

Testimony in support of HB 2833 and HB 2834

Dr. Howard N. Kenyon, Vice President, Ecumenical Ministries of Oregon

2021.03.03

To Chair Williams and other members of the House Committee on Human Services:

My name is Howard Kenyon, from Portland. I speak in support of HB 2833 and HB 2834. My day job is serving as vice president of the Ecumenical Ministries of Oregon. I am but the latest from EMO over many years to represent the faith community on the Oregon Hunger Task Force.

I am also honored to serve as chair of the Task Force. The proposed changes in these bills were developed by OHTF members, including myself, with the goal of ensuring the Task Force reflects people most impacted by hunger, and that it has the resources to deliver equitable outcomes for the state.

Although I am not a native Oregonian, I have gained a breadth of understanding of this great state through a series of listening sessions conducted by the Oregon Hunger Task Force. From Gold Beach to Ontario and Nyssa, from The Dalles to Medford, from the Metro's Rockwood to rural Douglas County, I have participated in these sessions. I have learned from parents striving to put food on the table, church members running mom-and-pop food pantries, farmers, business leaders, county officials, and struggling college students.

Out of these listening sessions, the Task Force has developed numerous policy recommendations and provided research and resources for state legislators. Of particular note was the 2018 Malheur listening session on child hunger that informed the school meal bills passed in the Student Success Act.

As you all know very well, Oregon is a large state. The ability of its citizens to participate in state government is hampered by these distances as well as by the financial constraints of those with limited means. When the Task Force meets monthly to review all aspects of food insecurity, we engage the voices of legislators, government agency leaders, nonprofit representatives, agricultural and business representatives, faith leaders, and members of the academic and research community.

However, our desire is also to more fully engage the voices of those who have experienced poverty and hunger, racism and other marginalizing forces, people from both urban and rural communities. Much more can be done with additional funds, especially to support strong community engagement and membership by people who've experienced food insecurity, as we recover from the pandemic and its attending historic rates of hunger.

A year ago, EMO was minding its own business, serving some 17,000 people a year through its various direct services, including our Northeast Emergency Food Program, a distribution point for the Oregon Food Bank network in Portland's Cully neighborhood. I vividly recall the March day we realized our world was changing with the full-on arrival of Covid-19. Within a handful of days, we had pivoted our operations to serve emergency food to 50,000 people a month through NEFP alone, not counting the meals we provide through our HIV Services as well as our refugee, immigrant, and shared housing programs such as Second Home.

The amount of food that has flowed through our doors these twelve months equals 400 semi tractor trailers full of food parked end to end, some 32 million pounds going to more than 600,000 people. This "retail" end of emergency food service is possible only because of the amazing partnership this past year

between governor, the state legislature, the Oregon Food Bank network, and a host of local congregations and businesses. Add to that EMO's own vast statewide network of congregations meeting outsized needs during Covid. About half of the Oregon Food Bank's network of 1,200 food distribution points are connected to our faith communities.

What helps all our work is the vital role of the Oregon Hunger Task Force. I dare say the heroic efforts of our state to meet the Covid-induced hunger crisis would have been severely hampered without the seasoned networking strength of the Task Force. But we can and must do better by engaging more "ears on the ground" and increasing the capacity and equitable impact of our work. The Covid restrictions have brought to the forefront the value of making the most of modern communications opportunities and ensuring that all engaged parties have a seat at our table in a moment's notice. We really want to make participation in our work truly accessible for those facing hunger and poverty from all corners of the state.

Thank you very much.