



Reducing Food Hardship for Ohio Families

In many ways, the pandemic threatened economic stability and exacerbated pre-existing hardships for families and children. Although families with children received some temporary support due to federal COVID relief measures, research shows that childhood hunger, which saw historic declines in the latter half of 2021, [significantly increased after the expiration of the federal expanded Child Tax Credit](#). This, coupled with other factors including rising prices for food and other basic household needs, drove households with children to seek help from the Ohio Association of Foodbanks statewide food pantry network in great numbers and with more frequency. In state fiscal year 2022, Ohio's food pantries [provided take-home groceries to help meet nutritional needs for 2.8 million children](#), which made up 28.3% of the 9.9 million people served. But need continued to climb in the latter half of calendar year 2022; Ohio foodbanks served 50.9 percent more children (829,010) from July to September 2022 than they did just a year before, when they served 549,241 children from July to September 2021.

We know childhood hunger and poverty disproportionately harms those who have been historically marginalized, including Black children, Latino children, and those living in rural communities. Addressing childhood hunger must consider how these policies will impact these communities, so that all Ohio children are nourished and ready to grow. We can all agree that even one child experiencing hunger is unacceptable. Thankfully, Ohio has the power to change that by adopting common sense policies that support children and families.

A hungry child struggles to learn, has troublesome health outcomes, and will have difficulty achieving their full potential. To be the best state to raise a family, Ohio must give children all the tools they need to thrive and view food security as an essential ingredient to family stability and overall health.

Policy

Pandemic-related changes to many nutrition programs demonstrated to Ohio families and to policymakers that these programs can be improved to better meet community needs. These changes provided more autonomy and flexibility and helped program providers reach families where they were at. During the upcoming biennial budget, Ohio can build on these lessons learned during the pandemic and invest in programs and changes that would significantly improve family stability and health outcomes for Ohio families and children. Some policies include:

- **Family-focused changes to SNAP:** The state of Ohio can consider changes to the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) that would better support working families with children. The state can direct

the Ohio Department of Job and Family Services (ODJFS) to consider families with gross incomes at or below 185% or 200% of the Federal Poverty Level, rather than 130%, during eligibility determinations. This would direct more federally funded nutrition assistance to working parents and caregivers who would not have to worry about losing the benefits that help them feed their children as they climb the economic ladder toward self-sufficiency.

Additional direct certification between programs would ensure that families and children are enrolled in the programs for which they are eligible. The Ohio General Assembly could direct agencies, like ODJFS, the Ohio Department of Medicaid (ODM), and the Ohio Department of Health (ODH) to share data and work together to ensure eligible families are directly enrolled in programs like SNAP, Medicaid, and Women, Infants, and Children (WIC) based on their eligibility for other program(s). This reduces the burden on families and county caseworkers during the application and recertification processes, reducing caseload churn and freeing up resources to focus on other priorities for improving family stability.

- ***Investments in the emergency food relief network:*** Some hardworking families with children simply are unable to afford enough food after they have paid for housing, utilities, transportation, health care, medicine, childcare, and basic household necessities. Others need a safety net to turn to when they experience an unexpected crisis, from a car repair to lost wages due to unpaid sick days. Fortunately, the State of Ohio can continue to support Ohio foodbanks through the existing [Ohio Food Program and Agricultural Clearance Program](#), which has supported Ohio farmers and families for three decades.
- ***Family-focused state tax credits:*** It costs a lot to raise a family; Ohio needs to support families as it strives to attract and retain workers. A [thriving families tax credit](#) would help nearly 986,000 Ohio families and 1.8 million children under 18 and provide eligible families with an average tax refund of roughly \$1,000 a year. This tax credit would directly improve food security, as demonstrated by the [significant reductions in food insufficiency](#) when the federal expanded Child Tax Credit was available through advance monthly payments in 2021.
- ***School Meals for All:*** Every student in Ohio should be able to count on wholesome meals as part of their school day. During the pandemic, Ohio students received school meals at no cost to themselves or their families. Making [meals for all students](#) part of the school day reduces stigma and reduces the burden on families and schools to submit applications and determine eligibility.
- ***Modernization of WIC:*** We lift up the need for Ohio to modernize the Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC). The pandemic made it clear that Ohio's program needs to be transitioned to an online program, where benefits are loaded onto an EBT card like the SNAP program. Ohio is one of just 9 states still requiring in-person office visits to load WIC benefits, which led to a reduction in Ohio's WIC caseload during the pandemic at a time when more mothers, infants, and children needed support. [COVID stimulus funds were provided to Ohio specifically earmarked for improving and modernizing WIC](#), which could be used to support these priorities.

Challenge

2022 was an especially difficult year for many Ohio families. As COVID-19 cases ebbed and flowed, rising costs for basic needs deeply impacted families with low to moderate incomes who did not have the extra room in their budgets to soften the blow of inflation. This, combined with the expiration of some

pandemic-related changes to nutrition programs and other factors, has led to an increase in families with children turning to Ohio's emergency hunger relief network. This is only expected to increase in the coming months, and Ohio foodbanks are reaching a breaking point.

Opportunity

We know what policy changes would alleviate hunger and support financial stability for families. The evidence is also clear that these hunger-fighting policies would lead to better learning and health outcomes for young Ohioans. The whole state benefits when all Ohio children are given the tools to thrive. The 135th General Assembly and the DeWine Administration have the opportunity to invest in a hunger-free future for all Ohio children during this biennial budget.

Support Child Well-Being: Budget Recommendation

- Direct ODJFS to increase the gross income limit for SNAP from 130% FPL to 185% or 200% FPL to help working families get the federally funded economic support they need to feed themselves as they climb the economic ladder.
- Streamline benefit programs by directing agencies to utilize direct certification.
- Invest in school meals for all to support better learning and life outcomes for the next generation.
- Support the modernization of the Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC) to improve participation in the program.
- Invest in Ohio's emergency hunger relief network so families can turn to their local food pantry when they experience a crisis.
- Create a Thriving Families Tax Credit to support Ohio families with affording basic needs including rent, childcare, and groceries.

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