

But we *need* sob stories!

By [Steve Thorngate](#)

June 19, 2012

The latest in can-you-believe-this-guy campaign-trail videos: Senate candidate Eric Hovde, who—like Montgomery Burns with a Wisconsin accent—reduces media coverage of low-income people facing service cuts to "sob stories." Take a look:

Pretty heartless stuff—and pretty bush league. (Hovde's lightly mockng summary of stories of struggling people: "Oh, the person couldn't get, you know, their food stamps or this or that." He's a first-time candidate for office. You think?)

But while Hovde's tone-deaf dismissal of the not-rich made my jaw drop, his media analysis made it drop farther. Leave aside the ideological specifics for a moment: Does he really think that the media spends too much time telling individuals' stories and too little covering big-picture developments and What Experts Say? It's been a while since I've read a Wisconsin paper regularly, but more generally I'd say it's the opposite: a steady stream of workmanlike reporting about federal/state/city budgets and programs, with quotes at the ready for a quick he said/she said. In-depth looks at how all this affects individuals are fewer and farther between.

While Hovde would apparently prefer this to be even more lopsided, the news journalists I know wish they had the time and resources to tilt things in the other direction. It's sort of a fundamental of any kind of narrative communication: you have to relay the big-picture stuff, but to give it any impact you also have to tell individual stories. (Spielberg's [girl in the red coat](#), anyone?)

The U.S. Senate is [about to vote on farm bill reauthorization](#), an omnibus bill that promises to replace direct commodity subsidies with something better, or [at least something different-bad](#). It will also reduce food stamps benefits for half a million Americans, unless [Sen. Gillibrand can save them](#). Those of us who don't use food stamps need to know that number, and to see what experts have to say (preferably experts not paid by politicians or their surrogates). We also need to know what this will

mean for specific families.

Not that such "sob stories" are the only stories that need to be told. Hovde might be happier to see reporters telling stories about individual private-sector job creators. You know, if they can find any.