

Testimony submitted by Jay Worrall, President, Helping Harvest Fresh Food Bank, Reading, PA

We have all been moved over this past year by the heart-breaking images of people lining up in cars for hours to get the food they need to survive. Never before has it been so clear that we must work together to ensure that no child, senior or adult goes to bed hungry because of food insecurity in our community. Helping Harvest and our partners are working harder than ever in pursuit of our shared mission to eliminate hunger in Berks and Schuylkill Counties.

This past year has laid bare the financial challenges and hardships faced by low- and middle-income families, senior citizens, and particularly children in our community. Too many folks are forced to choose whether they should pay their rent or mortgage, their utility bills, their medical bills, or put food on their tables. This is the true meaning of food insecurity.

This problem has been exposed and made worse by COVID-19, but it was not caused by the virus. Many in our community had to skip meals, buy food that was affordable but not nutritious, or make the impossible choice of feeding their loved ones rather than paying other bills well before COVID-19 arrived.

What We Do

Since 1983, Helping Harvest Fresh Food Bank has been working with hundreds of partners and thousands of volunteers to provide nutritious food to those in need in Berks and Schuylkill Counties. We primarily get food products for distribution through our partners in one of three ways. First, we get food through several governmental programs, including The Emergency Food Assistance Program (TEFAP), the Emergency Food and Shelter Program (EFSP), the Commodity Supplemental Food Program for Seniors (CSFP), the Pennsylvania Agricultural Surplus System (PASS), and the PA State Food Purchase Program

(SFPP). At Helping Harvest, those governmental food programs provide us with 46.5% of the food we distribute.

Second, we receive donated product from manufacturers, distributors and grocery stores in our service territory. Those donations account for 47.4% of the food distributed in Berks and Schuylkill Counties. The remaining 6.1% of our food is purchased by Helping Harvest using non-governmental funding.

Over the past 12 months, Helping Harvest distributed over 11.2 million pounds of food valued at \$15 million to 98,742 households. In addition, we provided food to homeless shelters and soup kitchens to make over 1.2 million prepared meals. It is likely that one out of five residents in our service territory receives food from one of our 320 food distribution points in Berks and Schuylkill County each year.

The increase in food insecurity over the past year has tested the limits of our staff, volunteer and financial resources in many ways. Our primary challenge has been to secure enough food to meet the needs of our community. We had planned to spend \$384,000 to purchase food in 2020, but needed to find a way to purchase \$3.5 million worth of food instead. We have doubled the capacity of our fleet of trucks. We have increased staff, purchased additional warehousing equipment, and will soon expand our facility with desperately needed additional cold storage for fresh produce, dairy and frozen food items, and additional office space.

What We Need

First and foremost, we are asking that the Commonwealth consider increasing funding for its signature food insecurity programs, the State Food Purchase Program (SFPP), and the Pennsylvania Agricultural Surplus System (PASS), and increase the flexibility for how those funds can be expended.

While those funds are of course used primarily to purchase food, sometimes what limits a Food Bank's ability to get food to those who need it most is a lack of other resources or infrastructure. More food is

not enough if we lack the number of trucks, employees or fuel that is needed to get the food where it needs to go. Similarly, if a food bank does not have sufficient storage space in their facility, or enough material handling equipment, or an adequate number of employees to manage the food in the warehouse, then that food may go to waste. More flexibility for how state funds can be used will help each food bank direct those funds to their greatest need, be it food purchases, truck leases, fuel, facility improvements or staffing needs.

We should also invest in the capacity of the churches and nonprofit agencies which run food pantries and soup kitchens so that they have the resources they need to serve their neighborhoods. Many churches are forced to run their food programs out of outdated social halls or basements that lack adequate storage space, access for seniors or people with disabilities, or other challenges. A shortage of pantries with cold storage limits a Food Bank's ability to distribute the healthiest food options—perishable produce and dairy products, and fresh or frozen meats. If we can identify funding options for capital improvements that can be accessed by faith-based organizations who serve their neighborhoods in this way, it would go a long way to easing hunger and improving nutrition for the people who rely on the charitable food network.

The Future

Food Banks have not seen levels of food insecurity as we have this year since the Great Depression. Helping Harvest has seen an increase in demand for our services of around 80% from pre-pandemic levels, and we are preparing for that demand to remain high for at least several more years. One reason for that is the simple fact that it is always the poor who feel the pain of economic crises earliest, and are always the last to see the gains of a recovery. The result of the widening income inequality seen in our society since the 1980's will be that low-income households will have an even harder time recovering from the current crisis than they have in the past. This is going to be a long haul for many families.

But even more, we believe that the stigma associated with accepting food from the charitable system has historically been the largest contributor to people not seeking help from food pantries or soup kitchens. One of the consequences of the increased focus on food insecurity by the media over the past year is that we have collectively removed some of that stigma. As a result, we must be more prepared now to meet the nutritional needs of our community than ever before.

I myself come from a family that needed food assistance on occasion, and I recall how upset my father would be when my mother came home from the church with food for my four brothers and I. Regardless of whether we call the impetus for that feeling pride, or shame, it should never be the case that a child, adult or senior goes hungry in Pennsylvania because they cannot or will not access food from a Food Bank. Thank you for being our partners in this work.