it isn't just a food aid program, it isn't just about feeding hungry kids. It's about long-term development," said Jim Hershey, who oversees food aid programming for the American Soybean Association, which is based in St. Louis.

Soybean producers benefit from the program, too. The Agriculture Department buys soy products in the U.S. for the overseas program.