



Chairman Edwards, ranking member Sweeney, and members of the finance committee, thank you for the opportunity to testify today. My name is Nick Bates and I am Deacon in Evangelical Lutheran Church in America and director of the Hunger Network in Ohio – an ecumenical network that believes we can end hunger in Ohio by addressing the root causes of poverty.

People of faith are on the front lines fighting hunger and poverty in Ohio, but we cannot do it alone. The vast majority of our charitable work comes after our neighbors are in crisis. Your efforts through this budget can prevent hunger before it starts.

First, we need you to invest in Ohio's food banks. Ohio's 12 regional food banks are the backbone of our charitable response to hunger in Ohio. The pandemic phase of COVID-19 might be over, but the scars of the pandemic remain. Higher need and fewer volunteers are the new reality and our faith-based pantries are struggling to keep food on the shelves. Our food bank network is effective at getting proteins and fresh fruits and vegetables into homes. Please **support a \$50 million** a year appropriation for our food banks.

Seniors experience hunger. We encourage you to increase the minimum SNAP benefit for persons over 60 to \$50. Growing old should never mean growing hungry. This effort will have minimal administrative expense, because this increase will use the existing effective and efficient SNAP EBT card system. This small increase will provide countless households a bit more food security.

We can reduce childhood hunger by expanding school meals. In Ohio, children cannot learn on empty stomachs. As I travel the state talking with congregations, one thing is constant, people of faith overwhelmingly believe that society has a moral obligation to guarantee all children are fed. Public schools should provide students the necessities to learn – text books, computers, school busses, and food are all necessities. Expanding School meals will reduce bureaucracy, reduce stigma, and most importantly reduce hunger. We saw expanded school meals work during the pandemic, so let's build on what works and expand of our school meal program.

We can do great things in Ohio when we choose to invest. Ohio has the resources to address major concerns right now – including the generational long struggle for equity and adequacy in our public schools. The Fair School Funding Plan should not be delayed four more years to be properly funded, but fully phased in now. My daughter was in preschool when the pandemic began, and slow-rolling the implementation of the Fair School Funding Plan will put her into middle school before we have it implemented. Calls for income tax cuts for the wealthiest Ohioans will not only prevent us from funding these essential services now, but create barriers to properly funding them in the future.

Budgets are moral documents. This document is Ohio's Roadmap. Where do we want to be in two years? I want to build up an Ohio with clean water, healthy children, and economic

Hunger Network in Ohio



opportunity and economic supports for all of our neighbors. As you all begin to discern all the amendments on all the separate issues, I encourage to recognize that there are children who are busting their butts to succeed. They need you to have their backs. Budgets are moral documents and our ultimate moral responsibility is to those whose voices often go unheard, the elderly, the children, the marginalized, the outcast and those who hunger for food and hunger for pathways toward sustainability.