



## **Testimony to the Ohio House Finance Subcommittee on Health and Human Services**

**March 4, 2021**

### **Testimony from Kristin Warzocha, President and CEO, Greater Cleveland Food Bank and Board Chair, Ohio Association of Foodbanks**

Chairman Roemer, Ranking Member Thomas, and members of the Health and Human Services Subcommittee, thank you for the opportunity for the Greater Cleveland Food Bank to provide testimony on H.B. 110.

At the Greater Cleveland Food Bank, we work to ensure that everyone in our communities has the nutritious food they need every day. Last year we made possible fifty-five million meals in Ashland, Ashtabula, Cuyahoga, Geauga, Lake, and Richland Counties. This is not an isolated effort- rather we partner with more than one thousand food pantries, hot meal programs, libraries, churches, schools, senior centers, and other nonprofits to get food out to those in need. This emergency hunger relief is done in partnership with the eleven other food banks throughout our state, collectively making up the Ohio Association of Foodbanks. We thank you for your longstanding support of the Ohio Food Program and the Ohio Agricultural Clearance Program. To put it simply, these two programs are critical to the health and wellbeing of food insecure families who lack access to enough food for an active, healthy lifestyle.

In the Greater Cleveland area, the need was already high before the pandemic began. In 2019, Cleveland had the highest child poverty rate among the fifty largest U.S. cities, with nearly half of kids falling below the poverty line. This high poverty rate was only exacerbated by school closures, shuttered businesses, and record unemployment levels throughout 2020, leading to a heartbreaking child food insecurity rate of 30% in our service area. And as food insecurity hit record numbers, so did the number of community members turning to us for help. In our 2020 fiscal year, we provided food to more than 404,000 children, seniors, and other community members, a significant increase from the 308,000 individuals we served in 2019. Our temporary drive-thru food distribution quickly became a permanent, weekly fixture in our community- moving from our warehouse on South Waterloo to the City of Cleveland's Municipal Lot. At our Thanksgiving drive-thru distribution alone, we served 5,000 families over the course of one afternoon. While we expected to see the demand drop after the holiday season, we have instead continued to see more than 2,700 families visit our distribution each week, in addition to the thousands of families who seek help from our network of one thousand partners. Through all of these efforts combined, we served more than 52,000 new families from March 2020 through February 2021, meaning they had never turned to emergency food providers before now.

When talking to families who seek help from our Food Bank and network of partners, we often hear how grateful they are to receive fresh, perishable product that they would typically purchase at the grocery store. During the pandemic, that has proved even truer- as locally grown food provided a sense of comfort and familiarity to families struggling to keep food on the table. A few months ago, I spoke to a mother with a toddler at home who turned to an emergency feeding program in Parma after the pandemic disrupted their grocery budget. She told me that it was such a blessing to receive the food that she cried the first few times she visited the program. Her toddler especially loved the fresh produce and dairy products- and even helped her mom make dinner on a few occasions. Without the food, she did not know what she would do to feed her family. "It has been such a lifesaver to us," she told me.

Sadly, this story is not unique. We hear stories like this one frequently- in our food lines and on the hundreds of calls we get each week at our onsite call center (known as our Help Center). Many families talk to us about pandemic-related job losses, reduced hours at work, or in the case of many seniors we serve, an inability to leave the house to get groceries. This often leads to households making impossible decisions to stretch their limited grocery dollars, i.e. choosing between food and utilities, food and transportation, or even food and medicine. Food provided by the Ohio Food and Agricultural Clearance Programs help make hard choices a little easier and provide these families with nutritious food while also paying for basic necessities, like medicine, rent, utilities, and transportation.

In 2020, more than fifty-four million pounds of food were distributed through these two state programs across Ohio's twelve food banks, translating to around forty-five million meals. I can confidently say that we could not serve this many Ohio children, seniors, and families without them.

In addition to these programs providing Ohioans with the nutritious food they need to grow and thrive, another extraordinary benefit of these programs is our ability to work directly with local producers and growers. Through the Ohio Agricultural Clearance Program, farmers can find a second life for much of the produce that would otherwise be plowed under – imperfect produce that would go unsold, as grocery stores and food distributors hesitate to purchase fruits and vegetables that do not meet the expectations of customers. A couple years ago, the Holthouse vegetable farmers from Willard told us how much their partnership with Ohio's food banks has meant to them. They no longer have to plow crops under, and they can pay people to plant, care for and harvest the fruits and vegetables they grow. In effect, our farmers and their relentless hard work are helping to feed those struggling in our communities.

For twenty years, the State of Ohio has supported the Ohio Food and Agricultural Clearance Programs. We thank you for your continued support and for allowing us to keep food on the table for our neighbors going through difficult times, especially during the pandemic. With a sustained high demand at our Food Bank, as well as the eleven other food banks across our state, we humbly request that you help us by providing \$45 million per year in the 2022-2023 biennial budget. This funding would provide \$40 million per year for the operation of the Ohio Food and Agricultural Clearance Programs, \$4 million per year to purchase, transport, store, and distribute essential non-food items, as well as \$1 million per year to support capacity building for local food pantry and anti-hunger organizations. Additionally, we are requesting \$12 million in one-time, pass-through federal CARES Act funding to support the purchase and distribution of emergency foods, including Ohio-grown fruits and vegetables, Ohio-raised protein, and Ohio-produced dairy, as well as shelf-stable items and essential non-food items such as personal care and personal hygiene products, household paper goods, and household cleaning items throughout 2021.

This invaluable funding will allow Ohio's food banks and our partner programs across the state to continue our impactful work ensuring no Ohioan is left behind during the pandemic. By helping Ohio households meet their basic needs, such as food and essential non-food household items, we can free up more of their limited incomes for utilities, housing, transportation, health care, child care, education, and regaining lost emergency savings. Hunger is an urgent problem in Ohio that must be addressed. With your support, we hope to continue tackling this critical issue and ensuring no one in our community goes hungry.

Thank you for your time and consideration.