



Date: March 23, 2020

To: Joint Special Committee on Coronavirus Response

From: Annie Kirshner, Partners for a Hunger-Free Oregon, Suzanne Washington, Meals on Wheels People, Moira Bowman, Oregon Food Bank

Re: Ensuring access to food during the COVID-19 pandemic

The Joint Committee Hearing on March 20 revealed that additional information is needed to support the Committee's deliberations in this rapidly changing environment in which food security for many Oregonians hangs in the balance. Protecting Oregonians from food insecurity is going to take many strategies--and in most cases simply leveraging, resourcing and streamlining access to systems that already exist.

Essential needs outlined in this testimony:

- Ensuring SNAP benefits are available to as many eligible Oregonians as possible.
- \$30,000 to the Oregon Hunger Task Force to support program and agency coordination in lieu of shifting needs and rapid policy/rules changes.
- \$2 million to support food procurement and distribution through the Oregon Food Bank statewide network.
- \$2 million to support meal delivery to seniors in the Portland Metro area through Meals on Wheels People and through meals on wheels providers across the state.
- National Guard support for food distribution efforts through the Oregon Food Bank statewide network and Meals on Wheels People.
- Requiring school meal distribution and delivery in school districts across the state.
- Ensuring that all state efforts to ameliorate hunger be made available to people regardless of their immigration status.

SNAP benefits are the most important tool for fighting hunger in Oregon.

Ensuring that as many people that are able can buy food from grocery stores should be a top priority. Not only is this the most effective way to fight food insecurity, it also

supports local businesses. Every \$1 in SNAP spending generates \$1.70 in local economic activity. Approximately 20% of Oregon households participate in SNAP during times of economic well-being. It is not desired nor scalable for all the new households experiencing layoffs and increased healthcare and childcare costs to enter the emergency food system when they could participate in the local economy through SNAP.

The following recommendations will enable Oregon to leverage SNAP most effectively. See 3.18.20 testimony from Partners for a Hunger Free Oregon for details.

- Oregon DHS should exercise every option at its disposal, including new options and federal waivers resulting from the Family First Coronavirus Response Act to ensure more Oregonians have simple and timely access to food assistance through SNAP, and place a moratorium on SNAP benefit terminations during this emergency.
- Many Oregonians facing income of job loss will become newly-eligible for SNAP, or be eligible for an increase in benefits. DHS should be resourced to coordinate SNAP enrollment and ensure outreach happens in all languages and all communities in Oregon, both through increased staff capacity and increased funding for its network of SNAP Outreach Contractors.
- Implement “Pandemic EBT” to support students who lose school meals. This new option through Family First can increase or newly provide EBT food benefits to families of students who can’t access school meals because of closures. DHS should be resourced to plan and implement, including securing an adequate supply of physical EBT cards for the anticipated hundreds of thousands of new cases during the pandemic.
- SNAP is now able to be used to order groceries through Walmart and Amazon statewide in Oregon. Encourage online grocery ordering and delivery by subsidizing the delivery fee, which cannot be paid for with SNAP, with state funds

Leverage existing anti-hunger programs to their fullest potential

Oregon already has a strong anti-hunger infrastructure that with additional resources and modifications for the current environment can continue to support Oregonians in getting access to the food they need.

Oregon Food Bank and the statewide food banking network includes 21 regional food banks and 1,400 food distribution sites serving 267,000 Oregonians each month (pre-pandemic). Meals on Wheels People normally delivers 25,000 meals to seniors per week and requests have grown 300% in the past weeks from seniors and people with disabilities that have become shut-in. Nutrition providers across the state are also

experiencing this increased demand. As outlined in Oregon Food Bank's 3.18.20 testimony, our emergency food system is facing pressure points during the crisis--both as a result of social distancing and increasing need. Meals on Wheels People is adapting to the same reality.

- **\$2 million to purchase and distribute food through Oregon Food Bank Network:** Food banks across the state are reporting increased need and concern for keeping an adequate flow of food. These funds will be disbursed throughout the food banking network. Social distancing best practices will be implemented at food distribution sites.
- **\$2 million to Meals on Wheels People** to enable this program and other meals on wheels providers across the state to meet increasing need as more seniors are staying home to stay healthy.
- **Activate the National Guard to support food distribution with the Oregon Food Bank Network and Meals on Wheels People.** Unlike other disaster scenarios, the pandemic cannot result in a massive influx of volunteers. The role of the National Guard includes aiding states in times of disaster. The National Guard is an existing resource that can replace the volunteers that normally power food banking and meal delivery.

Oregon's school meal programs are another effective anti-hunger program that Oregon can leverage during the pandemic. The vast majority of school districts have begun utilizing federal flexibility and funding to serve "grab and go" meals, but a more comprehensive approach is needed for the extended school closure.

- All districts should be directed to exercise the new option to deliver meals to eligible households, such as via school bus routes, in addition to school-based distribution
- Districts should be directed to distribute "grab and go" school meals during *the entire length of the closures* and provide public notification of where meals are available in needed languages.
- Meals are only federally reimbursed for children aged 18 and under. The state could subsidize the cost of providing meals to adult caregivers, to efficiently utilize school meal preparation and distribution infrastructure.

Food Access Coordination and Communication

- \$30 thousand should be allocated to the Oregon Hunger Task Force to support program and agency coordination in lieu of shifting needs and rapid policy/rules changes.
- Create a central state webpage with pandemic food access resources and policy updates, that's fully ADA and language accessible.

Additional Considerations

Hunger exists in relationship to other gaps in essential human needs:

- Undocumented immigrants are not able to access many of federal programs being put in place at this time. All state solutions for food insecurity and other human needs should be available to all people regardless of immigration status.
- Housing, child care, and work supports: Emergency rental assistance, a state moratorium of evictions, expansion of TANF grant, additional support for safe child care options, and funding to address Oregon's homelessness crisis should be considered.
- Federal Stimulus: Our nation needs a bold response at the federal level to meet this unprecedented challenge. Oregon should urge our federal delegation to promote solutions that make everyone better off, including:
 - Basic income through this crisis and beyond.
 - Extended unemployment insurance eligibility and eliminate the "waiting week."
 - Paid sick leave for all employees.
 - Rental assistance that's sufficiently funded and without wait lists.
- Reject attempts to gut revenue for education and human services . With revenue forecasts looking far less optimistic than even a few weeks ago, now is not the time to delay funding streams for Oregon's schools and basic services.

Hunger resources for Oregonians:

- <https://oregonhunger.org/covid-19/>
- <https://oregonfoodbank.org/emergestronger>
- <https://mowp.org>