



**Testimony before the Senate Democratic Policy Committee -
Policy Hearing on Food Insecurity
Agriculture Secretary Russell C. Redding
April 30, 2021**

Opening

Thank you for the opportunity to join you today and discuss the impact of food insecurity on Pennsylvanians in the wake of the Coronavirus pandemic, highlighting actions taken and recommendations to ensure that agriculture is doing its best to feed the commonwealth.

In 2019, before this pandemic began, food insecurity rates in Pennsylvania and across the nation had dropped to levels that hadn't been seen in more than a decade – since prior to the onset of the Great Recession in 2008. According to data released by Feeding America, the largest hunger-relief organization in the United States, 1.35 million Pennsylvanians were at risk of hunger in 2019 -- 10.6 percent or one in ten Pennsylvanians. This figure included 383,500 children – 14.6 percent or one in seven of Pennsylvania's children.

As COVID-19 began to make its way into the Commonwealth, hundreds of thousands of Pennsylvanians found themselves either out of work or saw their work hours dramatically reduced. With these changes in employment status quickly came a dramatic surge in demand for emergency food assistance. Any food insecurity issues that existed prior to COVID were now exacerbated to unforeseen levels; and were perhaps best exemplified by the photos and videos that went viral nationwide showing hundreds of cars waiting in miles-long lines for food outside of the Greater Pittsburgh Community Food Bank. These circumstances weren't unique to Allegheny County of course but were replicated in the other 66 counties all across Pennsylvania.

According to a series of data analysis reports compiled by Feeding America, the number of Pennsylvanians facing food insecurity in 2020 grew substantially to 1.77 million individuals – 13.8 percent – an increase of 30 percent. Even more startling, the number of children in our state facing food insecurity rose to 537,080 -- 20.4 percent – an increase of nearly 40 percent in just one year.

But, perhaps even more telling than these figures are the numbers of people served and pounds of food provided that were reported by Pennsylvania's food banks and their charitable feeding network. Between April and December 2020, these organizations, serving all 67 counties, reported serving more than 21.7 million Pennsylvanians and providing them with more than 206.5 million pounds of food. On average, that means these charitable feeding organizations were serving more than 531,000 Pennsylvanians in need of food assistance every week.

Current Status

Feeding America projects that in 2021, as a result of policies implemented by the federal and local governments to strengthen nutrition assistance programs and the generosity of the private sector, food insecurity rates are likely to improve over the rates seen in 2020. The 2021 projections indicate that the number of Pennsylvanians at-risk of hunger will drop to 1.54 million individuals, including more than 443,000 children. These figures represent 1 in 8 Pennsylvanians, and 1 in 6 Pennsylvania children.

Even as these numbers are projected to improve however, it is important to remember the pandemic is not yet over. Neither is the economic crisis this pandemic brought to bear on far too many Pennsylvanians. With Pennsylvania's unemployment rate as of March 2021 remaining higher than the national average – 7.3 percent in the commonwealth versus the national average of 6 percent – the outlook for the future remains uncertain for those who have experienced food insecurity and are not always assured of having access to enough food for their families.

Actions Taken by the Wolf Administration in Coordination with the Federal Government

Early in the pandemic, Governor Wolf and his team quickly recognized the increased levels of demand that were being placed on the commonwealth's charitable feeding network. As a result, the Wolf Administration asked Congress to help address this concern by providing additional funding for United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) foods purchases through The Emergency Food Assistance Program (TEFAP). As a result, in the past year, Congress has three times provided additional funding for TEFAP:

- Through the Families First Coronavirus Response Act (FFCRA), Pennsylvania received more than \$11 million in food funds and more than \$3.7 million in administrative funds to help defray the costs of storing, transporting, and distributing these foods.
- Through the Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security (CARES) Act, Pennsylvania received more than \$11 million in food funds and more than \$5.6 million in administrative funds.
- Through the Consolidated Appropriations Act of 2021, Pennsylvania received more than \$12.9 million in food funds and \$3.2 million in administrative funds.

Additionally, since the pandemic first began, USDA has responded to support American agriculture by intervening in struggling agriculture markets to make millions of dollars of Bonus TEFAP purchases. Of those purchases, Pennsylvania has received more than \$31 million worth of additional TEFAP foods.

USDA also responded to the need to support struggling agriculture producers and markets, as well as a growing number of food insecure Americans, by launching the Farmers to Families Food Box Program in April 2020. As a result of this program, which will come to a close as of the end of May 2021, 17 Pennsylvania producers and distributors received contracts worth more than \$154 million to provide food boxes containing a mix of fresh produce, milk, dairy products, and pre-cooked meats to non-profit organizations for further distribution to those in need. As of April 17, 2021, food banks in Pennsylvania report having distributed in excess of 2.4 million of these food boxes, weighing more than 51.5 million pounds.



In the spring of 2020, USDA also awarded Pennsylvania \$255,373 from the Farm to Food Bank Program. Farm to Food Bank is modeled after our very own Pennsylvania Agricultural Surplus System (PASS) and provided the perfect opportunity to support our farmers as well as food-insecure families at a time when they needed it the most. These funds, combined with other PASS program funds, were used in June 2020 to acquire more than 200,000 pounds of swiss cheese – produced in Pennsylvania using milk from Pennsylvania dairy farms – that was left without a market due to food supply chain disruptions as a result of COVID-19 mitigation efforts. This cheese was distributed by 13 food banks who collectively serve all 67 counties across the commonwealth. In December 2020, Pennsylvania was awarded an additional \$237,288 in Farm to Food Bank funding from USDA.

Beyond these federally allocated funds, the state stepped in to ensure that Pennsylvanians struggling with hunger had access to the additional food resources they needed. In June 2020, Governor Wolf announced more than \$25 million in federal funding from the Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security (CARES) Act would be made available to support Pennsylvania's food banks and charitable feeding network. Of these funds, \$15 million was allocated to bolster the Pennsylvania State Food Purchase Program – a program that annually provides grants to each county to purchase food to supplement what they each receive through TEFAP. The other \$10 million was allocated to increase spending for the PASS program – with \$5 million of those funds specifically dedicated to the purchase of surplus milk and dairy products. Thanks to those additional PASS funds provided through the CARES Act, between July 2020 and March 2021, 6.1 million pounds of product sourced through PASS were able to be distributed to low-income Pennsylvanians in need while also providing financial support to Pennsylvania farmers.

Additionally, \$10 million of CARES ACT funding was dedicated to the COVID-19 Pennsylvania Fresh Food Financing Initiative. This program was created by both Department of Agriculture and Department of Community and Economic Development staff. This program aimed to provide grant support to food retailing businesses impacted by COVID-19 to ensure that amidst the pandemic, communities could maintain healthy food access. Specifically, this program recognized the disproportionate impacts of both COVID-19 and food apartheid on communities made up of Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC), and especially Black and African American communities and therefore prioritized businesses that were owned by and served low-income BIPOC communities. The program impacted 41 counties, 20 minority owned businesses, and a total of 117 food retailers. All of those selected either supported EBT, were registering for EBT, or supplied products to stores that supported EBT or other food access programs. In addition, every location or supplied location was designated as low food access or low income by the USDA Food Access Research Atlas.

One fortunate aspect to the timing of COVID-19 was that several PA Farm Bill grants and other programs had been implemented earlier in 2019. These programs included the urban infrastructure grant program, very small meat processor grant program, and Pennsylvania Dairy Investment Program, to name a few. These programs not only enabled more food to be available, but also made agricultural businesses better suited to respond to the requests of the Federal Government. This was the case with Titusville Dairy in Crawford County. As a recipient of a Pennsylvania Dairy Investment Grant, the dairy was able to increase capacity to turn fluid milk into cultured products like cheese, cottage cheese, and yogurt. With this increased capacity, the dairy was able to participate in the USDA Farmers to Families



Food Boxes. This further emphasized the importance of these investments under normal circumstance, but even more so during a crisis.

Looking to the Future

COVID-19 emphasized areas where we can continue to improve. The lessons learned over this past year have provided us a fresh lens to look at our grant programs to ensure they are equitable and meeting the needs of those we serve. The gaps in the system have been highlighted such as meat processing delays and lack of access to fresh foods. We will continue to enhance our current programs and investigate additional ways to address these needs. Additionally, expanding broadband access throughout the commonwealth will assist in providing equal access to resources and e-commerce platforms. These are some of the issues that we can address moving forward.

Closing

As I said in July, I have never been prouder of the work the agricultural community is doing together, and apart, to ensure that their fellow Pennsylvanians have food on their tables. Although, the agricultural community still faces many challenges, I am confident that this community will come out of this stronger and more resilient.

Although the events of the past year have proven unpredictable, there has been an undeniable constant; the department's dedicated public servants. I am so grateful to have a team that works tirelessly to ensure public safety, keep the food supply secure and uninterrupted, and provide resources, support, and information. A special thanks must be given to our Bureau of Food Assistance, led by Director Caryn Long Earl, which had the critical task of ensuring Pennsylvania's most vulnerable families had access to food. I could not be more impressed with how the department has banded together to provide innovative solutions in these unprecedented times.

I would be happy to address any questions members of the committee might have at this time.

Thank you.