



House Agriculture Committee
Hearing on *A Look at Food Insecurity in America*
Thursday, March 11, 2021

Statement of Kyle Waide
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Dear Chairman Scott, Ranking Member Thompson and distinguished Members of the Committee:

Thank you for the invitation to testify at today's hearing on *A Look at Food Insecurity in America*. My name is Kyle Waide and I am the President and CEO of the Atlanta Community Food Bank, one of the largest food banks in the country. I am excited to share my perspective today on the food insecurity crisis and the work we're doing to confront it.

My food bank is part of Feeding America, the national network of food banks. Like our sister food banks across the country, the Atlanta Community Food Bank works to fight hunger by engaging, educating and empowering our community. We work with a wide variety of retailers, farmers, manufacturers, distributors, and federal programs to secure donated and purchased essential groceries. We distribute this food through a large, decentralized grassroots network of more than 600 community-based feeding programs across twenty-nine urban, suburban and rural counties in north Georgia. In 2020, we served close to 900,000 of our Georgia neighbors, distributing more than 100 million pounds of food through a network of partners.

Our work depends on broad community support. Feeding America food banks are supported by millions of volunteers, who help us pack food boxes, organize and manage food distributions, and address other client needs. In addition to managing a food supply chain that moves 7.5 billion pounds of food in 2020, our network of food banks also provides a variety of additional programs and services, ranging from food pharmacies and nutrition education to job training and assistance with applying for benefit programs. Collectively, we serve kids, families and seniors in every county in the United States, including each of the 159 counties in Georgia.

The Feeding America network is uniquely capable of working to reduce food insecurity. Through forty years of growing our capacity, building public-private partnerships, responding to

crises and driving innovation, we've seen it all. And yet the past twelve months have been the most challenging and most inspiring year our network of food bankers has ever experienced.

Impact of the Pandemic on Food Insecurity

Prior to the pandemic, national food insecurity rates had reached their lowest levels in 20 years. After reaching a peak following the Great Recession, the food insecurity rate fell steadily as the economic recovery accelerated and we reached historically low levels of unemployment. Despite that progress, some 35 million individuals, including nearly 11 million children, still lived in food-insecure households. In Georgia, 1 in 8 of our neighbors didn't always know where their next meal would come from, including more than 400,000 children.

Based on an analysis conducted by Feeding America, we estimate that the economic effects of COVID-19 have caused an additional 350,000 Georgians to experience food insecurity, an increase of close to 30%. Nationally, the food insecure population could be as high as 50 million, including nearly 17 million children. These increases suggest that there are likely more food insecure kids and families today than there were at the peak of the Great Recession. Many of the people who have fallen into food insecurity are experiencing it for the first time in their lives, as our food pantry partners across the country report that 35% or more of the people they're serving today had never received charitable food prior to the pandemic.

While the pandemic has increased food insecurity far and wide, touching people and communities of all backgrounds, we also know that the impact has been even greater on those communities that were already experiencing higher rates of food insecurity prior to the pandemic. Black, Latino, and Native American/Alaskan communities were twice as likely to face food insecurity before the pandemic and were less likely to have health insurance. During the pandemic, these communities have experienced higher rates of COVID-19 infection and mortality, while also experiencing more significant increases in unemployment due to the economic downturn. Alongside our peer food banks across the country, the Atlanta Community Food Bank is working to enhance our core practices in communities of color to ensure we are serving people equitably.

Similarly, many rural communities experienced higher levels of hunger before the pandemic, a challenge that has only intensified in the current environment. Food insecurity rates exceed 20% in a number of large, rural census tracts across Georgia for a variety of reasons. With the nearest grocery store, food pantry, or food bank potentially hours away, food deserts are more common. Job opportunities are more concentrated in low-wage industries. Higher fixed costs to operate impact profit margins for smaller grocery retailers, who pass on those increased costs to their customer base. Many of these communities face higher rates of unemployment and underemployment. The pandemic has intensified these challenges.

Food Bank Response to the Food Insecurity Crisis

In the initial weeks and months of the pandemic, food banks faced three significant challenges as we sought to respond to the crisis. First, as noted above, demand for charitable food assistance grew dramatically and suddenly. The extent of this increase has been captured repeatedly in

media images from around the country of lines of cars stretching for miles, waiting to receive boxes and bags of charitable food. Second, stress on the larger food supply chain reduced our access to several key sources of food at the very moment when we needed more food than we ever have. Third, like so many other businesses and nonprofits, we had to quickly adapt all of our core processes for storing, handling and distributing food in order to reduce the risk of exposure to COVID-19 for our staff, partners, volunteers and clients.

Food banks, our partners and our volunteers have responded creatively and courageously to these challenges. At the Atlanta Community Food Bank, we have grown our weekly distribution of food by 65% and now provide close to 2.5 million pounds of food a week. Nearly 60% of the food we are distributing is perishable. Similarly, in 2020, Feeding America food banks collectively distributed 7.5 billion pounds of food, an increase of 43% compared to 2019. This included 3.8 billion pounds of fresh produce, milk, dairy and animal proteins, more than half of all the food we distributed. We are providing more food to more people more often than we ever have, significantly reducing the impact of hunger created by the pandemic.

Fueling this growth are a variety of approaches for increasing our capacity in light of the crisis. Food banks have dramatically increased our food purchasing activity. In Atlanta, we are spending more than \$1 million every month to buy food, and we expect to increase this number significantly in the coming months to keep up with such high levels of demand. Food banks have also increased our trucking capacity to support more large mobile food distributions. In Atlanta, we are supporting 60 mobile “pop-up” distribution deliveries each week, in addition to the regular orders we process, an increase of more than 50% compared to our volume prior to the pandemic. Food banks have increased operational staff to support higher volumes of activity. In Atlanta, our payroll expenses are 25% higher than they were a year ago, in addition to the increases in other operational costs related to supplies, transportation and so forth.

Central to our effort has been the resiliency of our extraordinary network of community-based feeding programs, many of whom depend entirely on the commitment of volunteers to continue operating. Despite the obvious risks to the safety of these volunteers and staff, many of whom are seniors, the majority of these programs have continued to serve hungry families on the front lines. Food banks across the country have worked to support our partners financially with grants and other support to help them stay open and grow their capacity. At the same time, food banks have also worked closely with new partners during this pandemic to distribute food in places and to communities where our existing partners could not meet the full demand. My food bank has worked closely with schools, with local government leaders, with business groups, and with other nonprofits to host a variety of food distributions. For example, we helped support food distribution events with Chairman Scott and a variety of community partners last year, where families could access food assistance and COVID testing in a single, large-scale drive-thru site. These stand-up partnerships have been even more critical in rural communities, where we’ve seen larger numbers of our existing partners forced to close.

Food banks could not sustain this effort without the support and partnership of the broader community. Many food banks have been unable to utilize onsite volunteers during the pandemic. In Atlanta, we engaged more than 600 volunteers in a typical week prior to COVID, an addition to our workforce that has been missing since last March. Like many food banks in multiple

states, we were able to replace this volunteer capacity with support from our Georgia National Guard, as Governor Brian Kemp deployed more than 150 guard members to missions at food bank locations across the state throughout the past year. And of course our food bank network has been supported very generously by all types of donors, giving us the resources and confidence we need to respond aggressively to the crisis.

Role of Federal Support in Addressing Food Insecurity

The support provided by and through a variety of federal nutrition programs has been critical to helping food banks do our work, starting with two programs that are providing us with large volumes of food. The Emergency Food Assistance Program (TEFAP) is a means tested federal program that provides nutritious food to low income individuals through food banks and other charitable organizations nationwide, while supporting U.S. grown commodities. The program provides critical support, helping us ensure a nutritious balance of food is distributed to families in need by allowing us to combine TEFAP with our other sources of food. As the committee already knows, Congress authorized more than \$1 billion in additional TEFAP spending through a number of stimulus bills over the past 12 months, dramatically increasing our access to food resources during the crisis.

Another critical source of federally funded food has been the Coronavirus Food Assistance Program (CFAP), commonly known as the Farmers to Families Food Box Program. This program was launched by USDA in April of 2020, as an effort to leverage surplus produce, dairy and proteins to support farmers, food service distributors and families impacted by the pandemic. Distributors are awarded contracts to purchase the surplus food items, package them in easy to distribute boxes (~20 lbs each), and distribute them to people in need through a network of nonprofits, including food banks. Almost \$5 billion has been spent on this program since its inception.

CFAP food boxes have provided a critical source of food inventory for the Atlanta Community Food Bank and many food banks around the country. Combined, **TEFAP and CFAP have provided our food bank with 50% of our total inventory during the crisis**, an influx of food we simply couldn't replace from any other source. Sustaining our response will be nearly impossible without ongoing support from USDA at similar levels. This is even more important for food banks serving more rural areas of the country, where private sources of food are more scarce. For these food banks, which are often serving areas with even higher levels of food insecurity, federal food commodities are accounting for 60% to 80% of their total food inventory.

That said, food banks and communities have not had equitable access to CFAP product. The food boxes have not been available in many parts of the country, a reflection of the capacity and capabilities of the food service distributors to whom contracts were awarded and the nonprofits with which they chose to work. This has been particularly true in smaller and more rural parts of the country. For example, the distribution of food boxes in Georgia has been highly concentrated in the metro Atlanta area, with a smaller percentage of this product reaching other parts of the state. To remedy this imbalance, we encourage USDA to rely more heavily on the well established distribution methods and capabilities evident in the TEFAP program, where food banks and other social service organizations have already developed the relationships and

capacity to move large volumes of food safely and efficiently into the highest need areas of the country. In contrast, with each round of contracts awarded through the CFAP model, we are reinventing the supply chain for these products, a less efficient, equitable and sustainable operating model. To the extent that USDA renews the CFAP program, we recommend that USDA examine whether more state and regional contracting with growers and producers would better support our agricultural community most impacted by the pandemic.

In addition to the food provided to food banks and other nonprofits by USDA, support for food assistance through other nutrition programs has played a critical role in response to this crisis. Our food insecure neighbors rely heavily on an array of federal programs - SNAP, school lunches, Pandemic - EBT, WIC, senior meals - to meet their families' needs. Millions of Americans would not have the food they need to survive without the continued strong support of federal nutrition programs.

SNAP is the most important of these programs and stands as the nation's first line of defense against hunger. Feeding America food banks will distribute between 6 and 7 billion meals this year. SNAP provides nine times that amount of food. **Increasing, or decreasing, SNAP benefits by 10% is equivalent to doubling, or eliminating, access to all of the food provided through our nation's food banks.** My food bank strongly supports expanding access to SNAP. Continuing to invest in SNAP will reduce food insecurity, improve the health and well-being of millions of families, reduce the burden on food banks, and continue to stimulate local economies. Alongside investing in SNAP, we also encourage USDA to continue to grant waivers providing flexibility to a number of nutrition programs (SFSP, NSLP, CACFP, P-EBT) as we continue to operate in a challenging environment.

Forward-Looking Outlook

As we look forward to the rest of 2021 and beyond, food bank leaders across the country are preparing our organizations for a marathon. While we all hope for a robust economic recovery and a dramatic improvement in levels of food insecurity, our experience tells us that the families and communities impacted by the current economic crisis face a long, uphill struggle. We expect we will need to respond to historically high levels of food insecurity well beyond 2021.

Food banks are well positioned to meet this challenge. Our network has made systematic, strategic investments over time to grow our capacity and capabilities to serve more food insecure neighbors. We have expanded our distribution centers, especially in growing our freezer and cooler capacity for handling more fresh and frozen food. We have invested in trucking capacity, enabling us to move food more efficiently across the regions we serve. We have invested in technology systems, applying the best practices of the private sector to improve the efficiency of our operations. We have invested in the capacity of the community partners we supply with food, helping them add freezers and coolers, purchase trucks, engage more volunteers, operate more efficiently and serve more people. We have grown our fundraising, helping us sustain our growth for the long haul. As an example of these kinds of investments, my food bank now operates out of a 345,000 square foot distribution center with 35 dock doors and 80,000 square feet of freezer cooler space. We manage a fleet of 25 refrigerated trucks. We have invested millions of dollars in our partner network. Because of these investments, **we are now distributing eight times the volume of food we distributed in 2008**, prior to the Great Recession.

We have the capacity to do more. Given our expectation for the next 12 to 24 months, we will need to do more. I urge USDA to consider working even more intensively with our national network of food banks to safely and efficiently distribute food to the hardest to serve communities across the country. I also urge USDA and congress to consider additional funding for providing food and growing the capacity of our food bank network. Even with all of the growth in our capabilities and resources, we cannot sustain our current distribution efforts without federal support. As an example, if the volume of federal commodities flowing to my food bank were cut in half, we would need to spend more than \$20 million to replace it. Food banks simply don't have enough resources to make up that kind of difference.

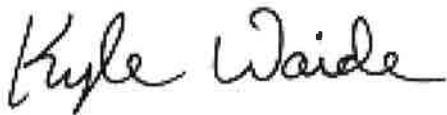
Conclusion

Increasing levels of food insecurity is one of the many challenges resulting from the pandemic. Families across our country are in crisis. For many of these families, this crisis is new. For others, this crisis is a deeper and darker chapter of the struggle they've been facing as long as they can remember. Without support, these families will struggle to survive today and will be less able to recover tomorrow. We are compelled to help them.

Recovering from this crisis, as a community, will be an ongoing challenge for all of us. Ongoing federal investment and support will be necessary to accelerate and sustain our recovery. This is even more true for food insecure families, whose recovery will be disproportionately harder. I urge the committee, congress, and the administration to keep doing what you're doing. Keep your foot on the gas. Sustain the expansion of SNAP benefits. Use waivers and other nutrition program flexibilities to make it easier for food insecure families to access food. Purchase more food through TEFAP and other USDA programs. Leverage high capacity partners like the nation's food banks to move this food safely, efficiently and equitably to the people and communities who need it. Flood the zone with access to food. Doing so will help our families, communities and our country recover faster.

I want to again thank Chairman Scott for inviting me to testify. We celebrate the committee's interest in ensuring all of our neighbors have the food they need. I look forward to working with you on that important goal and to answering your questions.

In gratitude for your ongoing support,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Kyle Waide". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

Kyle Waide, President and CEO
Atlanta Community Food Bank

Attachment:

Georgia Food Banks

