



## Testimony to the Ohio Senate Health Committee

May 4, 2021

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

Good afternoon Chairman Huffman, Vice Chair Antani, Ranking Member Antonio, and members of the Senate Health Committee. Thank you for the opportunity to testify on behalf of the Ohio Association of Foodbanks budget request regarding Amended Substitute House Bill 110. I am Kristin Warzocha, President and CEO at the Greater Cleveland Food Bank. I am also honored to serve as Board Chair for the Ohio Association of Foodbanks.

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- instead, 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. Thank you for your longstanding support of the Ohio Food Program and the Ohio Agricultural Clearance Program. 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.

The need was already high in the Greater Cleveland area 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. School closures, shuttered businesses, and record unemployment levels throughout 2020 exacerbated the already high level of need, 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 people in our community turning to us for help. In our 2020 fiscal year, we provided food to more than 400,000 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 Road to the City of Cleveland's Municipal Lot. On average, we have seen nearly 2,500 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 62,000 new families from March 2020 through March 2021, meaning they had never turned to an emergency food provider before.

When talking to families who seek help from our Food Bank and our network of partners, we often hear how grateful they are to receive fresh, perishable food that they would typically purchase at the grocery store. During the pandemic, 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 receive 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 helps make hard choices a little easier and provides these families with nutritious food while also paying for 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 of Ohio’s 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 of 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. 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 and the eleven other food banks across our state, we humbly request the committee’s support for an amendment to provide a temporary increase of \$20 million per year over the biennium. This funding would support the purchase of additional perishable and shelf-stable foods through the Ohio Food and Agricultural Clearance Programs, as well as personal care items, personal hygiene products, and household cleaning supplies that families cannot purchase with their SNAP benefits. These temporary funds would also support the transportation, storage, and distribution of these critical items. Finally, the funds would support capacity-building projects for local hunger relief organizations, ensuring that our network of partners is adequately equipped to store and distribute healthy foods.

This invaluable funding would allow Ohio’s food banks and our partner programs to continue our impactful work, ensuring no Ohioan is left behind during the pandemic and the months and years that follow. By helping Ohio households meet their nutrition needs, 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 the General Assembly can help food banks address. 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.