

Dear Chair and members of this committee, my name is Janeece Cook. Thank you for the opportunity to accept my testimony in support of using the lottery bond to secure the remaining funding for rebuilding South Benton Food Pantry.

South Benton Food Pantry has been a lifeline in a food desert for families since the 1980's. It is located equidistant between Corvallis and Eugene with the nearest big grocery store 8 miles away. The pantry serves all the Monroe School District including families living in rural Benton, Lane and Linn counties.

South Benton Food Pantry was started in a converted garage where it still operates. As you can imagine, it is an old garage with cracks in the cement, a leaky roof, and walls connected to the ground in places where water gets in from the rain. With as much rain as we have been seeing lately, it is a literal creek running through.

As a mother to a family of five, I started using the pantry in 2005 to supplement my SNAP benefits. The monthly food box was helpful until the recession in 2008 and 2009. By that time, I became a volunteer running the monthly food distribution reports and saw an increase in use of over 100 families per month. What we got simply wasn't enough to stretch the dollars. By the time I became a pantry manager in 2013, I realized that we needed to help more families access emergency food and change the way we operated. The church could no longer support the operation in volunteers, and we became a nonprofit separate from the church. We continued to pay rent and save up to buy property to have a permanent home.

We changed our operation to a shopping style pantry and became a path to provide other resources for housing, low-income programs and medical services. We help clients with the ability to shop weekly for what they need. Last year we served over 5,000 individuals with emergency food and nonfood items. That means we helped an average of 154 families each month. Since the beginning of this year, we are on track to help an average of 165 families each month. Last year, we distributed over 56,000 pounds of food with the help of an average of 27 volunteers per month, putting in nearly one thousand hours of their own time.

In 2019, we were given the opportunity to buy the church property at \$250,000 and made the purchase final in November 2022 with donations and grants. With the increased use of the pantry and a local gleaning group sharing the pantry space, we have run out of room to continue to supply and service clients of both essential programs. Our clients stand in the wind and rain to shop for the food and nonfood items we supply to help stretch their food and SNAP dollars. They need the space to shop safely and with dignity. We have raised nearly half of the \$250,000 dollars needed to rebuild the pantry with donations and foundation pledges.

The safety net we bring to this area is vital and we need your support.

It has been an honor to be with you today and I thank you for your time and attention.

Sincerely,

Janeece Cook, Executive Director

South Benton Food Pantry

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