

# Midwest Food Bank Congressional Committee on Agriculture Testimony

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 Executive Officer. I am honored to have a seat at the table today.

Midwest Food Bank was founded by a farmer 20 years ago. I too was raised on a farm and continue to manage a 1,400 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. Thanks in advance for the important work and policies the Ag Committee supports through the USDA.

Food insecurity is real. It is besieging our urban and rural poor, grandparents on social security caring for grandchildren, struggling single parents, and the underemployed. Everyday Midwest Food Bank rescues food that would otherwise be discarded and efficiently distributes it to nonprofit agencies and food recipients. My ask today for the Committee on Agriculture is simple: Continue providing programs and support that are open and inclusive for all food banks to help put food on the table for the nearly 35 million Americans who live in food insecure households. I am prayerful today's testimonies and discussion from all of us will provide the innovative ideas needed to change the trend line of food insecurity.

After two decades of sustainable growth, our values and mission remain steadfast. In 2022, Midwest Food Bank distributed \$415M in food, including family food disaster relief boxes. We have ten locations across the US spanning from Connecticut to Arizona. We have 55 full-time employees, and 99.5 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 Disaster Relief support, 3) producing Tender Mercies nutritional rice & beans meal and 4) weekend feeding program for school aged children.

We serve small to very large agencies knowing they each have a role to play in providing food access. We do not collect payment from our agencies for food provided to them. This allows our agency's operational cost to not be burdened and their local impact to go further. Some of our agencies will partner with their local grocery store and team together to purchase or receive donated food items to help supplement the MFB donated food. It's a collaborative and community team effort to fight hunger and serve food to individuals and families. We believe change occurs in the community. 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, unexpectedly, the pandemic catapulted more families into a state of food insecurity. Our combination of food distribution to nonprofits and Disaster Relief equipped us to promptly serve during this



challenging season. The USDA Farmers to Families Food Box Program was a valuable resource for Midwest Food Bank. We distributed over 2 million USDA Farmers to Families Food boxes. We appreciate and 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.

“Never waste a crisis” is a leadership motto I firmly believe and follow. And so, at Midwest Food Bank we have taken the learning from the Farmers to Families Food boxes and improved the availability of our Disaster Relief boxes. We now provide our boxes for humanitarian and agencies to deliver. We have also teamed with corporations to study data on the high poverty counties and pockets in the US. And thanks to their financial support to purchased food items, our volunteers assemble the family food boxes and an agency in location provides delivery service of these food boxes to homes. Nearly 1000 food boxes representing 15,000 meals are delivered each week into eastern Kentucky. And future projects are in the planning stages for Mississippi and Louisiana. Additionally, we have started a pilot program with a logistics company to keep family food boxes in inventory to support the super rural communities. Their drivers will have access to shelf stable food boxes to take out with them on delivery routes and they can determine and share appropriately with those people battling food insecurity.

As mentioned earlier, Midwest Food Bank has ten main warehouses distributing food into 23 states. As we continue to sustainably grow, USDA’s The Emergency Food Assistance Program, commonly known as TEFAP, is an option we are exploring and looking for as an opportunity to provide staple food options, in addition to the industry rescued food. We request an open bid process for all food banks to have an opportunity to apply.

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

- Mission Focus – Serving our agencies with a focus on efficiency and excellence.
- Nutrition – Increasing the nutrition of food distributed, procured through multiple channels.
- Collaboration and sponsorship – Build relationships with industry (food and other) to provide financial support, volunteers, in-kind services, and rescue food for re-use in the food bank network.
- Community Partnerships - Strengthening our partnerships with community leaders and agencies to advance holistic programming 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 provide food to families in need as we serve and support communities across America with innovation and nimble execution.

Submitted on June 2, 2023, by Eric E. Hodel, Chief Executive Officer, Midwest Food Bank, NFP

