



July 24, 2020

The Honorable Peter A. DeFazio, Chairman
Committee on Transportation and Infrastructure
Subcommittee on Economic Development, Public Buildings, and Emergency Management
United States House of Representatives
Washington, D.C. 20515

Dear Chairwoman Titus, Ranking Member Katko, and Members of the Subcommittee:

Thank you for allowing me the opportunity to provide written testimony regarding the experiences of vulnerable populations during disasters. It has been an honor and privilege for Second Harvest Community Food Bank and myself to support distressed families during this pandemic. I hope the insight I provide will be taken into consideration as the federal government continues to respond to the needs of its citizens and prepares for future unforeseen emergencies.

I also want to take the opportunity to thank Members of the Committee for your support of food banks within the Feeding America network and your dedication and commitment to hunger relief efforts and causes. We appreciate Chairwoman Titus' efforts on legislation targeted to assist children with weekend and out-of-school meals in previous sessions. While preparing my testimony and remarks, I solicited feedback from food banks across the country. Food bank staff from Nevada communicated how attune Chairwoman Titus is to the work of food banks, citing her efforts to address childhood food insecurity. Food bank staff in New York commended Ranking Member Katko for being genuinely concerned with issues surrounding poverty and food insecurity. They mentioned he has visited their food bank as well as summer feeding sites for children, has volunteered at a mobile pantry distribution and has taken time to discuss issues related to food insecurity with their staff. My own Congressman, full Committee Ranking Member Sam Graves, has visited my food bank and others in his district learning about United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) Commodity distributions, our partner agency network, food distribution programs, and legislative issues critical to our cause. We appreciate and thank all Members of Congress who have taken time to visit or volunteer at food banks serving their constituents and hearing our concerns.

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Second Harvest Community Food Bank is a non-profit food distribution organization serving fifteen counties in Northwest Missouri and four counties in Northeast Kansas. Our mission is to provide nourishment and hope to the hungry, while engaging and empowering the region in the fight to end hunger. We welcome food from the federal government, food manufacturers, retailers, restaurants, food drives, through our own purchases, and from other partners. We strive for efficiency and integrity in our work and are proud to say that ninety-six percent of our operating budget goes directly to providing food for families and only four percent is used for administrative or fundraising purposes. We distribute nutritious food product through a network of 54 partner agencies and direct distribution programs such as mobile pantries, childhood, and senior hunger initiatives. In the last fiscal year, 39 percent of the nutritious food product Second Harvest distributed was associated with federal nutrition programs.

From July 1, 2019 to June 30, 2020, Second Harvest distributed nearly 9.9M pounds of food through direct service programs and partner agency distributions. This translates to the equivalent of approximately 8.25M meals to families in need. This was a 31 percent increase over our distribution from the year before. We employ a staff of 24 full-time employees with an annual operating budget of \$3.7M. Prior to the pandemic we served an estimated 45,000 individuals identified as food insecure out of a total estimated population of 350,000, or 13 percent of the population. The estimated number of food insecure is expected to increase by approximately five percent to an estimated 64,000 individuals as a result of the pandemic.

Second Harvest Community Food Bank is also part of the Feeding America nationwide network of 200 food banks and 60,000 food pantries and meal programs which provide food and services to food insecure people in every county in the United States. Together, we are the nation's largest hunger-relief organization. While food banks throughout our network are very diverse and vary in size and types of distributions, one thing that we all have in common is our reliance on donors and volunteers to carry out our day-to-day operations. I am proud to serve on Feeding America's Policy Engagement and Advocacy Committee (PEAC), which helps direct policy and advocacy work for the organization.

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The focus of this hearing – the impact on vulnerable populations of disasters like the COVID-19 pandemic - is something our food bank has also been considering. When we look at vulnerable populations, we understand that low-income families in general are vulnerable. One vehicle emergency or unexpected home repair can set a family back financially for months, and we know that low-income seniors often must choose between needed prescriptions and a nutritious meal.

We are particularly mindful of racial disparities and the disparate prevalence of poverty and food insecurity among various ethnic groups as well as between urban and rural communities. While the focus for our food bank has always been reaching and serving all food insecure families in our service territory, we also seek to better understand the inequities that exist in our service territory so that we may develop plans to address any disparities.

As an example of our efforts in this area, during the past two years we have benchmarked our food distribution efforts against the estimated need in each of the nineteen counties we serve, and perhaps not surprisingly, we discovered that some counties were receiving more support than others. The county where our food bank is physically located received more support than counties in more remote, rural areas, as a significant amount of our distribution was happening through an on-site pantry and pickups from local agencies. We made a conscious decision to close our on-site pantry and initiate a mobile pantry program. Initially this idea was met with some criticism and skepticism, but the focus on mobile pantries in every county we serve has not only helped us increase our overall distribution but also improve the equity of service we provide.

Additionally, we learned that our poorest performing county - Leavenworth County - is the county in our service area with the largest black population. Because of this work evaluating our service at the county level I am proud to say we have increased our food distribution in Leavenworth County by more than 72 percent in the past two years. We will continue to challenge ourselves to be better and ask the tough questions about why these disparities exist, and how we can continue to ensure our distribution is fair and equitable throughout our 19-county service territory.

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Second Harvest also created partnerships with the Iowa Tribe of Kansas and Nebraska and Kickapoo Tribe, both operating on federally established reservations in Northeast Kansas and worked with these native populations to support food distributions to children when schools on the reservations closed. Second Harvest is currently providing support through the summer feeding program for children at both locations. Monthly mobile pantry distributions are regularly scheduled on the reservations and food product received for COVID-19 relief has been provided through these distributions.

The focus of all Second Harvest programs and distribution efforts is reaching all vulnerable populations within our service territory. The response and recovery effort from COVID-19 will be the largest relief assistance program in American history by far and will require significant partnerships along the way, including federal, state, and local government and nonprofit organizations. Our work to support hunger relief needs resulting from the pandemic in the communities we serve would not have been possible if not for the federal support and assistance our organization has received. This support has allowed us to begin building a path to a brighter, food secure future for people in our communities and we are proud to be a partner in this endeavor.

Obviously, this is an unprecedented time, and I believe this has been the quickest I have witnessed the government respond to the needs of its citizens. This is not to say there have not been challenges along the way. We appreciate the response and continuous efforts to support us in hunger relief strategies for vulnerable families. From passage of the Families First Coronavirus Response Act (FFCRA), to the Coronavirus Aid, Relief and Economic Security (CARES) Act, the Coronavirus Food Assistance Program (CFAP), and the Paycheck Protection Program, we have seen the government roll out new programs to respond to the pandemic, illustrating a commitment and dedication to serving the citizens of this country.

In Missouri the FFCRA provided \$5.1M for food purchases and \$7.6M was provided by the CARES Act for the State to purchase and distribute food through The Emergency Food Assistance Program (TEFAP) channels. Additionally, \$1.7M has been allocated through FFCRA for administrative funding to support food distribution and an additional \$1.5M in

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flexible CARES Act funding is being funneled to the food banks in Missouri for reimbursement of purchased food. A total of \$107,811 of the flexible CARES Act funding has been provided directly to Second Harvest.

In Kansas, \$2.7M was allocated for food purchase through FFCRA and an additional \$400,000 allocated for administrative funding, and \$3.5M in CARES Act funding was authorized for food purchases. In addition, the Kansas Department of Emergency Management has purchased nutrient-dense, shelf stable meals that were packaged by members of the National Guard. Second Harvest has also distributed over 1M pounds of CFAP product between the two states it serves with an estimated value of \$1.5M.

With as much additional food provided for our pandemic response efforts, we still have purchased significantly more food product than we did a year ago. In addition, the cost for purchased product has increased and our budget for food purchases does not go as far as it did before the pandemic. From March to June of 2019 Second Harvest spent \$404,538 on purchased food product, and from March to June of 2020 we spent \$727,284. With funds spent last year we purchased 692,492 pounds of product, compared to 793,649 pounds this year. This results in a \$0.33 increase in the price per pound of purchased product. I am extremely concerned that as the federal relief programs expire, demand will remain high, prices to purchase food will remain higher and the strain this will put on most food banks will be difficult to navigate.

The federal support received has been very critical to our response efforts. Yet we also understand these programs are temporary solutions and will eventually come to an end. Pandemic unemployment assistance will soon expire. Housing and SNAP assistance programs will eventually return to pre-pandemic levels. Funds families have received through stimulus programs will eventually be spent. The CFAP program will eventually expire. Unfortunately, I do not believe the food insecurity crisis caused by the pandemic will be short-lived. In fact, I am concerned the significant increase in demand we have seen since March will only increase, and as some of these federal disaster response programs end it will be a tremendous challenge for food banks to sustain current levels of operations without ongoing support.

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The estimated food insecurity rate for Second Harvest's service territory in 2018 was 13 percent of the total population. For 2020 we expect that number to increase by 40 percent to an estimated 18.3 percent of the population – and 26.5 percent of the children – living in our 19 counties. We have closely monitored our demand and service between mid-March and mid-July of 2020 compared to the same period in 2019. Through our partner agency network, we have witnessed an increase of approximately 58 percent of individuals served, and through Second Harvest's mobile pantry distributions we have seen an increase of more than 220 percent of individuals served from the previous year. This has been possible in large part due to the additional support of food product received from USDA and through CARES Act food purchases, and increased distributions made possible through utilization of the National Guard in both Missouri and Kansas.

Our biggest concern is that the increased demand will remain heading into 2021, while much of the support we received in the current year will not.

Among the most important support we have received, and that we can least afford to lose, is that provided by National Guard members deployed to Second Harvest who have done an exceptional job and have been critical to our work of providing much needed support to families in need. The Guard has been assisting in all facets of our operations including preparing disaster relief food boxes, distributing product at mobile pantry locations, delivering USDA commodities and other food product, sorting produce for distributions, packaging boxes of food for distributions to children, delivering food to the homebound, and serving at summer feeding sites for children.

Additionally, clients receiving services and our staff feel extremely confident in the Guard members' efforts to adhere to social distancing and best safety practices with our distributions, where monitoring volunteers to adhere to the same standards can be a challenge. One of our biggest fears would be one volunteer working a mobile distribution who tested positive for COVID-19 where more than 200 vehicles received food through that distribution, and the effort it would take to track families who received support through that distribution and provide future assurances to families that we are taking all necessary measures to ensure their safety when receiving food. The National Guard has shown a tremendous commitment to safety through their mission at the food bank.

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Many of our efforts and service levels would have been highly impacted without the support of the National Guard. With the increase in demand and reduction in traditional volunteers, what we have accomplished during the pandemic would not have been possible without their support. From May to July we established 67 additional mobile pantry distributions utilizing National Guard personnel and vehicles and the majority of these would not have been possible without their support. In total during those months, 70 mobile pantry distributions in Missouri and 34 in Kansas were conducted utilizing National Guard support at Second Harvest.

The Federal Emergency Management Agency's (FEMA) response efforts are no different, and we are especially grateful for the Agency's April 11 guidance that made emergency feeding activities eligible for reimbursement under FEMA Public Assistance. FEMA staff in regional offices have also been working hard to meet the requests of state and local governments and their partner non-government organizations, including food banks.

In Texas FEMA Public Assistance funds were utilized for food replenishment in the amount of \$65M. Food bank staff shared that this effort came at a critical juncture and helped bridge the gap from existing inventory and private funding shortages. In Indiana, FEMA supported delivery of meals for approximately six weeks as donations decreased. This effort was greatly appreciated and well received by the food bank's partner agencies and clients served. Across the country food banks are distributing record amounts of food product, and the various channels of food sourcing which have been made available to support the record levels of demand have directly correlated to the success we have seen in our disaster response efforts.

We have seen other initiatives that have contributed to the disaster response in different parts of the country. Funding has been provided to support pork processing initiatives in Missouri and pork and beef processing efforts in Iowa. Drive thru distribution models proved to be a safe and efficient way to get a large quantity of food distributed to a high volume of individuals with contactless distribution efforts implemented. Personal protective equipment (PPE) has been offered and provided across the country. Face shields have been offered by Missouri's State Emergency Management Agency and will be delivered to food banks this week.

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All of these combined efforts and much needed support have arrived during a critical time of need for hunger relief in this nation as a result of the pandemic. We truly appreciate the efforts of federally elected officials, administrative agency staff, state officials and local resources who have had a hand in carrying out each of these efforts. The work of food banks like ours would not have been as responsive to the needs of Americans if not for these actions taken.

With all the demonstrated success stories, there are also going to be opportunities for improvement and takeaways to improve on future disaster response efforts. When no one could have planned and prepared for everything that transpired as a result of COVID-19, the federal response should be commended for the swift action and rapid response. In the next few paragraphs, I will outline areas which I hope will be considered as the federal government continues to evaluate the effectiveness of its COVID-19 response efforts and the impact on vulnerable populations.

One of the challenges food banks experienced was a disparity in response efforts across FEMA regions. It seems that in some instances, discretion from the FEMA regional offices and the level of effort or understanding on the part of state and local emergency management agencies directly impacts the likelihood of emergency feeding activities by food banks having been reimbursed by FEMA during the pandemic.

There appears to be a tremendous opportunity to better educate state, local, tribal and territorial governments about how to partner with food banks to receive reimbursement for food distribution expenses during a disaster. Specifically, for Second Harvest Community Food Bank there has been a lack of clarity about which incurred expenses may be reimbursable, as well as how partnering with a state or local government might impact our ability to receive reimbursement for emergency food distribution. We developed a Memorandum of Understanding with our largest county served but to date have not had a need to act on this initiative. In addition, if we were to try and determine increased costs as a response to the pandemic, it would be difficult to differentiate costs that would be eligible for other federal program reimbursement or private funding and exclude those expenses.

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As an example, Second Harvest provides a report to Missouri Department of Social Services regarding purchases and value of distributions to families with children as a third-party maintenance of effort (MOE) claim toward the state's Temporary Assistance to Needy Families (TANF) MOE. We do not directly receive federal TANF dollars as a result of this, but we do receive funding from the state for the partnership created. However, it would be my understanding that if we claim expenses toward TANF MOE those expenses would not be eligible for any FEMA disaster reimbursement. Additionally, we received funding from a private donor for food purchases in response to the pandemic through March and April, and I assume we would not be able to claim costs covered through private donations also as a disaster reimbursement. However, there has not been much clarity on whether we can claim any expenses for disaster reimbursement, or what the guidelines would be in doing so. And for a small organization which employs 23 full-time employees and only one staff member handling all financial activity, tracking expenses across government programs can be very challenging.

Feedback provided by other food banks reiterated some of these same concerns, with a lack of understanding for what populations or services would be eligible for reimbursement. I also heard concerns from other food banks that FEMA prohibits reimbursement of expenses which are tied to serving anyone who receives any other form of government food assistance. Typically, during a disaster we would assume that those seeking additional assistance may very well also be SNAP recipients or receive federal commodities through USDA TEFAP or the Commodity Supplemental Food Program (CSFP). When the goal would be to serve a high volume of individuals in drive thru operations, it would be extremely difficult to track who might be receiving any other type of federal assistance. It appears that this may not in fact be the case, but this is the message some food banks received from emergency management officials they had been working with. Food banks shared that they along with many local governments could not afford to take the risk that FEMA would not reimburse expenses for emergency food distributions, and therefore did not pursue the opportunity.

In addition to these challenges, it can also be problematic managing various food distribution programs across multiple states and among different state agencies operating in the same state. States are allowed flexibilities to operate food distribution programs within the standards set by the federal government, but within those standards can

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manage programs as they best see fit. This can be a challenge when managing the same program, with basically the same food product in the same warehouse, but variances in how to manage each of these for different states. In Kansas we operate USDA Commodity programs with oversight from the Kansas Department of Children and Families. In the same state we operate the USDA Child and Adult Care Food Program (CACFP) and USDA Summer Food Service Program (SFSP) under the Kansas Department of Education. In Missouri we work with the Missouri Department of Social Services in operating SNAP Outreach Assistance and the TEFAP Commodity program, and the Missouri Department of Health and Senior Services in operating the USDA CSFP, CACFP, and SFSP programs. In addition, each state has other departments managing other federal nutrition programs. This can often cause challenges in working to find the best methods to efficiently manage each program.

As we look at what the federal government could do to best support our efforts going forward, the first effort which would be a tremendous help to our food bank and others across the country would be extension of the Title 32 authorization to support states in the deployment of the National Guard to support food distribution efforts. We know that over the next few months many of the food distribution programs will continue and we expect to have increased amounts of food available to distribute. The challenge will be in our individual food bank cold storage capacity and logistical limitations. With National Guard support we can increase distributions and move product more quickly so that it reaches families needing support in a timely manner. The second item which would be most helpful is financial support for the purchase of shelf-stable food product. Because product from the CFAP program and other steady channels includes more perishable product, an increase in shelf-stable food would complement our current product offerings and is much easier for food banks and partner agencies to distribute in a safe and efficient manner.

I would also encourage any efforts to provide consistency across FEMA regions to ensure all parts of the country are receiving similar support and resources for disaster response. We know that states may have different priorities in how they choose to respond to the pandemic, but a priority should be placed on making sure food banks have the support and tools they need to keep up with the increased demand, regardless of how those resources are acquired. We know there are different approaches that can work to address any problem and we simply hope steps are being taken to make sure the end-result is the same and vulnerable families receive the support they need.

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I also believe steps could be taken to build stronger partnerships between emergency management agencies and Feeding America food banks. Feeding America has the infrastructure and history of meeting the hunger needs of American citizens. During this pandemic we found ourselves developing an agreement with a state for emergency food distribution to receive product that was highly needed just prior to implementation, and consequent month-to-month agreements were signed as prior agreements expired.

If a time comes when we must respond to a disaster worse than this pandemic, it could be detrimental to have a need to develop and requirement to sign a formal agreement which could delay a food bank from being able to provide the necessary and expedient response. Instead, we should be focused on meeting the need and equipping food banks to be ready to move as disaster strikes. Ideally, we would like FEMA to encourage proactive partnerships with food banks and state associations of food banks on an ongoing basis, so that relationships already exist for food banks to respond quickly when such need should arise.

Providing PPE to food banks for staff and volunteers at the food bank and partner agency level is encouraged. This has been a tremendous help and provides added safety for staff, volunteers, and clients involved with food distributions. Along those lines, if hand sanitizer is provided, it is most needed in individual sizes or more manageable packaging, rather than large 55-gallon drums which some food banks were offered. No contact thermometers have also been very helpful to check temperatures for staff and volunteers involved in food distribution efforts.

The final suggestion I would offer is related to the capacity of food banks to meet ongoing community needs and also be better prepared to respond to future disaster situations. The dramatic increase in commodity foods being distributed by our nation's food banks, which began with the introduction of the USDA's Food Purchase and Distribution Program two years ago, is stressing the ability of food banks and our agency partners to store and distribute this volume of perishable foods.



The \$600 million for TEFAP food purchases provided in the FFCRA and CARES Acts, as well as the approximately \$500 million in additional USDA Section 32 food purchases announced in May 2020, will add further distribution strain to food banks and agency partners. This need is more acute in communities that are also receiving a high volume of perishable food through the CFAP program. Specifically, we are seeing a significant need at food banks and partner agencies across the country to acquire the coolers, freezers, trucks, and trailers necessary to efficiently store and distribute food across their service areas. Additionally, and especially during disaster response, there is a need for on-site generators to help ensure food banks can maintain operations during prolonged power outages.

To address these needs Feeding America has recommended an investment of \$543,625,000 to support the rental, lease, or purchase of these essential assets across the nation's network of 200 food banks and 60,000 partner agencies. Such an investment will allow Second Harvest Community Food Bank and our colleagues across the country to better meet the ongoing needs related to the current pandemic, and ensure we are prepared to respond to future crises.

In conclusion, there have been multiple challenges we have faced during our pandemic response at Second Harvest. I am extremely proud of my team and the efforts of our food bank, to distribute record levels of nutritious food product this past fiscal year. We have persevered and accomplished much of this while dealing with partner agency closures including food pantries and meal service centers and concerns among staff for their own safety. Children's initiatives were impacted with school closures, and our staff worked closely with multiple school districts to continue to provide much needed support to families with children. We have worked through a decrease in volunteerism, and we still have many volunteers reluctant to return because of COVID-19 concerns.

While food safety and product integrity has always been a focus of our food bank, we have been extremely mindful of safety and sanitation needs associated with food distributions during the pandemic. We have dealt with work from home efforts with full intention of keeping our doors open and uninterrupted service. We dealt with challenges acquiring and providing PPE and hand sanitizer to accommodate staff and volunteers. We understood families needing assistance were at times reluctant to go out to a food distribution site to receive food product their family needed. We have experienced increased food costs and disruptions to supply chains, impacting our food sourcing efforts. Finally, we

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have worked through extreme limitations with cold storage capacity and a significant increase in the amount of frozen and refrigerated product received and needed to support families in need.

Through all the adversity and challenges I am proud to say my team has demonstrated a tremendous effort keeping up with the demand and serving families in need. And we are very appreciative of everything the federal government has done to help us respond to COVID-19 and support vulnerable populations which have been impacted. We will continue to serve the American public and I hope you consider this testimony as an indication of what has been working well, and ideas for how we can all be better in what we do.

If I can provide any additional information to support the committee's efforts through this process, please do not hesitate to reach out.

Respectfully Yours,

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read "CHAD HIGDON".

Chad Higdon
Chief Executive Officer

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