

Testimony for SB 5526 to support regional food banks.

On behalf of ACCESS, we urge you to support increased funding for regional food banks in SB 5526 to ensure that families and individuals across Oregon have access to the food they need. According to Feeding America, 13.8% of people in Jackson County (28,700) are food insecure – this is more than the size of Ashland, Oregon, the second largest town in our County. For these people our food bank and pantry partners are often the difference between having enough to eat and going hungry. Post-pandemic we have seen a sharp increase in the need for food assistance, made even more urgent by the rising cost of food and recent federal reductions to food programs.

Statewide, hunger has reached crisis levels. One-third more Oregonians are experiencing food insecurity now than before the pandemic. Last year alone, there were 2.5 million visits to the 1,200 food assistance sites in the Oregon Food Bank Network—a 31% increase from the previous year. A recent survey of Oregon’s regional food programs identified a \$15 million funding gap just to maintain existing services.

In Jackson County, we went from an average of 2,590 pantry visits a month in 2019 (pre-pandemic) to 5,670 pantry visits per month in 2024 – a 119% increase in need. We distribute more than 4.5 million pounds of food annually to over 24,000 individuals through a network of 34 food pantries and 12 partner agencies. We also have a weekend backpack program that currently feeds 825 students across 30 elementary schools, bridging the weekend food gap for families that rely on school meals. The ACCESS Food Bank has a staff of 12 to do this work, including managing the almost 400 volunteers it takes to help feed the community. In order to sustain food assistance operations and our partnerships with local pantries and agencies our community needs at least \$1,668,000 in funding over the next biennium.

Last year, we sent a survey out to families whose kids were receiving our backpack food. One mom said:

Every week my children look forward to seeing what's inside the bag. As a working single mom, I feel I'm in the hardest category to be in. I'm the working poor. I make just enough not to qualify for any help. I don't qualify for food stamps, or other services. I pay my mortgage, childcare, etc. and don't have much left after bills.

We also hear from pantry participants about how having access to food helps them keep from being hungry, including one participant who says:

I really appreciate the help you give us; it helps us a lot. I had cancer surgery and I couldn't work for two months, and with the help of ACCESS we don't have to worry

too much about trying to get food. The people who work to help are very kind, the food is good, thank you and God bless you. (Translated from Spanish.)

For many of our neighbors, one unexpected expense or missed paycheck can mean the difference between stability and crisis. Food banks are often the only place they can turn for help. Food insecurity affects Oregonians of all ages and backgrounds, creating direct barriers to health, education, and economic stability. The funding requested today will go directly toward food distribution, operational costs, and targeted programs to address specific needs within our communities.

We ask you to recognize the vital role that food banks play in sustaining the health and well-being of our state. Increased funding is not just a response to a crisis, it is an investment in Oregon's future, ensuring that no one in our community goes hungry. Thank you for your time and consideration.