

Ohio House Finance Committee Health and Human Services Subcommittee
House Bill 33
Ohio Food Bank Funding
Matt Habash, President/CEO Mid-Ohio Food Collective
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Chairwoman Carruthers, Ranking Minority Member Liston and members of the Subcommittee, I am Matt Habash, President and CEO of Mid-Ohio Food Collective. Today, I am sharing this written testimony as an interested party to House Bill 33, the state operating budget. I will highlight the needed support of funding for Ohio's food banks and related services to address hunger and poverty.

Mid-Ohio Food Collective is the largest food relief agency in Ohio and one of the largest in the nation, serving 20 urban, rural and Appalachian counties from Chillicothe to Marion and Marysville to Belmont, including Columbus. To give you some context of our work to connect nutritious food to those who are struggling, last year Mid-Ohio Food Collective distributed 76 million pounds of food – enough for more than 170,000 meals every day, serving nearly 700,000 children, seniors, veterans, disabled and others facing food insecurity.

Our numbers thus far in 2023 are startling and disturbing; through February of this year, compared to the first two months of last year, we have seen 51 percent more total visits and an increase in customers of 40 percent. We also have had a 78 percent increase in new customers so far this year – families and individuals visiting one of our agencies for the first time.

With these increased service numbers, MOFC is also experiencing the fall out of inflation. Even as we are buying more of our food and personal care items, we are seeing double-digit increases in the price of meat, eggs and other staples. Two additional factors impacting our customers and our services are:

- 1) The end of the SNAP Emergency Allotments eliminating over \$25 million a month in support in our 20-county service region. While an average loss of over \$80 month in supplemental food purchasing power will hit all recipients hard, it may be most devastating to low-income seniors, many of whom will revert to the current \$23 minimum monthly allotment. Living on a fixed income during inflationary times with less than \$6 per week in assistance will push too many vulnerable older Ohioans over the hunger cliff.
- 2) The ending of the Public Health Emergency declared in response to the COVID pandemic will increase daily living costs for low-income earners and their dependents. With the loss of Medicaid coverage, rental and utility assistance and other supports enacted due to the pandemic, dollars for nutritious food will be stretched or more likely disappear altogether.

Before laying out our request, I want to express a heartfelt thank you. The appropriations last year for \$15 million for Ohio fresh food and \$25 million for additional purchases will help us to continue meeting the increased need this year. These funds, in addition to what was previously appropriated, will be instrumental in keeping our shelves stocked and our neighbors fed.

Unfortunately, we do not see a decrease in need this year or the next. Until inflation abates and prices, rent and other essential cost centers come down – not simply level off, but drop – we expect our elevated numbers to continue. With these increased customer numbers comes growing need for support, to ensure we and all of Ohio's hunger relief network can respond.

With that, we support the Ohio Association of Food Banks (OAFB) ask on behalf of its 12 members:

- 1) For a total appropriation per year of \$50 million through the Ohio Food Program and Agricultural Clearance Program for distribution of 100 million pounds of nutritious food and personal care items as well as capacity for storage and distribution.
- 2) An option to assist food insecure senior citizens is the creation of a Senior SNAP supplemental program to provide a state/federal supplemental food assistance benefit of \$50 per month (\$23 in federal support with \$27 from the state). Based on research by the Association, the state

portion comes to \$42.8 million biennially for one- and two- person households. This investment would bring nearly 70,000 older adults to a minimum SNAP food assistance benefit of \$50 per month which would be life changing in an aging state.

- 3) Up to \$2.5 million in each fiscal year to support in-person health insurance program enrollment assistance services for Ohioans who may become ineligible for the Medicaid Program. These funds will be regrant to organizations that provide in-person navigation services to assist eligible Ohioans who will need to enroll through the ACA Marketplace Health Insurance program. These navigators are licensed by the Ohio Department of Insurance and the State of Ohio currently does not provide any assistance or support in providing these services across the state, missing a valuable opportunity to promote healthier, thriving communities.

There is an unprecedented food assistance need across the state, including in our own footprint of service. In response, we continue to expand our fundraising efforts, find new food sources and implement multiple changes to meet the increased demand. We know that this is a marathon at a sprinter's pace. Many of the neighbors who we serve were struggling before the onset of the pandemic; their hardships are now greater than ever – hardships that we know will take months and even years from which to recover.

We recognize this is an increase in funding for anti-hunger efforts. However, this is reflective of an unprecedented era of hunger and financial instability. We are requesting a critical investment to help Ohioans get through these turbulent times to better days ahead.

Madame Chair and members of the subcommittee, thank you for your time and consideration. We at Mid-Ohio Food Collective are happy to answer questions or share additional information. I will also ask each of you to visit your local food bank to see firsthand their operations and to learn more about what we are doing toward ending hunger.

On behalf of Mid-Ohio Food Collective, we urge you to support the requests for House Bill 33 from Ohio's food bank network. More specifically, we ask for your support on behalf of our neighbors – seniors, children, disabled, veterans and those who have seen their work and personal circumstances change so dramatically in the past year. Together, we can bridge the gap – helping families to connect to the most basic of needs – food.

Thank you,

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