



**CHA FY26-27 Operating Budget Testimony**  
**Senate Finance Committee**  
**May 27, 2025**

Chair Cirino, Vice Chair Chavez, Ranking Member Hicks-Hudson, and members of the Senate Finance Committee, thank you for the opportunity to provide testimony today on House Bill 96.

My name is Aaron Ockerman, Board Chair for Children's Hunger Alliance, a statewide non-profit, currently serving 76 counties across Ohio. CHA connects children to food right where they are: at childcare centers, at home through weekend meals, afterschool, and in summer programs.

Governor DeWine's budget provided flat funding for Children's Hunger Alliance at \$3.75 million per year. The House reduced this investment by \$1.25 million per year. Our amendment (SC0300), drafted by Senator Gavarone, would restore this line to flat funding at \$3.75 million per year.

Your support through the last operating budget, in addition to funding from corporations, foundations and individuals, meant we could provide 10.8 million meals, to over 1,800 partners and 160,000 children in 2024 alone! Thank you!

With the House cut to our current funding, we will have to take a step back as an organization and deny thousands of children access to meals. Please note, we are not asking for additional funds above and beyond what we received in the last budget. We simply want to maintain our current funding levels and continue to work to grow our private sector donations.

Here's some of what our partners say about the Weekend Meals program that our request supports:



*Mansfield City Schools* said: “Before CHA, we worried about some of our youngest kids coming back to school on Monday hungry and unable to focus because they hadn’t eaten well, or at all, over the weekend.”

*Antwerp Local Schools (Paulding County)* shared: “I’ve had kids tell me they went home and didn’t really eat over the weekend. What’s great is that students know they have something for the weekend, so they’re not stressed. They don’t have to worry about mom or dad or somebody fixing it for them.”

*Amesville Elementary (Athens County)* praised the process of CHA boxes being portable and filled with larger quantities of healthy food than they could source themselves. One father had a mental health break and told the school: “Where the end of my rope was, is where you were able to step in and help with food.”

*Clark Elementary (Cuyahoga County)* said: “One of our students is homeless. You don’t know exactly what’s going on all the time, and I was fortunate to have a box of food for him.”

*Middletown Creekview Elementary (Butler County)* shared: Just the absolute joy on their face on a Friday when they get that box. It may seem silly or trivial but to them it’s a huge deal. Time and time again, we have this experience with our students.

If there is any cut to this program, our partners say point blank children will go hungry. It’s so real, and frankly it would be heartbreaking. The nutrition at home would decrease and it makes your heart heavy. Providing weekend meals is improving their education, sense of community, and their general wellbeing. We have a lot of kids who stress a lot about where their next meal is coming from. If we lost this program, it would be devastating to the students who rely on it.



Can these children and their care takers count on your support for this basic need?

We already sit around the table having to decide which kids we can provide food to, and which will have to wait, perhaps indefinitely. The decrease in funding will cut at least 1.5 million meals and double our waitlist to over 160 schools.

CHA has a proven track record for efficient and effective use of funds with a 90% direct program expense rate. Our staff live and work all around the state, supporting small businesses such as in-home providers and childcare centers when they often have no one else in their area that can help them.

By supporting our work, the Ohio Legislature supports a best-in-class example of how to operate programs at-scale, with attention to quality and details. This work is essential because we first need to eat before we can do anything else. Please make feeding children a non-negotiable in this budget by supporting this amendment (SC0300). Thank you, and I am happy to answer any questions the committee may have.

Am. Sub. H. B. No. 96  
As Passed by the House

\_\_\_\_\_ moved to amend as follows:

In line 133709, delete "\$2,500,000" and insert "\$3,750,000"

1

The motion was \_\_\_\_\_ agreed to.

SYNOPSIS

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**Department of Job and Family Services**

3

**Section 307.80**

4

Increases the earmark in Fund 3V60 ALI 600689, TANF Block  
Grant, for the Children's Hunger Alliance by \$1,250,000 (from  
\$2,500,000 to \$3,750,000) in each fiscal year.

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## Weekend Meals Testimonials

### What it was like before Weekend Meals...

“Before we began Weekend Meals...several families said money for food was an issue. Sending these boxes home allows families to have access to food on the weekends. It allows them to access food without asking anyone.”

“We have several children who eat a significant amount of food when they’re here because they’re not getting the nutrition they need at home. We were making snack packs ourselves for them to take home in the evenings and weekends.”

**– Mindy Caldwell, Child Care Director, French City Academy**

“Before partnering with CHA’s Weekend Meals program, one of our biggest challenges was ensuring that students had access to nutritious foods outside of the program food that we could provide as a district. There is only federal and state funding for school breakfast, lunch, and afterschool snacks for qualifying programs. So many of our children rely heavily on school meals during the week... We worried about some of our youngest kids coming back to school on Monday tired, hungry, and unable to focus because they hadn’t eaten well, or at all, over the weekend.”

**– Lauren Moran, Food Service Manager, Mansfield City Schools**

“We had a lot of kids whose biggest meals were at school. We worried about them over the weekends. We have some parents incarcerated and the kids are living with grandparents. They appreciate the help because they’re raising their grandkids.”

“We have a lot of stories of kids who didn’t have food at home. We had kids who were making their own meals at home because they weren’t in stable households. I’ve had kids tell me they went home and didn’t really eat over the weekends because mom or dad didn’t cook for them.”

**– Erin Lichty, Elementary Guidance Counselor, Antwerp Local Schools**

“The big challenge for us before was the amount of time it took to do a food program...The process of CHA bags coming in, going from box to backpack, took our workload down tremendously. The other obvious piece is sourcing the food. The CHA bags are much larger quantities of healthy food than what we could source ourselves.”

**– Dan Fuchs, Caseworker, Amesville Elementary School**

“Our district is one in which every student receives free breakfast and lunch every day. The poverty levels are so high that our district is able to provide for all of them...Several students I work with before we partnered with CHA, they were often going from Friday lunch through

Monday morning breakfast with no food at all... On Monday, they were taking everything they could find off of other kids' plates or whatever teachers could offer them."

**– Emily Morgan, Community Success Liaison, Middletown Creekview Elementary**

## **What makes Weekend Meals so beneficial...**

"There's a link between nutrition and having a full belly and your ability to absorb information at school... It's a basic need for human life, but also for education so their minds can learn. Unfortunately, it's not always a priority for some parents, so this is an extra way for us to partner with them to help them the resources."

"Just the absolute joy on their face on a Friday when they get that box, knowing they have something to eat over the weekend. It seems silly and trivial, but to them it's a huge deal. Time and time again, we have this experience with our students."

**– Emily Morgan, Community Success Liaison, Middletown Creekview Elementary**

"It lets them know we care, that someone has their back. Right now, with the economy and prices of food and not having readily available foodbanks in our area — they're only open during working hours — so having these boxes here gave people the opportunity to grab them more easily."

**– Mindy Caldwell, Child Care Director, French City Academy**

"It's been a huge, huge blessing and it's so simple to execute on our end. You want to make it as friendly to teachers as possible because they already have full plates. Many families have let me know that this is a huge thing to bridge that gap."

"We are a district that's CEP, and the participation rate is very huge: 55 to 60 percent in breakfast and 70 to 80 percent at lunch. Some of those families are the working poor and some are just poor. Every little bit helps them get through the weekend. Because when school is out, we have a lot of hungry kids. For families that are working, it could be two or three jobs, and the kids being able to grab something to feed themselves while they're away is very helpful."

**– Judi Hunter, Food Services Supervisor, Northridge Local Schools**

"The first benefit is that it's easy for kids to take. It's portable. A lot of them are walkers or they take the bus. The other thing is that it's things they don't need to cook. A lot of parents work on the weekend and kids spend their time on their own. They don't have to use a stove. The Weekend Meals box has a lot of variety of food. It's shelf stable."

“A lot of our families are experiencing homelessness. The boxes might be all they have before they could get other resources. Some families are living in shelters or don’t have a shelter and are living in cars. I’ve seen the meal boxes help families that didn’t have a refrigerator.”

– **Courtney Kirby, School Social Worker, Alliance Academy**

## **The effect of cutting Weekend Meals...**

“[If Weekends Meals is cut,] it comes down to those 200 kids won’t know whether they’re getting that food. We all know food is an essential piece of how your body functions, how you think, how you feel... We have kids with hardworking parents who are trying their best, and it’s reassuring to them that their kids are coming home with food. It would be shocking and we would feel the loss for sure if Weekend Meals was cut.”

– **Danya Claes, Coordinator of Community Outreach & Student Wellness, Bowling Green City Schools**

“If we lost this program, it would be most devastating to the students who rely on it. The food insecurity gap over the weekend would reopen for some of these kids, and we’d see it reflected in their health, behavior, and academic performance. Our staff would feel helpless — we’ve seen the difference these meals make, and to have them taken away would feel like a step backward. Frankly, it would be heartbreaking.”

– **Lauren Moran, Food Service Manager, Mansfield City Schools**

“I think we would have some kids who are stressed out. Fending for themselves over the weekend. It’s also helpful for those families on a limited income trying to raise grandkids.”

– **Erin Lichty, Elementary Guidance Counselor, Antwerp Local Schools**

“A program cut would affect a large chunk of our community. These families depend on those boxes coming... During the school day, kids are getting fed. At night, parents only have to worry about dinner. When the weekend comes, there’s more they have to take care of. It adds stress on everybody. We have a lot of kids who stress a lot about where their next meal is coming from. The weekend meal box is all they’ve got sometimes.”

– **Donnie Strong, Nutrition Services Coordinator, Marion City Schools**

“I’ve been trying to figure out how to recreate what you’re all doing for us. I’ve been trying to get a grant to do it. It wouldn’t do half of what you’ve done for us. I think that Weekend Meals helps reduce a level of food insecurity for each community. It provides the safety net, the security blanket, that there is food for these kids. It’s not a stressor.”

– **Dan Fuchs, Caseworker, Amesville Elementary School**