

## **Testimony**

Submitted to the House Committee on Agriculture Subcommittee on Nutrition Oversight & Department Operations  
United States House of Representatives

## **Hearing**

Coronavirus Food Assistance Program's Farmers to Families Food Box Delivery to Nonprofits  
Tuesday, July 21<sup>st</sup>, 2020  
Cisco WebEx

## **Statement of Matt Habash**

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Dear Chairwoman Fudge, Ranking Member Johnson and distinguished Members of the Committee:

Thank you for the invitation to testify at today's hearing on how USDA's Coronavirus Food Assistance Program's Farmers to Families Food Box Program is working in Ohio. My name is Matt Habash and I serve as the CEO for the Mid-Ohio Food Collective, the largest hunger relief organization in Ohio. To put our work in context, the Mid-Ohio Food Collective, a customer-centric organization, is comprised of five assets: Mid-Ohio Foodbank (its anchor asset), Mid-Ohio Pharmacy, Mid-Ohio Farm, Mid-Ohio Kitchen and Mid-Ohio Markets – all intended to meet customers where they are. As the 12<sup>th</sup> largest food bank in the country, we serve a blended footprint of 20 counties in Central and Eastern Ohio that includes urban, rural, and Appalachian areas. Over the past year, the Mid-Ohio Collective served about 600,000 of our neighbors, distributing a record high, almost 75 million pounds of food through a network of more than 680 partner agencies.

Since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, our food bank has seen continued and unprecedented demand, like our partner food banks across the country. As so many Ohioans are seeking food assistance for the first time in their lives, the Mid-Ohio Food Collective is working in whole new ways to connect nutritious food to struggling families, displaced workers, children who depended on meals at school, isolated and health-compromised seniors, and to homeless men, women, and children. Since the beginning of March through June 30, 2020, we have responded to 396,367 visits across our 20-county urban, rural, and Appalachia footprint, including, providing a rapid response in serving an increase of 24,783 NEW FAMILIES seeking nutritious food to feed themselves and their families. Additionally, our food bank has distributed 29.04 million pounds of food from March through June, a 30 percent increase from the same period last year, breaking record after record in food provided to our neighbors and will end its fiscal year with a distribution of more than 73 million pounds of food. Based on the current

trajectory, we expect food insecurity to continue to rise as the coronavirus continues to greatly impact our day-to-day lives. According to research projections by Feeding America, our service area will most likely experience a 38 percent increase in food insecurity due to the economic impact of COVID-19.

While we have taken aggressive steps to ensure an adequate supply of food, such as early acquisitions and utilization of offsite storage units, we understand that COVID-19 is a marathon as well as a sprint, and that we need to secure business, community, and government partners to meet and sustain what we know will be a significant increased demand for food – the most fundamental of basic needs. COVID-19 has caused unprecedented supply chain disruptions as consumers shift to preparing and eating food at home. This has resulted in significant food loss from farmers, dairy producers and other food producers as consumers shelter-at-home, purchasing more food from groceries, and restaurants that normally purchase their food have experienced significantly reduced demand or have closed. Due to these disruptions in the supply chain, it is critical that the federal nutrition programs continue to be well-funded and strengthened in order to serve our customers and food insecure children, seniors, veterans and those struggling with disabilities nationwide. The increases and program flexibility changes in the CARES Act and Families First Act in TEFAP, SNAP and the child nutrition programs meant that we are able to serve our neighbors in safe and effective ways.

USDA and food banks frequently work together to connect surplus food with individuals and families in need when USDA makes market support commodity purchases through Section 32 and distributes the food through The Emergency Food Assistance Program (TEFAP). Last year, USDA commodities from Section 32 market support purchases, the Food Purchase and Distribution Program, and TEFAP entitlement funding provided in the Farm Bill resulted in 20.283 million pounds of food distributed through our food bank. This is the backbone of our food supply, and without TEFAP and USDA foods, we would not have been able to respond as we did to the increased need caused by COVID-19. USDA's announcement of The Farmers to Families Food Box program in May meant we would have an even greater ability to get nutritious food onto the tables of those individuals and families who need it most.

### **CFAP Experience at Mid-Ohio**

We are incredibly grateful to have partnered with USDA over the decades to ensure that no one in our communities go hungry. Regarding CFAP specifically, we have worked with select partner food agencies in our service area to distribute the CFAP food boxes. To date, we have received 42,590 boxes equaling 1.115 million pounds of food, receiving our first box on June 1st; through the next round of scheduled deliveries for July/August, we expect to receive and distribute 95,710 boxes equaling 2.515 million pounds of fresh food. We have largely focused on our rural and Appalachian counties, identifying a key agency in 18 of our 20 counties to distribute the food boxes. Both the partner agencies in our network and our customers appreciate the amount and freshness of the food. The CFAP initiative has been helpful in supporting our “food is health,” strategy – a high-value, low-cost healthcare solution -- to enhance access and

provide nutritious food to our customers. Along with ensuring less food waste, the efficiencies of having the food packed and ready for delivery has been key as we continue with a “touch free” system to mitigate COVID-19 exposure for associates and customers.

Having said the above, there have also been a number of “hiccups” with the program – namely around program coordination, accountability, and communications. Not all distributors are able to pack and deliver the food as promised and while the food is appreciated, it does not account for health concerns including allergies and other common issues. Where there are coordination issues for packing and delivery of the food, it actually has increased cost to the food banks for storage and transportation, straining valuable resources. Moreover, more accountability to ensure that the right food is getting to the right place at the right time by the right entity will not only strengthen the program but will give added confidence in the intention behind the program. Moving forward, it will be incumbent on USDA to be transparent and more robust in their communications with all partners engaged in the program in an effort to streamline the process and ensure the program’s success – a goal that we are all seeking to reach. If the CFAP program was administered via existing, experienced networks within USDA, these frustrations would most likely have been mitigated and the program overall, would have been more efficient and realize more substantive results.

## **National Information**

It’s also important to note that we do not work in isolation to address food insecurity in Ohio or across the country. The Mid-Ohio Food Collective is a part of 13 food banks serving the state of Ohio, and the 200 Feeding America-affiliated food banks in the United States, working to serve the communities in which they live. Food banks have seen an increase in demand during the COVID-19 pandemic, with an average increase of 60 percent, and are experiencing similar challenges and hurdles as you have heard here today. From March 1 to May 24, the food banks in the Feeding America network distributed an estimated 1.3 billion meals to people facing hunger in the United States.

CFAP has created another option to get food to individuals across the country, and to provide additional support to growers and producers who are hurting due to the disruption in the food supply chain. As with any new program this one has experienced some challenges as reported by a number of food banks from the program’s onset. Some food banks have confirmed a lack of nationwide access to food, particularly in rural areas thereby reducing the reach of CFAP into rural areas that have been affected by the pandemic. Other food banks are successfully working with local producers to get fresh produce to food banks. Additionally, the consistency of the contractors of CFAP has led to varying degrees of success nationwide. Contractors in some regions have struggled with providing truck to trunk services and may have never been a part of a large-scale food distribution before. Overwhelmingly, the food banks that are receiving food through the Farmers to Families Food Box Program are thankful for the additional food provided and ask that USDA continue to provide nutritious food for food insecure individuals and families and continue to improve this program to assist individuals for the duration of the year.

This program has the opportunity to play a crucial role alongside TEFAP and SNAP to feed families we serve every day, while also supporting US agriculture.

### **Key Recommendations for the Next Stimulus Package**

The food bank network is a critical part of the response to hunger in our country, but we also know that the most efficient way to address food insecurity during this crisis is to increase SNAP benefits for the duration of the economic recovery. Before COVID-19, for every meal the Feeding America network of food banks distributed on average, SNAP provided nine. In these uncertain times, SNAP can help people immediately while also providing an economic stimulus to local economies, helping people and communities get back on their feet so they don't have to rely on charitable or government assistance any longer than necessary.

- Increase the maximum SNAP benefits for all recipients by increasing the thrifty food plan by at least 15 percent for as long as the economy is weak. This will help food banks that are seeing large increases in demand and also will help promote economic stimulus during this economic downturn.
- Increase the SNAP minimum benefit from \$16 to \$30 for the duration of the economic downturn.
- Extend Pandemic-EBT authority provided in earlier legislation to ensure USDA has the authority needed to continue this important program through the summer and into the next school year as needed.
- Provide \$500 million for TEFAP food purchases to follow the increases included in previous legislation as well as funding for storage and distribution needs to help our food bank network continue to meet the unprecedented demand in our communities.
- Provide \$543.25 million for food bank infrastructure capacity needs to support the rental, lease, or purchase of essential assets such as refrigeration and transportation equipment across the network of food banks and partner distribution agencies.

### **Key Recommendations for Improving CFAP**

With any new program, there are opportunities to improve. We are ready to help expand the program's reach through partnerships between experienced food industry providers and food banks across the U.S. Although the Farmers to Families Food Box Program is meant to be a temporary program lasting May-December to address critical food supply chain imbalances, we stand ready to work with USDA and contractors on ways to strengthen this temporary program.

Our suggestions to USDA are to focus on strengthening food access, provide clarity on distribution cost and responsibility of contractors, and continue to provide contract oversight to encourage contractors to coordinate among nonprofit partners to avoid duplication of food distributions.

- Food Access: We recommend that USDA expands the reach of the program so that all communities and states are able to participate equitably in the program. Several states were left with few to no food boxes while others received one type of box (i.e. produce)

while receiving none of the other varieties (i.e. dairy and meat). This could also create opportunities for national and local partners with experience distributing food.

- Contractor Support and Compliance: We recommend that USDA increase technical assistance to contractors to ensure familiarity with USDA contract requirements and successful execution of the contract. Some contractors have experienced difficulties that fall into these common areas:
  - The contractor did not secure agreement with nonprofits for all the food they are contracted to deliver prior to submitting a bid.
  - The contractor does not have the equipment needed to deliver to distribution sites. This negates the ability of the contractor to provide “Truck to Trunk” delivery to distribution sites and means the food bank must take on the expense to do so.
- “Last Mile” Distribution Costs: We recommend that USDA support contractors in accurately assessing commodity and delivery costs. Many contractors may not have known the true distribution costs in the initial plans submitted to USDA; allowing consideration of additional expenses will help contractors either shoulder more of the distribution costs as USDA intended in the RFP or compensate nonprofits for the last mile delivery to clients. This will increase the reach of the program.
- Local Coordination: We recommend that USDA encourage contractors to strengthen coordination with food banks and other nonprofits. We have seen many instances where contractors do not coordinate among the “network” of nonprofits for delivery, resulting in some smaller nonprofits receiving food they cannot safely distribute or store and then asking the food bank to urgently pick up perishable food that has not be handled according to proper food safety guidelines.

#### **Closing Ask of USDA/Congress:**

- We encourage the Committee on Agriculture along with USDA to ensure the Farmers to Families Food Box Program can provide a nationwide resource to individuals during this crisis and can provide food to communities in need through all four phases of the program (May-December) as announced by USDA in April.
- We also encourage USDA and Congress to continue the success of other USDA food purchase programs like the Food Purchase and Distribution Program, which has provided over two billion pounds of nutritious food to food banks over the last two years. Unfortunately, this food is slated to end in December 2020, creating a very large “commodity cliff” that will result in a significant reduction in food purchases for food banks. We believe another year of a planned food purchase program would provide U.S. growers and producers as well as food banks certainty and a steady supply of food to assist families and individuals in need.

Making real progress towards reducing COVID-19’s impact on food insecurity will require investing new resources toward increasing access to food and allowing flexibilities within existing programs. I encourage the Committee on Agriculture along with USDA to ensure the Farmers to Families Food Box Program can provide a state by state, nationwide resource to individuals during this crisis and can provide food to communities in need through all four phases of the program as announced by USDA in April. I also ask Congress to strengthen federal

nutrition programs like SNAP and TEFAP for families affected by this public health crisis. It has been my honor to testify today on behalf of everyone we serve through the Mid-Ohio Food Collective and all of its assets. We look forward to working with this Committee to ensure no one goes to bed hungry. I look forward to answering your questions.

Thank you.

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Matt Habash

CEO, Mid-Ohio Food Collective