



Testimony of

Mr. Ron Edenfield
President
Wayfield Foods, Inc.

Before the

United States House of Representatives
Committee on Agriculture, Nutrition and Forestry
'A Look at Food Insecurity in America'

March 11, 2021
9 a.m. ET



Chairman Scott, Ranking Member Thompson, and Members of the Committee:

My name is Ron Edenfield and I am president of Wayfield Foods, a nine-store independent grocer with stores across the metro-Atlanta area. Wayfield Foods is an authorized retailer in the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) and also in the Special, Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program for Women, Infants and Children (WIC).

As a WIC and SNAP-authorized grocer for 39 years, I appreciate the opportunity to come before this distinguished committee to share my views on food insecurity and how the many assistance programs you oversee have been a lifeline to my customers, particularly during the pandemic.

Wayfield Foods has been a part of metro-Atlanta since 1982. My goal was to bring a full-service grocery store to communities that were being all but abandoned by other retailers. Most of our stores are located in low-income census tract areas. Without the arrival of our stores, these communities would be considered food deserts. We work, live and deeply engage in these communities that now have access to a reliable, economical source of fresh produce and meats. Our customers deserve to eat better for less, like any other community in America. This is our mission, and we have devoted our brand to reflect this commitment. Almost 40 years later, we are proud of the many ways we have become part of the community, providing jobs for over 500 associates.

Since the pandemic hit, I have never been prouder of our associates' dedication to serving our community. I know all of you experienced occasional empty shelves as customers literally rushed to get the last pack of hamburger meat or the last roll of toilet paper during some of the early days of the pandemic. Our dedicated essential employees came to work every day, even working overtime to take care of our customers, and we quickly got products back on the shelves.

As an essential industry, our stores never closed during the pandemic. Unfortunately, many of my customers have not been so lucky. Many have lost jobs or had their hours reduced. We have had Wayfield employees startled by the community need and reached into their own pockets to give a customer a few dollars when they could not pay their bill at check-out. Wayfield Foods has never wavered in our support of local food pantries and community groups to provide additional assistance, especially as this need is at an all-time high.

When [Georgia's Department of Labor](#) became inundated with claims, we heard horror stories from our customers who went months before they received any benefits. Almost a year later, there are still customers who tell us they are having trouble receiving unemployment benefits. For those individuals, SNAP has been a lifeline for getting food on the table and the Emergency Allotments that increased benefits to the maximum were and are critically important.

When the schools in Atlanta closed due to the pandemic, many customers had to quit their jobs to stay home and take care of their children. Feeding their children became a real struggle for those who rely on free and reduced-price school breakfasts and lunches. Thankfully, the Families First Coronavirus Response Act of 2020 that you passed allowed the U.S. Department of

Agriculture's Food and Nutrition Service to facilitate the distribution of pandemic EBT - or P-EBT - to families affected by coronavirus-related school closures.

Georgia families received a one-time allotment of \$256.50 in P-EBT benefits per child based on a calculation of \$5.07 per day for the 45 days the child missed school during last year's school year. Unfortunately, there have been **NO** P-EBT benefits issued for this school year even though we are now seven months into the school year. To date, less than half the states have been approved to issue P-EBT benefits for the current school year. While the P-EBT program is not directly under the jurisdiction of this committee, I encourage this committee in coordination with the House Education and Labor Committee to examine the program and why many states are facing so many challenges in being approved for the current school year. While implementing P-EBT remains a challenge for states, there are some very positive pieces to its model like how it is tailored directly to children in need and that it leverages the existing EBT rails. For families who already participate in SNAP, they can shop as they usually do with added benefits on their existing cards. For families who do not currently receive SNAP, they are issued EBT cards that function under the same requirements of SNAP. This allows families to continue shopping at their neighborhood grocer who is SNAP-authorized and easily redeem those benefits. I would encourage this Committee to consider the P-EBT model for summer feeding programs as well. I have always thought this approach of utilizing the EBT card for summer feeding made a lot of sense rather than having to send children away from their homes to feeding sites.

I also want to comment on the so called "food boxes" that were delivered to supplement families in tremendous need. While I certainly believe the need is there and that we should do everything we can do to help these families, I know without a doubt that the existing food partnerships that distribute funds through an EBT card or through food banks are far more efficient and give parents the opportunity to shop at their convenience and to purchase the best foods for their children. Imagine the frustration of a parent who receives a food box containing peanut butter but has a child with a peanut allergy.

There is much that has been said in the press that is less than accurate about the increased sales resulting in vastly increased profits to grocers this past year. While we certainly saw increased sales, we also confronted a significant number of costs to keep our associates and customers safe, including investments in PPE, enhanced cleaning and retrofitting stores with plexiglass to help keep cashiers, baggers and customers safe at check-out. The national data that FMI – the Food Industry Association has collected for more than 40 years finds that the supermarket industry profit margin has never hit 2%. Perhaps when this year's numbers are calculated, the industry may hit a 2% profit margin, but for my associates and for many others, that profit goes back to them through our Employee Stock Ownership Plan (ESOP).

In spite of these increased costs and the huge demand from consumers now responsible for preparing three meals a day for their families, I'm proud to say that the food retail industry continued to be the largest private sector donor to Feeding America. According to their 2020 *Annual Report*, food retailers were responsible for donating more than 1.5 billion meals to the

Feeding America network last year. And this represents only one stream of the efforts undertaken by retailers.

Although your committee does not have jurisdiction over the WIC program, I did want to share my frustration that Georgia has still not transitioned to e-WIC. Although every state was mandated to transition to e-WIC by October of 2020, Georgia received a waiver to extend their timeline. We are now hearing it could be another year before Georgia is ready to launch e-WIC.

Retailers and our customers are challenged to deal with an outdated system that requires customers to receive all their monthly benefits at one time and maintains the stigma of using the WIC paper vouchers. The e-WIC system will benefit retailers because costly human error will be reduced, reimbursement will happen faster and there will be less risk of rejected purchases.

Please encourage your colleagues to do everything they can to move Georgia WIC as well as other states who have not implemented e-WIC forward to better take care of our customers.

When we talk about food insecurity, we recognize that SNAP is an important stabilizer for low-income families, but it is also a powerful economic stimulator for the local economies and grocers. Wayfield Foods has been in partnership with a SNAP ED-funded community agency, Open Hand Atlanta, since 2017, to address food insecurity and health in our stores directly with our customers. Wayfield Foods & Open Hand have supported hundreds of store nutrition education sessions, employee trainings and thousands of healthy food demonstrations and produce donations over the last five years. We are committed to doing this work and we have witnessed firsthand, SNAP recipients making the best use of their limited funds as they learn to shop for healthy food on a budget, read nutrition labels, and other critical nutrition messages that help empower them to make better decisions related to nutrition and the health and wellness of their families.

We have also partnered with the Atlanta Community Food Bank by implementing the 2 for 1 SNAP fresh produce purchase program with the assistance of a FINI (Food Insecurity Nutrition Incentive) grant in 2018 and 2019. Wayfield Foods supports this critical work, and we amplify the USDA funding with our own financial and staff support. These types of programs show that private-public partnerships can make a significant impact on the way people shop, think about food, healthy eating and nutrition.

One of the efforts we were engaged in during the pandemic was encouraging our customers and providing support with healthy and economical meal solutions with the theme - *Stay Strong with Family Meals*, recognizing that eating well helps to keep our customers healthy until they are able to be protected by the COVID vaccination.

In conclusion, addressing an issue as complex as food insecurity requires grocers, community-based organizations, food banks, hospitals, universities, and public health agencies working together to build nutrition programs that not only reduce hunger and poverty, but enhance nutrition knowledge, improve health outcomes and productivity, create jobs and economic

growth, and strengthen our communities. Wayfield Foods will continue to work with our partners to increase access to quality food in our communities, and we are pleased to see the result of this work in healthier customers.

I may be biased, but I happen to think that the House Agriculture Committee has the right person leading this important work at this critical time.

I would be pleased to answer your questions.