

Ohio House Finance Committee Health and Human Services Subcommittee

House Bill 110

Ohio Food Bank Funding

Tommie Harner, CEO, West Ohio Food Bank

March 4, 2021

Chairman Roemer, Ranking Member West, and Representatives Edwards, Lipps, and Russo,

My name is Tommie Harner and I am proud to serve as chief executive officer for the West Ohio Food Bank. I am testifying as an interested party to House Bill 110, the state operating budget, and in particular, in support of funding for Ohio's food banks. The West Ohio Food Bank serves food insecure Ohioans in Allen, Auglaize, Hancock, Hardin, Mercer, Paulding, Putnam, Seneca, Shelby, Van Wert, and Wyandot Counties. In 2018, about 11.6 percent of the residents in our 11-county service territory experienced food insecurity, just shy of 60,000 people. Food insecurity can sometimes be stigmatized or experienced in isolation here, but we're proud of our work to make having enough food about basic dignity for our neighbors.

Prior to the pandemic, we opened our first on-site food pantry at our foodbank. We've been so relieved for the extra coolers and storage space, where we can now stage pre-packed emergency food boxes and produce to distribute through a drive-through model to limit the spread of COVID-19 in our communities. We've also been incredibly grateful for the hardworking hands of the Ohio National Guard soldiers that have helped us keep food moving into the warehouse and out the door to our neighbors. And it's been so painfully necessary. Projections by Feeding America indicate that more than 20,000 additional people in our service territory were newly food insecure in 2020, bringing our local food insecurity rate to 15.6 percent and flooding our foodbank with new need for help.

We don't notice any trends showing the need will let up soon. In fact, not only do we estimate that about 30 percent of the people we've served the past year had never turned to our network for help before, but we also estimate that about two-thirds of the people we were serving *before* the pandemic are now turning to us for help more frequently. That's in spite of federal nutrition relief that has been critical but remains temporary, like a modest boost to SNAP benefits and the Pandemic EBT program for children in households with low incomes. We have seen an increase of 69% more food distributed in 2020 than we did in the previous year pre-pandemic. Many individuals have found themselves unemployed or jobless, utilizing what little savings they have to pay monthly bills and/or medical expenses leaving very little left for food. We have increased the number of food distributions we provide monthly so that we can ease the burden on these families experiencing food insecurity during these unprecedented times. These individuals are not just unemployed, but working poor struggling to make ends meet, necessitating the increased need for safety net services to be funded.

Our experience mirrors that of our fellow foodbanks throughout Ohio that make up the Ohio Association of Foodbanks. We work together, through the association, to procure healthy, wholesome foods, including Ohio-grown fruits and vegetables and Ohio-produced protein and dairy items, leveraging product at lower costs and doing our critical work as efficiently and equitably as we can. At the West Ohio Food Bank, we are a small but mighty team that partners with about 145 local nonprofit

and faith-based organizations to put food on the table for our neighbors. On our own, we couldn't possibly access the nutritious, fresh foods and center-of-the-plate items that the association can procure through our collective purchasing power and through the extraordinary support of the State of Ohio.

We join the Ohio Association of Foodbanks in requesting funding and support to meet the long-term demand we expect to continue for many months. We urge your support for:

- \$12 million pass-through of federal CARES Act funding for emergency food, including Ohio-grown fruits and vegetables; shelf-stable food; and, personal care products for calendar year 2021.
- \$45 million per year in the 2022-23 biennial budget (primarily funded by pass-through TANF dollars), including \$40 million per year for the operation of the Ohio Food Program and Agricultural Clearance Program; \$4 million per year to purchase, transport, store and distribute essential household non-food items that cannot be purchased with SNAP benefits; and \$1 million per year to support capacity building for local hunger relief organizations.

We are requesting this increase in funding for anti-hunger efforts in response to the truly unprecedented need for help that we have seen on a sustained basis for a full year. It's the right thing to do to invest in basic needs for Ohioans while they try to focus on rebuilding their lives and livelihoods in the months and years ahead.

Chair Roemer and members of the committee, thank you for your careful consideration of this request. The West Ohio Food Bank stands ready to share any additional information or answer any questions you may have. If you haven't lately, please consider visiting your local foodbank to witness the continued crisis at hand yourself, and to see how we're working to keep hunger at bay every day.

On behalf of the West Ohio Food Bank and the neighbors and friends we're humbled and proud to serve with food and with hope, thank you for your time and attention, and for your investment in our community's recovery.

Tommie Harner

CEO

West Ohio Food Bank