



Testimony to the Ohio Senate Finance Subcommittee on Health and Medicaid

May 15, 2019

**Testimony from Kristin S. Warzocha, President and CEO
Greater Cleveland Food Bank**

Chairman Hackett, Ranking Member Thomas, and members of the Health and Medicaid Subcommittee, thank you for the opportunity for the Greater Cleveland Food Bank to provide written testimony on HB 166.

At the Greater Cleveland Food Bank, we work to ensure that everyone in our communities has the nutritious food they need every day. We serve 300,000 food insecure residents in Ashland, Richland, Cuyahoga, Lake, Geauga, and Ashtabula Counties. We are one of 12 Ohio food banks that provide food to hunger programs in every county throughout the state. We thank you for your longstanding support of the Ohio Food Program and the Ohio Agricultural Clearance Program. To put it simply, these two programs are critical to the health and wellbeing of food insecure families who lack access to enough food for an active, healthy lifestyle.

Last year, the twelve food banks across Ohio provided food to more than two million people through a network of 3,500 nonprofit partner programs. Although the recession ended ten years ago, we are serving more clients than ever. Within the Greater Cleveland Food Bank's six-county service area alone, we are serving 76,000 more people through our network of programs than we did in 2009. This increase has consisted of working poor families, children, veterans, and older adults who have a difficult time making ends meet.

Here's just one example of older adults struggling to make ends meet: They came in for help at one of our partner programs near the Pennsylvania border in Ashtabula County. It is a rural community, with no cell reception and nothing nearby but farm land and a stop sign. The husband was filling out a survey, but had trouble keeping his hand still. Noticing this, his wife began to cry. She told us that her husband had suffered a stroke a few months earlier and he had not yet fully recovered. The stroke had changed their lives and his new medication cost nearly \$400 per month. Medical bills were stacking up from his time in the hospital and they just couldn't manage all of the expenses. Their refrigerator was empty and there was no money left to buy food. They had started coming to this program so they could at least keep food on the table.

Here's another: A Cleveland family with four children. Mom and dad both work full time in low paying jobs, but they are trying to put meals on the table for their kids and their grandmother, who also lives with them. They were turning to one of our partner programs when they just couldn't stretch to pay all their bills and afford fresh fruits and vegetables for their kids. Recently, dad got a new, higher paying job and we are thrilled for the entire family.

These stories are not unique. Unfortunately, nearly two-thirds of the households served by our partner programs report making the decision between paying for medication or paying for groceries

during the month, or choosing between food and utilities. Of Ohio's ten most popular occupations, only one of them, nursing, provided an income that kept a family of three above 200% of the poverty level (\$42,660 in 2019.) Parents have gone back to work since the recession, but they are still struggling to pay for their children's basic needs. Seniors are living longer and running out of savings. Food provided by the Ohio Food Program and Agricultural Clearance Program help make hard choices a little easier and provide low income Ohioans with nutritious food while also paying for basic necessities, like medicine, rent, utilities, and transportation.

One-quarter of the food distributed by the Greater Cleveland Food Bank, as well as the 11 other food banks in Ohio, comes from these two state programs. I can confidently say that we could not serve this many children, seniors, and families without them.

We continue to expand our reach within our service area and create innovative and effective programs to get this food out to our community. A great example of this is our 147 mobile pantry programs, where a truckload of fresh Ohio produce is delivered to a church or partner agency to be distributed to their clients the same day. In addition to this program, we have partnered with 35 senior centers and low-income apartment buildings to provide local produce to seniors.

Another extraordinary benefit of these programs is our ability to work directly with Ohio producers and growers. Through the Ohio Agricultural Clearance Program, farmers can find a second life for much of the produce that would otherwise be plowed under – imperfect produce that would go unsold, as grocery stores and food distributors hesitate to purchase fruits and vegetables that do not meet the expectations of customers. The Holthouse vegetable farmers from Willard, Ohio told us how much their partnership with Ohio food banks has meant to them. They no longer have to plow crops under, and they can pay people to plant, care for and harvest the fruits and vegetables they grow. In effect, our farmers and their relentless hard work are helping to feed the hungry in our communities.

While we have a robust economy throughout Ohio and nationally, the unemployment rate does not tell the entire story. The families standing in our food lines do, in fact, work – often multiple jobs. Lack of jobs in this economy isn't the issue – it's the low wages from said jobs that can stand as a daunting barrier to food security and to the overall well-being of so many of our state's citizens. Additionally, there are segments of the economy that have been left behind in our current economic expansion and those are the families that we are serving. This includes many of our brave veterans who fought to protect this country and now need our help.

For twenty years, the State of Ohio has supported the Ohio Food Program and Agricultural Clearance Program. We thank you for your continued support and for allowing us to keep food on the table for our neighbors going through difficult times. While the Ohio House made the investments in public systems and public services, now is the time for the Ohio Senate to step forward and support the services provided to their many constituents by non-profits, faith-based, and volunteer-supported organizations. We ask you to help us reach even more people by supporting an amendment for \$10 million per year for our Comprehensive Approach to Hunger Relief.

The amendment increases funding for proven programs and incorporates existing items into the state budget, such as the innovative summer meals programs. The amendment would provide a \$5 million increase to the Ohio Food and Agricultural Clearance Programs, allowing food banks to strengthen their partnership with farmers across Ohio and provide even more local produce and protein items to those in

need. The amendment would also incorporate (at current funding levels) the innovative summer meals programs into the Ohio Association of Foodbank's state budget allocation, which were formerly funded through Executive Order by then Governor John Kasich and later through the Governor's Office on Faith-Based and Community Initiatives. Having all of these programs in one place in the state budget would allow food banks to operate programs with less administrative burden to the state, reduce overhead costs, and allow for more flexibility to leverage better food pricing.

This invaluable funding will allow the food banks and our partner networks across the state to continue our impactful work in meeting the increased need of all who rely on the nutritious food and crucial services that we provide daily – our children, seniors, veterans, and working families – thereby, ensuring that they, too, can contribute to our state's overall health and well-being.

Thank you for your time and consideration.

Kristin S. Warzocha
President & CEO, The Greater Cleveland Food Bank