

To: House Human Services Committee  
From: Susannah Morgan, CEO, Oregon Food Bank  
RE: Food insecurity has doubled. Here's what we can do to Emerge Stronger.  
Date: May 27, 2020



Chair Sanchez and Members of the Committee,

We face the biggest challenge of our lifetimes. Our task is to lead our state through this crisis so that we may emerge stronger on the other side.

This week we will surpass 100,000 deaths in the United States due to Coronavirus. The necessary shifts to our lives have also resulted in the highest levels of hunger and food insecurity since the Great Depression. One in three families in the United States with children now reports that “the food we bought just didn’t last and we didn’t have money to get more.”

**Since the beginning of the pandemic, the number of Oregonians facing hunger has doubled.** A new report from Oregon State University estimates that **900,000 Oregonians** are now food insecure. **That’s one in five Oregonians.**

We know COVID-19 is disproportionately impacting our communities of color. This is true both with health outcomes and with economic impact. While unemployment has increased across all demographics, it has increased disproportionately among communities of color according to the Bureau of Labor Statistics. These inequities are exacerbated among communities not eligible for certain types of federal aid, such as many in Oregon’s immigrant community.

Oregon Food Bank’s mission is to eliminate hunger and its root causes. We pursue this goal in two key ways: We foster community connections to help people access nutritious food today; and we build community power to dismantle systems and policies that drive hunger and poverty. Our network of 21 regional food banks and 1,400 partner agencies are working tirelessly to ensure that Oregonians are able to continue to put food on the table.

Fortunately we are not in this alone. Food banking is necessary because there are too many cracks in our system, and Coronavirus has mercilessly exposed these cracks. The response to this unprecedented increase in hunger will only be possible with a robust effort to protect and strengthen public programs like SNAP that will help ensure our families can survive and recover from this crisis.

**Demand for emergency food has doubled** in Oregon over the past two months at Oregon Food Bank’s five branches. We are resolute in ensuring that food - our most basic human need - is available to all.

We are grateful for \$8m in emergency food secured by Oregon, 75% of which was funded by FEMA. This funding is helping our network meet increased demand by allowing purchases at the state and local levels while we wait for increased federal aid to arrive in June. This has leveraged our ability both to purchase food at scale statewide, and also purchase food in communities. Regional food banks have made purchases from food suppliers across the state, including produce, meat, dairy, seafood, and from local grocery stores.



Our delivery models have also shifted reflecting the need to implement social distancing protocols. This means many food pantries are now conducted via drive-up distributions. It also means that congregate meals – such as soup kitchens and community meals for seniors - are no longer possible, creating an additional gap. Our network is addressing this by increasing our capacity to deliver food to people facing challenges accessing a food distribution site.

The reality, however, is that the most important tool Oregon has to address hunger is SNAP. With new federal options, SNAP has an even greater ability to provide eligible families with the ability to purchase food at grocery stores. This gives families a lifeline, supports grocers, and keeps demand strong in the food supply chain. SNAP is federally-funded for all who are eligible.

We would like to commend Oregon DHS for the commitment to exercising every available federal option available through various stimulus bills for SNAP. The result is more support to families for food, and stronger communities.

As we face a long path toward recovery, we are calling on leaders at all levels to demonstrate a heightened sense of urgency to ensure our families and our communities have access to nutritious food during this crisis.

### **Recommendations for Oregon**

- **What Oregon can do now:**
  - Urgent: process all Unemployment Insurance claims. We must take immediate steps to ensure Oregonians who have filed unemployment claims have cases processed as soon as possible to put money in people's pockets.
  - Conduct robust SNAP outreach. For example, people who are waiting for UI benefits, those without access to the internet.
  - Make it easier to apply for SNAP. Reduce barriers to "sign" over the phone, since the online application is only available in English.
  - Allow SNAP to be used at restaurants by seniors, people with disabilities and those experiencing homelessness.
- **Special Session Recommendations**
  - We must not balance our budget on the backs of Oregonians who are already hurting.
  - Prioritize gaps for immigrant families, such as the Oregon Worker Relief Fund.
  - Extend eviction protections and rent assistance.
  - Preserve critical human services in state budget.

### **Recommendations at the Federal Level**

- Prevent increased hunger in the summer months:
  - Expand "Pandemic EBT" (money for groceries instead of lost school meals) through the summer and through school closures.
  - Increase access for summer "grab and go" meals.
- Increase SNAP benefits through the duration of the pandemic.
- End harmful exclusions of stimulus benefits.
- Provide assistance to states to avoid need to raise revenue or cut budgets.

