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PRESS STATEMENT

LISA HAMLER-FUGITT, EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR
OHIO ASSOCIATION OF FOODBANKS

October 13, 2015

Good morning, and thank you for coming. My name is Lisa Hamler-Fugitt; I serve as the director of the Ohio Association of Foodbanks, Ohio's largest charitable response to hunger. Since 2010, our network of 12 Foodbanks and 3,300 member charities has worked tirelessly to fight hunger in Ohio – all while we've experienced a 40 percent increase in demand for food.

Recently released federal data from the US Census Bureau and USDA find that Ohio now ranks 6th in the nation for the highest rate of food insecurity and hunger. That's a sharp rise from a 12th-place ranking in 2013. Further, 25 percent of Ohio households, or one of every four, lived on less than \$25,000 last year – bad news since Ohio's median wages are still plummeting.

Increasing demand for more food from more people is being placed on our over-stressed systems. Contributing to that strain are three policy decisions that have limited our most vulnerable citizens from their ability to participate in the food stamp program, SNAP, the first line of defense against hunger.

Accessing these vital federal food assistance benefits is both economically wise for our state's economy and a smart investment in mitigating likely costs associated with increased demands for more health care, educational challenges and public safety.

Beginning in January 2014, Ohio implemented time limits to basic, 100 percent federally funded food assistance to nearly 140,000 of our poorest citizens, while at the same time our state began expanding Medicaid to all Ohioans with incomes at or below 138 percent of the Federal Poverty Level. In all of my decades of fighting hunger and serving the hungry, I know and have documented through research that hungry Ohioans are not healthy Ohioans.

My remarks today will focus on the findings of current research and firsthand experiences we've seen. Specifically, I'll discuss the resulting impact on 4,827 Franklin County residents, beginning in December 2013, when the Administration decided to reject the Statewide waiver of the work requirement for certain able-bodied adults without dependents to three months of food assistance benefits in every three-year period.

Who are these hungry adults without food benefits? 60 percent are males and 1 in 5 are at-risk young adults, under the age of 25, including youth aging out of the foster care and juvenile justice systems.

Many others are veterans, autistic adults and ex-offenders attempting to re-enter and survive in a harsh society.

- 1 in 4 is under a doctor's care and many report suffering from depression, anxiety, bipolar, PTSD and schizophrenia.
- 1 in 3 (32.5 percent) report having a physical or mental disability that limits their ability to perform daily activities.

The findings in our research and program experiences with clients participating in our Association's Work Experience Program should give significant pause about how this current state policy to abandon a working federal program will lead to increasing health care costs associated with higher rates of hunger and food insecurity. Some of our clients report physical limitations due to diabetes and heart conditions and injuries from crimes of violence, such as stab and gunshot wounds. To deny food to someone who suffers from diet-related diseases and who is struggling to recover from a traumatic injury is bad policy and fiscally irresponsible.

Let me state clearly that the Ohio Association of Foodbanks supports work. We believe everyone that can – should work – there is dignity in work. Unfortunately, far too often for the Ohioans facing these challenges, the current reality of a tight and tough work and labor environment presents significant challenges and barriers.

One of the challenges our state policy and programs must urgently address and invest in is targeted education and training. The reason for that is practical: 30 percent of the clients have no high school diploma or GED. For Ohioans that are marginally and functionally illiterate, their job prospects are far and few between. These citizens are almost totally dependent on low-wage, part-time, temporary, day labor, contingent jobs and the underground economy.

A few additional findings of our research of program participants provide further reasons to take a thoughtful, thorough and strategic process for adopting smart hunger relief policies.

- 1 in 5 clients report they are working, in paid employment or in exchange for food or housing, or are providing caregiver services for parents, relatives or friends.
- 1 in 3 clients report working in the last year. Yet nearly 80 percent report they have never received unemployment compensations and only 24.7 percent have heard of or registered in Ohio Means Jobs.
- Only 37 percent have an email address.
- 1 in 4 clients report having children who are not in their custody, and 1 in 5 owe child support.
- Only 4 in 10 have a valid driver's license.

The path that Ohio is on is the wrong path for our most vulnerable mothers, fathers, sons, daughters, friends and neighbors.

One that is truly penny-wise and pound foolish.

Since November 2013, Ohio has lost more than a half-billion dollars in direct food assistance benefits. This food assistance would allow our hungry friends and neighbors to stand in grocery store checkout lines – instead of forcing them to stand in food pantry and soup kitchen lines.

The legislation proposed by Representative Ramos is a wise policy and fiscal decision that will pay dividends both to the state’s most vulnerable residents and to our state budget. We urge all members of the Ohio General Assembly to join with him in supporting this bill. It’s time for Ohio’s elected leaders to protect every citizen’s access to healthy, affordable food, and to make a firm, demonstrated commitment that no Ohioan should go hungry.

Detailed policy and program recommendations prepared on behalf of our 12 Feeding America Foodbanks are available and will provide much-needed insight into solutions to preventing hunger in Ohio. Thank you for your time today and I would be pleased to answer any questions you may have.

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