

Midwest Food Bank Congressional Committee on Agriculture Testimony

Submitted on March 9, 2021

Good morning and thank you for the invitation to participate in today's hearing. My name is Eric Hodel, and I serve Midwest Food Bank as the Chief Operating Officer and Chief Financial Officer. I am honored to have a seat at the table today.

Midwest Food Bank was founded by a farmer 18 years ago. I too was raised on a farm and continue to manage a 1,000 acre grain and livestock farm in addition to my responsibilities at Midwest Food Bank. I come today understanding the impacts of agriculture policy as both a producer and a servant to the food insecure.

Midwest Food Bank started in 2003 when our founder, David Kieser, and his two brothers responded to a request for help in the local newspaper. The Kieser brothers saw a community in need and quickly turned a barn on their family farm into a distribution site for ten local food pantries. They soon realized that the need in their community was greater than they anticipated.

Our values and mission remain steadfast after nearly two decades of growth, via locations, food distributed, and quality of service to our 2000+ agencies. In 2020, Midwest Food Bank distributed \$383M in food, including 3 million meals via family food disaster relief boxes. We have ten locations across the US (FL, GA, PA, CT, IN, IL, TX, AZ) and two internationally (Kenya and Haiti). We have less than 50 full-time employees, and 99 cents of every dollar spent is for program services.

Our business model is simple: We receive donations of food, financial support, and volunteer efforts. With these three inputs, we deliver four programs: 1) Distributing food to nonprofit agencies, 2) providing Family Food Boxes as Disaster Relief, 3) producing Tender Mercies, a high nutrition rice & beans meal and 4) distributing Hope Packs, our weekend feeding program for school aged children.

Our faith-based mission calls us to serve each of our 2,000+ nonprofit agencies with dignity and respect. We have just two simple requirements for our agency partners: First, that they are



registered non-profits. Second, that they distribute the Midwest Food Bank food at no charge to their clients.

Midwest Food Bank does not receive payment for food distributed and therefore does not create a business model that relies on compensation from our nonprofit partners. Midwest Food Bank bridges the gap between poverty & prosperity for the people we serve. Said differently, our hope is to serve our food recipients for a season, not for a lifetime.

We celebrated the downward trend in rates of food insecurity across our nation in the decade leading up to 2020. And then, last year, all aspects of the emergency food system were disrupted due to the pandemic. Without question, the pandemic catapulted more families into a state of food insecurity. Our combination of food distribution to nonprofits and Disaster Relief equipped us to serve during this challenging season. The USDA Farmers to Families Food Box Program was a valuable resource for Midwest Food Bank. Midwest Food Bank shifted resources to be nimble and ensure each of our locations had access to the high-quality product. We distributed 1.1 million of the boxes in 2020. We applaud the USDA for the quick program execution from concept to delivered boxes. The program injected nutrition directly into the emergency food system – while supporting farmers and producers.

This past year, 2020, was the first year we consistently receive food funded by government programs – via the USDA Farmers to Families Food Box Program. As we are growing, USDA's The Emergency Food Assistance Program, commonly known as TEFAP, is an option we are exploring, and we recently applied to participate in Florida.

Moving forward, Midwest Food Bank will continue to pursue three opportunities:

- 1. Mission Focus – Serving our agencies with focus on efficiency and excellence.
- 2. Nutrition – Increasing the nutrition of the food distributed.
- 3. Partnerships - Strengthening our partnerships with community leaders and agencies to advance holistic programing for those we serve.

In closing, we ask the Committee on Agriculture to commit to equitable policies that channel government resources to independent food banks able to meet program requirements. Alleviating hunger and malnutrition is a complex challenge requiring a multi-faceted solution. We ask that you continue to bring efficient, community-centric programs to the table for collaboration. Together we will sustainably bridge the gap between poverty and prosperity for more American families. Thank You.

