

Ohio House Finance Committee Health and Human Services Subcommittee
House Bill 110
Ohio Food Bank Funding
Matt Habash, President/CEO Mid-Ohio Food Collective
March 4, 2021

Chairman Roemer, Ranking Minority Member West and members of the Subcommittee, I am Matt Habash, President and CEO of Mid-Ohio Food Collective. Today, I am sharing this written testimony as an interested party to House Bill 110, the state operating budget, and in particular, in support of funding for Ohio's food banks.

Mid-Ohio Food Collective is the largest food relief agency in Ohio and one of the largest in the nation, serving 20 urban, rural and Appalachian counties from Chillicothe to Marion and Marysville to Belmont, including Columbus. To give you some context of our work to connect nutritious food to those who are struggling, last year Mid-Ohio Food Collective distributed about 75 million pounds of groceries – enough food for more than 170,000 meals each and every day, serving well over 600,000 children, seniors, veterans, disabled and others facing food insecurity. And, since the onset of the pandemic, through January 31, 2021, demand for food assistance has significantly increased, with hungry neighbors now making more than one million visits to our agency partner network. Even more alarming is the 56,000 plus families who are asking for food - for help - for the very first time; displaced workers, isolated seniors and children without access to school meals. These are folks who are like you and me, just trying to take care of their families in these highly confusing and unsettling times.

First, I want to say thank you. Our ability to respond to the dramatic increase for food assistance during these extraordinary times is due in large part to the support of local, state and federal governments. We appreciate the actions taken by our public policy leaders to ensure that we could safely respond and help our neighbors in putting food on their tables. Within a single week from the onset of the pandemic, we completely shifted our receiving and distribution model through regulatory waivers. In particular, the deployment of Ohio's National Guard and Military Reserve was mission-critical in our being able to meet the increased needs of our neighbors. Thank you for both your partnership and leadership.

Our experience mirrors that of our sister food banks across the state. There is unprecedented food assistance needed across the state, including in our own footprint of service. We are continuing to work hard, implementing new changes to meet increased demand, such as expanding the hours of our onsite pantry to 40 hours per week, open six days per week. We know that this is a marathon at a sprinter's pace. Many of the neighbors who we serve were struggling before the onset of the pandemic; their hardships are now greater than ever – hardships that we know will take months and even years from which to recover.

As to House Bill 110 state funding for the next biennium, we anticipate this increased need to continue at historic levels through the end of this calendar year, into the next and beyond. We join the Ohio food bank network in requesting funding and support to meet this long-term demand. First note that surplus TANF funds are available to help fund Ohio's hunger relief efforts. Specifically, we ask for:

- Appropriation of \$12 million pass-through of federal CARES Act funding for emergency food, including Ohio- grown fruits and vegetables; shelf-stable food; and, personal care products.
- \$45 million per year in the 2022-23 biennial budget (primarily funded by pass-through TANF dollars), including \$40 million per year for the operation of the Ohio Food Program and Agricultural Clearance Program; \$4 million per year to purchase, transport, store and distribute essential household non-food items that cannot be purchased with SNAP benefits; and, \$1 million per year to support capacity building for local hunger relief organizations.

We recognize this is an increase in funding for anti-hunger efforts. However, this is reflective of the unprecedented era of hunger and financial instability experienced as a result of COVID-19. This is a critical investment to help Ohioans get through these turbulent times to better days ahead.

Mr. Chair and members of the subcommittee, thank you for your time and consideration. We at Mid-Ohio Food Collective are happy to answer questions or share additional information. I will also ask each of you to visit your local food bank to see firsthand their operations and to learn more about what we are doing toward ending hunger.

On behalf of Mid-Ohio Food Collective, we urge you to support the funding requests for House Bill 110 from Ohio's food bank network. More specifically, we ask for your support on behalf of our neighbors – seniors, children, disabled, veterans and those who have seen their work and personal circumstances change so dramatically in the past year. Together, we can bridge the gap – helping families to connect to the most basic of needs – food.

Thank you,

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