

**44<sup>th</sup> House District**

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**State Representative Joshua E. Williams**  
**Ohio House of Representatives**

Chair Click, Vice Chair Mullins, Ranking Member Brewer and members of the Community Revitalization Committee, thank you for the opportunity to provide sponsor testimony on House Bill 543. I would also like to thank my joint sponsor, Representative Upchurch, for helping to advance this bipartisan legislation.

Across Ohio, from Appalachia to the Mahoning Valley to the areas surrounding Toledo, many Ohioans do not have easy access to groceries and fresh food, creating so called “food deserts.” As defined in the bill, a food desert is a geographic area where residents lack reliable access to fresh fruits, vegetables, and other healthy foods. These areas are identified by the USDA’s Food Access Research Atlas, and they disproportionately impact low-income families, seniors, and rural communities that have seen years of disinvestment. Access to healthy, affordable food is one of the most fundamental building blocks of a strong community. Yet in many parts of our state, families must travel miles, often without reliable transportation, to find a grocery store that offers the basic staples most of us take for granted. Approximately 1.3 million Ohioans do not live within a short distance of fresh food or a grocery store, and about 225,000 of those do not even have access to a car to get to a grocery store.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> <https://open.clemson.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=3007&context=joe>

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In response to this, House Bill 543 creates the Food Desert Elimination Grant Program within the Ohio Department of Development. The purpose of this program is to incentivize the establishment of grocery stores in areas that currently have none. Under the bill, eligible retailers must either operate or plan to establish a grocery store in a food desert and must demonstrate that they currently do, or plan to, sell fresh fruits, vegetables, shelf-stable foods, and other healthful options.

To ensure meaningful statewide reach while maintaining accountability, the bill caps individual grants at \$15,000 per fiscal year. The Department of Development is directed to administer the program, establish application procedures, and collect documentation verifying a retailer's location and food offerings. Additionally, participating retailers must submit quarterly reports, allowing the department to track the use of funds, monitor the program's health impact, and maintain strong oversight. To support the launch of this initiative, House Bill 543 includes the appropriation to the Department of Development of \$200,000 for business development services. This targeted investment ensures the department has the resources necessary to administer the program and make grants available to qualifying grocery retailers.

Members of the Community Revitalization Committee, this bill is about more than just grocery stores. It is about economic opportunity, community stabilization, and the

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basic responsibility we hold to our communities. When a neighborhood gains access to a grocery store, it gains jobs, foot traffic, and a renewed sense of possibility. Most importantly, it ensures that families, regardless of zip code, can access the foods necessary for healthy living.

House Bill 543 is a focused, fiscally responsible step toward eliminating food deserts in Ohio. Chair Click, Vice Chair Mullins, Ranking Member Brewer and members of the Community Revitalization Committee, thank you for the opportunity to provide sponsor testimony on House Bill 543. I respectfully ask for your support and welcome any questions the committee may have.