



March 2, 2021

Ohio House Finance Subcommittee on Health & Human Services
Chair Roemer
Ranking Member West
Representatives Edwards, Lipps and Russo

Subject: H.B. 110 – Funding for Ohio Foodbanks

Dear Members of the Ohio House Finance Subcommittee on Health and Human Services:

Thank you for considering my testimony in support of increased funding for statewide hunger relief. My name is Kurt Reiber, President & CEO of Freestore Foodbank, serving our neighbors in Southwest Ohio (Hamilton, Clermont, Adams, Brown, Highland, Pike, Clinton and Scioto Counties), along with 9-counties in Northern Kentucky and 3-counties in Eastern Indiana. Our team of 125 at Freestore Foodbank are on the front-line in the fight to end hunger and our vision is to create a hunger-free, healthy and thriving community. Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic 1 in 7 of our neighbors were dealing with food insecurity, with 1 in 5 of those neighbors being children under the age of 18. That represents approximately 245,000 of our tristate neighbors, of which 75,000 are children.

As we have responded to the increased need brought on by the business closures, furloughs and layoffs, we have witnessed an unparalleled increase in overall demand year-over-year and roughly, 75% of the families who have received food through our large-scale emergency food distributions are new to our network and have never had to rely on charitable food relief! COVID-19 has created the “perfect storm” for Ohio families. Feeding America estimates that due to the pandemic 1 in 5 (18.1 percent) of Ohioans experienced food insecurity in 2020, meaning that they did not always know how they would afford or access their next meal. Even during the Great Recession, Ohio’s food insecurity rates never exceeded 17 percent.

More than 1 in 4 of Ohio’s children (27.1 percent) lived in food insecure households in 2020 and according to a recent U.S. Census Bureau’s Pulse Survey nearly 3 in 10 Ohio households with children (28.9 percent) experienced food insecurity in December 2020. When you consider these startling statistics along with the fact that hundreds of thousands of children have also lost access to traditional school meals, you realize the incredible pressure that household budgets are under for our Ohio neighbors. So many of the families served by Freestore Foodbank must make daily decisions on whether to pay for medicine or food and whether to secure housing for their families or purchase food.

On average, we are distributing 1 million pounds of food per week throughout our 20-county service area. We are forecasting that the total number of meals that will be distributed in our current fiscal year will likely exceed 48 million, compared to the 38 million meals that our Freestore team and our 600+ pantry network distributed during our last fiscal year. In addition to the distribution of emergency food boxes to our neighbors, we are also providing rental and utility assistance, workforce development training, stabilization services and enrollment in government assistance programs such as Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), Medicaid and Unemployment benefits.

While the federal nutrition safety net, especially SNAP will continue to be the most important line of defense against hunger as Ohio and the rest of the nation work to recover from the fallout of the pandemic. Feeding America estimates that half of the people served by Ohio’s foodbanks, like



Freestore, are not eligible for SNAP benefits. For hundreds of thousands of Ohioans, our network is the only place they can get help with keeping food on the table.

The Ohio Association of Foodbanks has been honored to partner with the State of Ohio for two decades, creating a safety net for our neighbors who struggle with food insecurity, while supporting Ohio farmers by creating a secondary market for their produce, protein and dairy products that could not be sold in the retail market. Now, more than ever, it is imperative that we work collaboratively to invest in food and economic security and ensure an equitable recovery for all Ohioans. Ohio's hunger relief network is requesting that the State of Ohio invest:

- \$12 million in pass-through federal CARES Act funding to support the purchase and distribution of emergency food, 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 supplies throughout 2021
- \$45 million per year in the 2022-23 biennial budget (primarily funded through pass-through TANF dollars), including \$40 million per year for the operation of the Ohio Food Program and the Agricultural Clearance Program, \$4 million per year to purchase, transport, store and distribute essential household non-food items that can't be purchased with SNAP benefits, and \$1 million per year to support capacity building for local hunger relief organizations to ensure hard-hit communities don't lose local access to charitable relief

The Ohio Food Program and Agricultural Clearance Program (OFPACP) has received bipartisan support from 5 governors and 12 Ohio General Assemblies since its creation in the 1998/99 state budget. OFPACP provides more than 20 percent of all of the food distributed statewide by Ohio's 12 Feeding America foodbanks and their 3,600 member food pantries, soup kitchens and other hunger relief agencies. As you can see, the member foodbanks of the Ohio Association of Foodbanks are able to leverage the resources provided by the State of Ohio to secure philanthropic and charitable resources to provide for the additional 80% of the food provided to our Ohio neighbors impacted by food insecurity.

Beyond providing direct relief for hungry Ohio families, the State of Ohio's investment in OFPACP through its budget allocation and Executive Orders by Governor DeWine in SFY 2020 led to \$18.9 million in direct economic output and \$20.0 million in indirect economic output, as well as generating \$11.5 million in income and creating 401 Ohio jobs.

By helping our Ohio neighbors meet their basic needs, like food and essential non-food household items, we can free up their limited incomes for utilizes, housing, transportation, health care, child care, education, recovering from debt and regaining lost emergency savings. Together we will provide greater economic mobility for our Ohio families. We know that this recovery will not happen overnight. In the aftermath of the Great Recession, Ohio household food insecurity did not recover to pre-recession levels for a decade. The need for help with food and therefore the need for Ohio foodbanks to provide that help will not subside as quickly as the immediate public health crisis.

Together, we can create an Ohio that is hunger-free, healthy and thriving!