



**TESTIMONY BEFORE THE UNITED STATES SENATE COMMITTEE
ON AGRICULTURE, NUTRITION, AND FORESTRY**

***Growing Jobs and Economic Opportunity:
2023 Farm Bill Perspectives from Michigan***

Dr. Phil Knight

Executive Director

Food Bank Council of Michigan

April 29th, 2022

STEM Teaching and Learning Facility

Michigan State University

East Lansing, Michigan

Introduction

Thank you Chairwoman Stabenow and Ranking Member Boozman for the opportunity to speak today. Senator Boozman, welcome to the great state of Michigan. Welcome home, Senator Stabenow. I start my testimony with a word of appreciation for our hometown Senator. A thank you to you personally Senator Stabenow for how you have chosen to invest the one handful of life you have been given, to stand in the gap for those who struggle a bit more with things most of us take for granted. Thank you for investing yourself in things that are bigger than we are and will last longer than any of us.

I am Dr. Phil Knight, the executive director of the Food Bank Council of Michigan (FBCM). I have the honor to represent the 7 Feeding America food banks here in Michigan who collectively serve all 83 Michigan counties through a network of almost 3000 community partners. I hold a doctorate in religious science and philosophy, a master's in professional counseling and I am a licensed professional counselor (LPC) here in MI. I come to you today not only representing my role at the Food Bank Council of Michigan, but also to share thoughts on how my own personal experience with food insecurity has impacted me and the work I do currently with FBCM. Hunger has many faces – at one time it was my own – and food insecurity is not limited to one singular story or experience.

No one aspires to be food insecure. It is not a hope, a dream, or a pursuit. But it happens in and through a variety of circumstances. Hunger does not care about your zip code or your level of education. It was Booker T. Washington who said, "Success is to be measured not so much by the position that one has reached in life as by the obstacles which he has overcome."

For me it was a life upset after 28 years of marriage. One where I found myself with full custody of 2 sons who were entering high school. During the time of the great recession, despite my advanced degrees and years of job experience, I could not find any job except for being a substitute teacher, which I did – you've never had a challenge until you've substituted as a PE teacher for 5-year-olds. I was also a cashier at a large retail outlet, and I was terrible at it. I was so bad they made me be the greeter at the door. We laugh but, at that time in my life my boys and I rolled quarters and dimes so we could eat.

Despite our financial challenges, it did not cross my mind that there may be options for assistance until my boys' school counselor informed me that she thought they would qualify for free or reduced price school meals. That also led to a SNAP application with a Michigan Department of Health and Human Services (MDHHS) case worker who treated me very well. The \$97 a month SNAP allotment was a life saver for us. We went straight to the retail store where I sucked as a cashier and used the

money to buy meat and fruits and vegetables, providing the protein and fresh produce we had not been able to purchase prior. We also received food from a nearby pantry that I learned later was supplied by our food banks and suddenly hunger came off the table for us and with it a lot of stress.

It was simultaneously a horrible time and joyful time. I was ashamed yet relieved, embarrassed yet appreciative, and my emotions fluctuated between despair and hope. SNAP and the work of the food banks helped take hunger off my table. The impact of the food cannot be minimized.

When hunger came off the table it also took some of the 'tradeoffs' away as well. I still had more month than money, but I didn't have to worry as much about rent, utilities or whether my boys could have the opportunity to play soccer or football. The power of the food is evidenced because it helped stabilize our home through direct economic impact, it empowered me by giving me hope, my mind was free from toxic stress of being food insecure and I could work on finding my next success. We didn't suffer as much nutritionally because the food we bought with SNAP and received from the food bank network was fresh and nutritious.

Senators, the investments that you, as the US government, and the charitable food network made in me inspired me. I often state the commodity we share most often is hope, it just looks like food. After some time, I found a job that led me to the one I have now at the FBCM, where I have served as the Executive Director for 7.5 years.

SNAP and the work of the food bank network are often referred to as 'charity', but they aren't, they are investments in the health and well-being of people. The work we do together to create and 'right size' the safety net is not just about expense, it is about how do we best invest in resources to create opportunities for people and our communities to thrive. Your investment in me helped me find my next success.

Food Insecurity in Michigan and the COVID-19 Response:

During the COVID-19 pandemic, FBCM's members ramped up their warehouse capacity, food sourcing, and direct-to-client distribution capabilities, all in order to serve more people in need than ever before in food banking history. At the height of the COVID-19 pandemic, food distributed by the Michigan food bank network across the state increased by 47%. Our network's existing statewide infrastructure combined with our supply chain and food safety expertise, experience responding to

crisis, and relationships with the farming and food industries uniquely positioned the Michigan food bank network to respond to the unprecedented increase in need related to the COVID-19 pandemic.

In 2019, approximately 1.3 million Michiganders faced food insecurity, over 305,000 of which were children, with a food insecurity rate of 13.6% in Michigan¹. While finalized statistics for 2020 are yet to be reported, estimates show that food insecurity increased to approximately 19.1% or 1.9 million people in Michigan, including 552,000 children². In 2021, we began to see some stabilization in food insecurity rates, approaching pre-pandemic levels, as a result of additional investments made in food assistance and other resources in response to the pandemic, such as the SNAP Emergency Allotments, Pandemic EBT, the Child Tax Credit, and the additional USDA food purchases provided to emergency food providers, such as food banks. With many of the COVID-related investments having ended and the current economic challenges such as inflation impacting households, we are now seeing an increase in need each month once again. Throughout it all, food banks have remained a constant and consistent resource for many individuals and households experiencing food insecurity throughout the pandemic.

In addition to sharing a bit of my own personal story, I am also here to speak to you more broadly on the importance of the federal nutrition programs within the Farm Bill, in particular the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) and The Emergency Food Assistance Program (TEFAP). Before and during the pandemic, federal nutrition programs have played a critical role in curbing the rates of food insecurity. Federal nutrition programs are the essential foundation for families and individuals with limited resources to get the nutritious foods needed when they fall on hard times and it is critical that the Farm Bill strengthen and continue to invest in these programs.

Strengthen Federal Nutrition Programs: The Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP)

I want to first applaud and thank Senator Stabenow for her leadership in passing the bipartisan 2018 Farm Bill that directed USDA to reevaluate the Thrifty Food Plan (TFP), which is used to set SNAP benefit levels, to better reflect the modern cost of a healthy diet by 2022 and every five years thereafter. This modernization helps ensure that people will have a better chance of getting the nutrition they need to

¹ Gundersen, C., M. Strayer, A. Dewey, M. Hake, & E. Engelhard. *Map the Meal Gap 2021: An Analysis of County and Congressional District Food Insecurity and County Food Cost in the United States in 2019*. Feeding America, 2021.

² Gundersen, C., M. Hake, A. Dewey, E. Engelhard (2020). *The Impact of the Coronavirus on Food Insecurity in 2020, Update October 2020 [Data file and FAQ]*.

thrive. The cost of the Thrifty Food Plan is supposed to represent the amount of money needed to purchase a nutritious diet assuming people take significant steps to stretch their food dollars. Prior to the recent update, the TFP had been adjusted only for inflation since the 1970s, resulting in SNAP benefits levels that often fell short of households' needs. The recent scientific, data-driven approach to updating the TFP resulted in providing more adequate benefits amounts, meaning that households that struggle with food insecurity now have more purchasing power to put nutritious food on the table.

SNAP benefits have been crucial in mitigating food hardship and stimulating economic activity during the pandemic and will continue to be a critical resource for families and individuals as increased prices for food and fuel continue to put much pressure on households. The Food Bank Council of Michigan operates a statewide food assistance helpline in which we assist Michigan residents with applying for SNAP benefits and connecting to local food resources through our network. We hear on a daily basis from the individuals we serve the impact that SNAP benefits have on their household. Like the Van Buren County resident that shared that when her husband's salary was reduced during the pandemic, the additional food assistance benefits helped her family greatly to be able to keep groceries in their home and eliminated some of the stress that would have been associated with the loss of income. SNAP benefits are such a critical resource to provide some stability for so many households in Michigan experiencing food insecurity.

SNAP also relieves pressure on overwhelmed food banks and food pantries across the country that could not meet the need for food assistance on their own if SNAP benefits or eligibility were reduced. Feeding America food banks in Michigan and nationwide see firsthand the impact that access to SNAP and more adequate benefits amounts have on the households and the communities we serve. When individuals and families are unable to stretch their SNAP benefits or do not qualify for SNAP benefits to meet their household's needs, they turn to our food bank network to help fill the gap. Improving food security for millions of Americans requires modern federal nutrition programs that reflect the realities of the needs of families and individuals today. More adequate SNAP benefits can help reduce food insecurity and child poverty, and those improvements can have long-term impacts, such as supporting economic mobility and reducing health care costs.

Strengthen Federal Nutrition Programs: The Emergency Food Assistance Program (TEFAP)

The Emergency Food Assistance Program, or TEFAP, is a means-tested federal program that provides nutritious food commodities to individuals and families with low-income facing food insecurity. TEFAP food commodities are an essential resource for food banks. Our Michigan food banks exemplify an optimum model of a public-private partnership, combining TEFAP with private donations and Michigan grown and produced food purchased through our Michigan Agricultural Surplus System (MASS) to maximize TEFAP resources far beyond the budgeted amount for the program. TEFAP not only supports food banks and the people we serve, but also has a strong impact on the farm economy as well. TEFAP bonus commodity purchases also provide support for agricultural markets when market support is needed and provides food banks with access to additional healthy food to distribute to communities and individuals in need.

As the need for food resources and supports increased during the pandemic, so have food prices and supply chain issues. The impact of inflation and supply chain issues are not only affecting the individuals and communities that the food banks serve, but also the food banks themselves. Food banks' current funds for food purchasing are not going nearly as far as they have in years past due to high costs of food and transportation, and this means less food available to distribute to communities and households in need. TEFAP commodities accounted for approximately 30-40 percent of the food moving through Feeding America food banks in fiscal year 2020-21. Today, our food banks are at pre-Trade Mitigation numbers for TEFAP, with our network being at a 5 year low for USDA food overall. Our food banks are in need of desperate need of protein right now, as well as dairy.

As the demand for food remains high at food banks across the country, a reliable and continuous stream of TEFAP is necessary to ensure a steady emergency food supply. Additional mandatory funding for TEFAP food in recognition of the sustained high need for food assistance at food banks in Michigan and nationwide is needed. We also see the Farm Bill as an opportunity to further strengthen TEFAP and other USDA commodity food programs such as the Commodity Supplemental Food Program (CSFP) through the development of standards around food safety and demonstrated infrastructure needed to distribute food both safely and efficiently, and opportunities for those unable to meet those standards on their own to work directly with partners such as food banks that can help local organizations provide their communities with fresh, healthy foods. You have partners like Feeding America, FBCM or Feeding Arkansas who are trusted partners to distribute the food across America and our states in the safest, most effective manner possible.

Conclusion

Solving hunger starts in the field and that's why the Farm Bill is so important. It is an honor and pleasure to come together with you all today in the great state of Michigan, the second most agriculturally diverse state in the nation, to discuss the most critical piece of food and farming legislation. We are in this work of creating food security together. There is a push and pull to policy decisions. We all want to shorten the lines at food banks and help people achieve self-sufficiency. The Farm Bill helps accomplish this objective by impacting families, but it also impacts organizations like our food banks. It is greatly important to Michiganders that Congress drafts a unified Farm Bill that supports our agricultural communities and the nutritional needs of all our state's residents. I am encouraged today by the belief in the two of you to work together to invest in the American people, in us and in the core belief that hunger isn't bigger than we are, better than we are and it isn't beyond us to solve.