



NeighborImpact

Supporting People, Strengthening Communities.

April 16, 2021

The Honorable Betsy Johnson
The Honorable Elizabeth Steiner Hayward
The Honorable Dan Rayfield
Co-Chairs of the Joint Ways & Means Committee
900 Court Street NE
Salem, OR 97301

Dear Co-Chairs:

REQUEST: SUPPORT A BASE BUDGET OF \$4.56 MILLION TO SUPPORT HUNGER RELIEF

NeighborImpact is the regional food bank serving the counties of Crook, Deschutes, Jefferson and the Confederated Tribes of Warm Springs. At present, we cooperate with more than 50 partners to provide supplemental nutrition to 32,000 Oregonians monthly. Today, we support ONE-THIRD more people than we did just one year ago as a direct result of economic loss attributable to COVID and the continuing high cost of housing, which is robbing families of ability to put food on the table.

Food programs such as ours are critical to fill the gap between SNAP (food stamp) support and what families actually need. SNAP payments typically cover 20 days of food, but hunger persists every day, year round. Because many of our clients are the disabled, seniors, children and the less skilled, they are often not in a position to find work to fill in the gaps. Clients who use our food program are disproportionately disabled, senior and low-skilled. They cannot just find another job to fill in the gaps in a household budget.

Nor is it true that the faith and nonprofit sectors can be relied upon to fill the gap. While these sectors are vital to the process of staffing local food banks with volunteers, they typically cannot drive the commercial trucks which are used to recover large volumes of food or manage the logistics of a warehouse which needs to move tons of food daily across a 7000 square-mile geography. While local nonprofits are very good at recovering small amount of food, the volume of commodities needed to meet the demand of an

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entire region is an operation more aligned to a large grocery store—or two or three or four. The scope and scale, supply of food, professional skills and logistical knowledge required to undertake such an operation exceeds the capacity of the nonprofit or faith sectors. That is the critical reason why government support is needed through adequate funding of the Oregon Hunger Relief Fund.

Oregon State University in December 2020 released data showing that since the pandemic began, the number of people worried about feeding their families has gone from one in nine to one in four Oregonians. This is alarming. Feeding America, updating its hunger report in March 2020, reports that hunger is a racial equity issue. Some 23.5 percent of Native Americans, 21 percent of Black individuals and 15.8 percent of Latinos are likely to experience food insecurity in 2021, compared to 11% of white individuals. Sadly, this data is clearly evidence of what food advocates have feared: Overall food insecurity rates, which had reached their lowest levels since measurement began in 1990s, have returned to new heights during the pandemic, wiping out the hard-won gains of previous decades. As a state, this should be of deep concern to policymakers.

On a personal note, I as a native-born Oregonian, take pride in my state's role as a vibrant agricultural region. Weirdly, I am proud of blackberries, hazelnuts, peppermint, cranberries, rhubarb, grass seed, florist azaleas and Christmas trees, which are the leading commodities of more than 250 our state produces. I am proud that produce a greater variety of products than any state but California. I am proud that there are more than 38,500 farms in Oregon feeding people around the nation and world, and I am astounded (but proud) that we export 80 percent of what we produce. I question, however, how we can be the source of such abundance yet not adequately provide for the needs of our residents.

The requested increase in the Hunger Response Fund of \$1.6 million is a pittance of the revenue available to support Oregonians. It is 6/100,000th of the total revenue available to state to spend but it will potentially impact 25 percent of Oregonians. When it comes to leverage, there is no better proposition sitting in from of the Ways and Means Committee.

I and my organization urge the State to invest in the Oregon Hunger Response Fund and thereby invest in Oregonians.

Sincerely,



Scott Cooper Executive Director