



March 30, 2022

Congressman Jim McGovern
370 Cannon House Office Building
Washington, DC 20515

Dear Congressman McGovern,

On behalf of the Foodbank of Santa Barbara County (Foodbank SBC) and our 300 member agencies and community organizations that help address food insecurity in our County, I want to thank you for your long and admirable leadership nationally on issues of hunger. I am pleased to share about our experiences serving the people of Santa Barbara County during the pandemic.

While Santa Barbara is often viewed as a very affluent community, the reality is that poverty and related hunger issues are significant, primarily due to many local residents being employed in agriculture, tourism, and low-paying service industry jobs. In normal times, Foodbank SBC distributes a little less than 10 million pounds of food per year, serving one out of every four Santa Barbara County residents annually. This equates to a little more than 100,000 people in a county of 446,000 people who face some level of food insecurity.

When the pandemic hit in 2020, the real-world challenges posed by poverty and food insecurity in our county were made abundantly clear. Almost overnight, food insecurity doubled. In the first 18 months of the pandemic we distributed nearly 30 million pounds of food and served more than 200,000 people. We also saw clearly just how ill-prepared our community was to truly meet the many challenges (including food insecurity) vulnerable populations face in times of community crisis and disasters like the pandemic.

As mentioned above, Foodbank SBC relies on a network of local agencies, nonprofits, churches, community centers, and others to help distribute food resources to people struggling with the daily disaster of food insecurity. When the pandemic hit, the vast majority of these organizations closed their doors and/or dramatically reduced in-person services. This fundamentally undermined our primary distribution network. This at a time when vulnerable populations such as low-income children, families, and seniors needed help at a level never seen before.

To accommodate for these systemic challenges, Foodbank SBC launched 50 regular food distribution sites throughout the county in the first two weeks after the pandemic shutdowns. You will no doubt recall the images and news coverage showing cars stretching blocks as people waited to get critical food supplies. This was our reality, just as it was for foodbanks across the country.

In addition to communitywide issues of food insecurity we faced, of particular concern when pandemic shutdowns were imposed was the thousands of seniors and other populations vulnerable to the health impacts of the virus who were stuck at home and who were unable to pay for food delivery services. To meet this need, we launched an entirely new COVID-19 grocery home delivery program, which at its peak served more than 4,000 people, including prepared meals for those who were unable to cook for themselves.

Additionally, as a community with a very high number of low-wage employees working in agriculture, we launched specific distributions and services for these often difficult to serve populations who tend to be socially, culturally, and linguistically isolated and who are often fearful of engaging with government and social service programs due to concerns about jeopardizing their immigration status.

The pandemic also presented challenges internally within our own organization. Key among these was the fact that many of our more than 2,000 volunteers upon whom we depend to help distribute food supplies are seniors. Most were no longer able to serve out of fear of contracting COVID. Additionally, our warehouse space proved to be woefully inadequate. We were exceedingly lucky that a local municipality happened to have an empty warehouse and that they allowed us to use that space for COVID relief efforts. If not for this extra storage capacity, and the additional help of the National Guard, we would not have come close to meeting the actual needs presented in our community. The logistical and organizational lift to get these programs off the ground with rapidity almost broke our organization and the financial impact is a challenge we will face for years to come.

I could go on and on describing the impacts of the pandemic and the many ways that we and our community partners worked to overcome them. However, in this testimony I want to focus on areas for improvement that we believe the Federal government should consider to help make our nation more resilient in times of community crisis, emergencies, and disasters.

First, as I am sure you will hear from other leaders working across the country on issues of food insecurity, it is critically important that the Federal government continue to fund, and to increase funding, for food and nutrition related programs such as SNAP, WIC, TEFAP, the Federal School Lunch Program, and Department of Agriculture programs that distribute food supplies to local foodbanks and communities. These programs are critical to our collective effort to meet our nation's significant food insecurity challenges. Please add my name and Foodbank SBC to the long list of others who support continuing and expanding these critical programs.

Additionally, through this testimony, I would like to share the following specific suggestions for how the federal government might work improve how we as a nation address food insecurity leading up to, during, and following a disaster.

1. The federal government should recognize food insecurity as a major vulnerability to our national, state, and local disaster preparedness, response, and recovery systems. The warehouses, cooling/refrigeration units, forklifts, generators and sources of alternative energy,

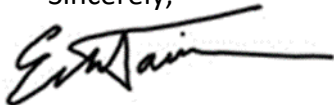
vehicles and other equipment necessary to meet food insecurity across this country should be classified as critical infrastructure and should be prioritized for funding at a national level. The pandemic revealed just how vulnerable tens of millions of Americans are to food insecurity in the disaster context. Having something healthy to eat is as fundamental as it gets to human survival. We need to do more to ensure that we have the ability to provide for this most basic human need when disaster strikes.

2. While the American Reinvestment Plan Act does allow local communities to invest in strategies to address food insecurity, Foodbank's must compete for these funds which local governments need to make themselves whole and to respond to a variety of long-term pandemic related impacts. The federal government should establish dedicated and ongoing funding sources to help Foodbanks improve their currently inadequate infrastructure. This funding should be provided as formula grants to states to facilitate their rapid deployment and to better ensure that local needs are effectively addressed.
3. The Federal Emergency Management Administration (FEMA) should recognize food insecurity as a standard, immediate, and direct threat to public health and safety in disasters. People lacking adequate nutrition is a threat to public health. Expenses tied to meeting that public health challenge in a disaster should be reimbursable. Current processes and systems for nonprofit foodbanks to secure reimbursement for expenses tied to disaster related food supplies and services need significant reform. The data collection and validation requirements necessary to qualify foodbanks for FEMA reimbursement are unnecessarily arduous and complex. For example, Foodbank SBC is uniquely well partnered with our local County Office of Emergency Management and as a result we are one of the few foodbanks we know of that received reimbursements from FEMA. In the first year of the pandemic, numerous Foodbank SBC and County staff spent nearly 100 hours trying to secure FEMA reimbursement through the County's cost recovery process. Ultimately, Foodbank received FEMA reimbursement for expenses related to serving fewer than 600 of the more than 200,000 people who received support from us during the first year of the pandemic. For such as basic human need, the path to federal support should not be so arduous, complex, and limited.

I offer these suggestions with tremendous gratitude for your leadership and support on issues of food insecurity, and also with a deep level of appreciation for the many important and substantial roles the federal government and the Biden Administration has played in getting us through this pandemic and on the road to recovery. I am eager to help explore these issues further and to assist you and the Administration in this good work.

Please never hesitate to contact me if I might ever be assistance to you in this or any other effort. Thank you for the opportunity to submit this information and thank you again.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Erik Talkin', with a long horizontal flourish extending to the right.

Erik Talkin, CEO
Foodbank of Santa Barbara County