

February 27, 2025

Ohio House Children & Human Services Committee

Written Testimony on H.B. 96

Tommie Harner, Chief Executive Officer, West Ohio Food Bank

Chairwoman White, Vice Chairwoman Salvo, Ranking Member Lett, and distinguished members of the Children & Human Services committee, thank you for the opportunity to provide written testimony on HB96. As you begin your work on H.B. 96, I would like to provide additional context and information on West Ohio Food Bank, our 121 partner agencies, and the work being done on addressing food insecurity in our region. Our mission is to nourish, educate, and advocate for those facing food insecurity. Our vision is to work to end hunger within our communities. Our service area consists of 11 counties that include Allen, Auglaize, Hancock, Hardin, Mercer, Paulding, Putnam, Seneca, Shelby, Van Wert, and Wyandot.

Along with our 12 fellow foodbanks and the 3,600 partner agencies across the state of Ohio, we are respectfully requesting additional financial support through the Ohio Food Program & Agriculture Clearance Program to continue to provide the critical nutrition and supportive services we provide for the Ohioans we serve. Not only has Ohio's hunger relief network provide take-home groceries for food insecure Ohioans for decades, but the Ohio Food Program & Agriculture Clearance Program have provided a secondary market for Ohio farmers, growers and producers to sell their unmarketable and surplus product, paying farmers and producers to harvest, pack and send that product to be distributed through the Ohio hunger relief network. Local producers and farmers have shared that this allows them to avoid layoffs, keep their workers for longer, and support their local food system and community.

I wanted to share some local context on how the Ohio Food Program & Agriculture Clearance Program deeply impacts our community and our region. Out of the 11 counties served by West Ohio Food Bank, 10 are rural with 1 being urban. In 2024, 23% of the food distributed to the 63,633 individuals (31% children, 51% adults, 18% seniors) was through the Ohio Food Program and the Agricultural Clearance Program.

We utilize our network of partner agencies and community organizations to get food onto the tables of individuals and families facing food insecurity. More than once, we have had individuals come through our food lines to tell us that they were once donors but now they need assistance from us. They are living on fixed budgets and/or paycheck to paycheck,

and with the high costs of groceries, utilities, medications and other expenses, they just don't have enough left over to purchase food.

During the pandemic, West Ohio Food Bank saw a record number of individuals needing food assistance from what we were accustomed to seeing. A total of 49,070 individuals (31% children, 49% adults, 20% seniors) received food from West Ohio Food Bank and its network of partner agencies during this time. As the pandemic came to an end, we anticipated the number of people relying on the food bank and its partners would be reduced but we were wrong. Because of the continued increase, we have had to reduce the amount of food that we are able to provide by a third or more.

Our food bank has never had to make a lot of food purchases because of donations and the state and federal programs we receive. Now, more food purchases are being made to keep up with the demand we continue to see at our distributions and that our partner agencies see coming through their doors. We partner with other Ohio foodbanks to purchase food in larger quantities reducing costs as much as possible. However, our fear is that if we must continue making food purchases on a regular basis, our budget could be depleted very quickly, threatening our operations and services provided to those experiencing food insecurity.

We need help. As more individuals and families are finding it harder to make ends meet, they are turning to food banks and their partners for assistance. We want to ensure our most vulnerable populations (children and seniors) receive fresh, nutritious produce and food, and that families aren't constantly burdened by wondering where their next meal will come from. Food is a necessity and a person experiencing hunger cannot live a healthy, full, and productive life.

Supporting a meaningful increase to the Ohio Food Program & Agriculture Clearance Program will allow Ohio's local food banks and food pantries to continue to be the places Ohioans turn to when in crisis and will allow Ohio's agricultural industry to remain strong. For our organization, it would mean that we would be able to keep our lights on, provide fresh, nutritious food to our community members, and support our local food system. It is an incredible investment not just for West Ohio Food Bank, but for the whole state. Please consider including additional financial support for the Ohio Food Program & Agriculture Clearance Program in the state operating budget, H.B.96.

I am more than happy to answer any questions you may have upon reviewing my testimony.

With thanks,

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Tommie Harner". The signature is written in a cursive style.

Tommie Harner
Chief Executive Officer
West Ohio Food Bank
1380 E. Kibby St.
Lima, OH 45804
PH: 419-222-7946 ext. 202
FAX: 419-222-1150
Email: tommie@wofb.org
www.wofb.org