



Chair Huffman, Vice Chair Johnson, and Ranking Member Liston

My name is Deacon Nick Bates, and I am called to serve as the director of the Hunger Network in Ohio – a statewide ministry that works to end hunger by addressing the root causes of poverty.

To solve any problem – big or small – you need a plan. Sometimes the plan will work perfectly, other times not so much. Even when a well thought out plan doesn't achieve the desired goal, you can learn from it and try again.

In Ohio we have that opportunity every two years to revise our plans to solve big problems. Right now, in Ohio some of the most pressing concerns for everyday Ohioans are pretty well known – rising grocery prices and housing costs, high costs and a lack of affordable childcare, and local schools that are struggling to have the resources to address all of the needs of our communities.

As a person of faith, addressing the needs of the hungry, the outcast, the widow is always top of my list and it is actually good policy for everyone. Working to increase economic stability for our neighbor equips them to be more fully present and an asset to our community.

***Hunger is going up in Ohio.*** Ohio saw an 11.3% increase in the rate of food insecurity for Ohioans last year. (11.5% to 12.8%) and the U.S. saw an 8.9% increase (11.2% to 12.2%)<sup>1</sup> in food insecurity. Not only is our food insecurity rate higher than the national average, we are increasing at a faster rate. Linger high inflation rates continue to cause stress and hardship for low- and middle-income families alike. While Food-at-home prices only rose 1.2% last year in 2024, the impact of the 5.0% inflation rate in 2023 on food-at-home prices, and 11.4% in 2022 have a lasting negative impact on our economy and food security.<sup>2</sup>

**I want to emphasize food Insecurity isn't the stereotype:** Right now, nearly 30% of Ohioans live below 200% of the federal poverty level<sup>3</sup>. These households are working but living right on the edge – one flat tire, one broken furnace away from hunger. I have led youth groups, soccer teams, Scout groups, and helped with programs at our YMCA. I have interacted with hundreds of neighbors in my neighborhood who are working, volunteering and doing what they can to give their kids a good life and to strengthen our community. However, many of these families have confided in me that – at different times – they have struggled. They turn to food pantries; they rely on school meals. Sometimes, these temporary moments of food insecurity are solved within a month or two, sometimes food insecurity remains a cloud that overshadows their household month in and month out.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.ers.usda.gov/publications/pub-details?pubid=109895>

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.ers.usda.gov/data-products/food-price-outlook/summary-findings>

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.kff.org/other/state-indicator/population-up-to-200-fpl/?currentTimeframe=0&sortModel=%7B%22colId%22:%22Under%20200%25%22,%22sort%22:%22asc%22%7D>

Remember, all public policy should have clearly identified goals and purposes. Our plan as a state in **HB 96 should have a goal of reducing hunger and poverty**. To that end we recommend that the state:

1. **Invest in the Ohio Association of Foodbanks.** As hunger increases, and costs go up, our food banks are on the front lines supporting our local congregational food pantries with *fresh fruits and vegetables*. Your investment into the foodbanks supports Ohio farmers and provides nutritious food to those who need it most. This nutritious food helps increase the amount of food given out, and it supports healthy food that will reduce negative health outcomes for children, seniors, and others.
2. **Keep SNAP effective and Efficient:** The Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) is the front lines against hunger. Policy changes proposed by the House will dramatically increase bureaucracy and bury social workers in constant paperwork. The changes also lock Ohio into a one-sized fits all federally dictated approach to SNAP in Ohio and prevents us from adopting our plans here to fit Ohio best.
3. **Protect the Housing Trust Fund:** For two decades, Ohio has utilized the Ohio Housing Trust Fund to address housing insecurity throughout the state. These are NOT general revenue dollars. Faith-based housing and homeless services, like Lutheran Metropolitan Ministry in Cleveland and Lutheran Social Services of Central Ohio, utilize the trust fund to serve our neighbors. In 2020-2021, the Trust Fund invested \$45 million into serving our neighbors and effectively leveraged \$167 million in other investments to reduce homelessness, improve homes, and strengthen communities<sup>4</sup> through locally crafted plans.
4. **Invest in young families:** The Governor's proposed Child Tax Credit is a smart investment into hardworking families struggling to pay for child care and other expenses when just starting out. Kids are likely to get sick with minor infection 10-12 times a year when young and in childcare.<sup>5</sup> This means days off work and missed wages. This would be more impactful tax reform than many Ohioans have seen in two decades.
5. **Strengthen our schools:** Investments into efforts to expand school meals to 225% of the federal poverty level. Free meals reduce lunch debt, reduce stigma, and decrease hunger. Ohio invests to fund other services like putting fuel into our school busses, so we should also properly fuel up our kids. In addition to meals and other services offered in schools, Ohio should guarantee the baseline of education is properly funded through the *Fair School Funding Plan*.

We strongly encourage you to adopt policies that have clear goals and plans. We are Ohio, and can solve big problems. It was Ohioans who flew the first airplane and just a few decades later flew to the moon. Our faith communities are doing what we can, but our private charity cannot be a replacement for a public commitment to solve Ohio's most pressing needs. Thank you and I'd be happy to answer any questions.

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<sup>4</sup> <https://ohiohome.org/news/documents/OHTF-FactSheet.pdf>

<sup>5</sup> <https://share.upmc.com/2023/05/daycare-syndrome/#:~:text=My%20Child%20Gets%20Sick%20Every,kids%20ages%20six%20and%20above.>