

Testimony to Amended Substitute HB 64

May 19, 2015

Greater Cleveland Food Bank

Workforce Subcommittee
Ohio Senate Finance Committee

Chair Senator Bill Beagle, Vice Chair Senator Sandra Williams, Senator Jay Hottinger, Senator Frank LaRose, Senator Tom Patton, Senator Chris Widener, Senator Kenny Yuko

Thank you, Chair Beagle, Vice Chair Williams and members of the Workforce Subcommittee for the opportunity to address you today.

I have the great privilege to work as Director of Advocacy for The Greater Cleveland Food Bank, a vibrant, responsive organization that works hard to ensure that everyone in our communities has the nutritious food they need every day.

The Greater Cleveland Food Bank is one of the 12 food banks that comprise the Ohio Association of Foodbanks.

In our fiscal year 2014, which ended October 1, the Greater Cleveland Food Bank distributed nearly 41 million pounds of food to more than 800 programs in six counties. The food is distributed to pantries, soup kitchens and shelters run by churches and community agencies, and through produce distributions and programs for children and seniors. Throughout the region we serve, from the rural areas of Ashland and Ashtabula to the inner cities of Cleveland and Mansfield, and even in formerly wealthy suburbs, there is significant food insecurity and hunger.

Most of the households served live below the federal poverty level, but the recession brought an entirely different client to the doors of these programs – people who had never received food assistance before. Some of them are back on their feet, but many are still in need of help.

I am here today because 18% of the food we distribute comes from the State through the Ohio Food Program and the Ohio Agricultural Clearance Program, an innovative effort with farmers and local food producers. This wonderful partnership with the State of Ohio provides the 12 food banks in Ohio with some of the most nutritious food we distribute – so essential for families forced to choose the cheapest (and often unhealthy) food at the grocery store.

The benefit of these state funded programs to Ohio farmers is also considerable. Lester Lynd likes to tell the story of his 300 acre fruit farm. The Lynd family has worked the farm for seven generations. Lester says it takes 6 to 7 years for an apple tree to become profitable. They will produce apples for 25 or 30 years, but varieties of apples go in and out of fashion with grocery stores and the public. When perfectly good apples no longer have a market, Lester has to decide whether it is worth it to pay to harvest the apples for cider or just to plow the apples under.

Lynd was one of the first farmers to participate in the Ohio Agricultural Clearance Program when it started 16 years ago. Lester, and 100 other farmers in Ohio, no longer are forced to waste produce they've grown. With dollars provided by the State of Ohio, this nutritious produce is made available to struggling Ohioans through 3300 emergency feeding programs across the state. This program is a true success story!

I would love to tell you that the need is subsiding and that no additional dollars are needed, but that is simply not the case. Our recent Hunger Study showed that more people are coming to the doors of our emergency food programs than four years ago. For instance, our biggest program, Garden Valley Neighborhood House, served 1800 people a month in 2010 and is serving 10,200 a month now. (The program is operated by Jan Ridgeway, a retired librarian, who spends significant personal resources on job training and other programs that are offered at her center.) Cuts to food stamps have resulted in significantly greater demand at Garden Valley, and the emergency food network in general.

Underemployment is another contributing factor to growing need. Many Ohioans are working low-wage jobs, or cobbling together part time jobs. Cheryl, age 54, told us that her husband was laid off, and went from \$17/hour full-time to minimum wage, part time work. She is working 33.5 hours/week at minimum wage. "Help with food will enable us to pay some of our bills, which we have neglected in order to eat and pay the necessary bills."

Another woman, Tina, age 52, told us: "I work every day, but can't buy food because my job cut my hours. I have to take two pay checks to pay my rent, then I'm behind on everything. I work every day, I help people who cannot help themselves. I love my job, I'm a housekeeper for a nursing home."

At the Greater Cleveland Food Bank, we are also seeing an increasing number of seniors needing assistance, sometimes because of inadequate savings, but often because of medical expenses. At a produce distribution in Geauga County, I helped an elderly woman to her car with a heavy bag of produce. She was well dressed, but her car was old and the rear-view mirror was held on with duct tape. She explained to me that she was paying \$400 a month for medicines she needed.

We obviously need your help. The Ohio Food Program and the Ohio Agricultural Clearance Program make me proud to be from Ohio. As legislators who have supported them for years, I hope you are proud as well. These successful programs are worth building upon. On behalf of Lester, Tina, Cheryl and the quarter of a million people served by The Greater Cleveland Food Bank each year, please increase funding for the Ohio Food Program and the Ohio Agricultural Clearance Program to \$20 million per year.

Thank you.