

Mid-Ohio Food Collective Public Policy Priorities for 2023

Mid-Ohio Food Collective's mission is to end hunger one nourishing meal at a time while co-creating communities where everyone thrives.

For communities to thrive, it is important to recognize the root causes that lead to our neighbors experiencing poverty. As such, Mid-Ohio Food Collective (MOFC) works diligently to advocate for the resources essential to create hunger-free and healthier communities.

In collaboration and partnership with government programs and elected officials at the local, state, and federal level; public- and private-sector stakeholders such as Feeding America, the Ohio Association of Food Banks, and The Root Cause Coalition; and community members, MOFC's policy priorities aim to utilize research-driven, human-centered understanding of key strategies critical to eliminating food insecurity in our communities. These policy priorities inform MOFC's advocacy and government relations efforts by identifying key policies and programs necessary to move closer to ending hunger.

1. Strengthening Government Commodities Programs

- a. Mid-Ohio Food Collective supports the continued and expanded investment into The Emergency Food Assistance Program (TEFAP). MOFC urges for the increase in funding for TEFAP, which funds food purchasing, storage, and distribution of products for organizations providing emergency food assistance. Continued investment in TEFAP will ensure a steady flow of food levels despite challenges like inflation and supply chain issues.
- b. Within the State of Ohio, programs such as the Ohio Agricultural Clearance Program and the Ohio Food Program help provide millions of pounds of nutritious foods, including locally sourced food that supports regional agricultural producers of all sizes. MOFC is grateful for the funding provided by the State of Ohio in cooperation with the Ohio Department of Job and Family Services while continuing to advocate for continued expansion of and investment in Ohio-based commodity programs.

2. Strengthening Investment and Modernization of Anti-Hunger Policies such as SNAP, WIC, and Federal Child Nutrition Programs

The federal Farm Bill contains key federal nutrition programs that provide families with access to much-needed food. Without these programs, food insecurity would spike, leading to an overwhelming demand for emergency feeding services. Mid-Ohio Food Collective supports the protection and expansion of these nutrition components of the Farm Bill in the 118th Congress along with the codification of effective pandemic-era waivers that allowed for flexibilities in many programs to improved access for individuals and simplified administration.

a. Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP)

The Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) is the country's most direct defense against hunger. MOFC advocates for the protection and strengthening of SNAP at the state and federal level.

i. Restructuring of SNAP Income Thresholds

1. Current SNAP income thresholds can make it harder for families to achieve self-sufficiency by creating a “benefits cliff.” For many recipients, accepting a raise or better paying job could mean disqualification from SNAP and no food on the table as a result. Raising SNAP income thresholds and implementing tiered eligibility criteria will allow families to pursue new opportunities and make it realistic for them to leave the program without going hungry in the process. Additionally, increasing SNAP income limits will allow low-income and inter-generational households’ budgets to go farther, combatting inflation and keeping families fed.

ii. Modernizing and Improving the Accessibility and Usage of SNAP

1. MOFC affirms that “when life happens,” no family should feel ashamed or singled out while benefiting from programs like SNAP. As such, we advocate for efforts to de-stigmatize the usage of SNAP, including giving families the ability to order groceries online, allowing recipients to purchase pre-prepped foods, and expanding the types of establishments that can accept SNAP dollars.
2. Red tape can worsen food insecurity. For individuals and families—particularly for older adults, college students, immigrant and mixed-status families, and other groups who face additional barriers—creating more flexibilities in enrollment and issuance of benefits can ensure more access. MOFC opposes efforts to prevent access to benefits such as photo I.D. requirements.
3. Recognizing the importance and cost, MOFC supports the ability to purchase personal care items (such as but not limited to toilet paper, soap, and feminine hygiene products) with SNAP dollars.
4. Minimizing paperwork, reducing the impact of work requirements and time limits, and understanding the impact that lack of transportation, taking off work, and lack of childcare have on enrollment are crucial to ensuring that people who are entitled to these benefits can access them. Additionally, the process of receiving SNAP benefits should be more streamlined to enable individuals receiving these benefits to use them more readily in their time of need.

b. Women, Infant, and Children Program (WIC)

- i. WIC is a vital program to provide food and additional resources to pregnant persons, new parents, infants, and children.
- ii. Mid-Ohio Food Collective supports the modernization and expansion of WIC. Ease of access to the program and its services will allow for more children and families to benefit. Program improvements such as online ordering, remote service and benefits issuance, and a coordination of enrollment with additional entitlement programs like SNAP and Medicaid are essential to supporting families.

- iii. Additionally, MOFC supports the proposed updates to WIC that include the increased availability and variety of produce that can be purchased within WIC. These changes will increase variety and choice to access nutritious foods and provide a more adequate level of assistance for families, while providing state agencies with more flexibility to tailor the packages to accommodate personal and cultural food preferences and special dietary needs.

c. Child Nutrition

- i. In order to ensure healthy physical, mental, and emotional development, it is imperative that our community's children be provided with nutritious meals through programs within the Child Nutrition Act (CNA). The expansion, modernization, and reauthorization of the CNA is crucial to supporting programs like the National School Breakfast and Lunch Programs, Backpack program, and many others. These programs alleviate the burden that many families face in putting food on the table. By providing breakfast, lunch, and after-school snacks and meals to developing children, we can ensure that they are nourished to effectively learn and participate inside and outside of the classroom.
- ii. MOFC supports free school meals for all regardless of income level and a simplified method of enrolling students into these programs. Additionally, schools, daycares, and after-school programs, most notably in rural and low-income communities, should be able to provide meals that incorporate healthier food options through multiple setting and distribution models as well as more culturally appropriate food products.

3. Supporting and Modernizing Ancillary Programs and Policies that Impact Food Insecurity such as Medicaid, Medicare, Social Security, the Child Tax Credit (CTC), and the Earned Income Tax Credit (EITC)

- a. The temporary expansion of the Child Tax Credit (CTC) has been proved to dramatically reduce poverty for children and their families. Mid-Ohio Food Collective urges lawmakers to expand the CTC by making it permanent and refundable for working families.
- b. The Earned Income Tax Credit (EITC) and its expansion is a financial lifeline to low-income individuals and families. MOFC believes that EITC can be a significant tool to create long-term solutions to alleviate poverty and allow for those experiencing it to build financial security.
- c. MOFC supports the strengthening of accessibility to key social safety nets that protect the health and well-being of individuals and families. Programs such as Medicaid, Medicare, and Social Security play a crucial role for people who need additional support.

4. Supporting Interventions that Provide Access to Nutritious Foods—Food is Health

- a. Mid-Ohio Food Collective advocates for the integration of "Food is Health" initiatives within the health care and public health space. Ensuring that everybody has consistent access to

nutritious food is good public policy that can improve health and education outcomes and strengthen our economy. Improved individual and community health outcomes are possible if we leverage the existing infrastructure of foodbanks to provide nutritious food to individuals experiencing food insecurity.

- b. Through innovations such as MOFC's Farmacy program, we understand the importance that consistent access to fresh produce plays in reducing diet-related diseases. MOFC supports the expansion and continued development of strategies like medically tailored meals, home delivery options, and other initiatives to meet customers where they live.
- c. Access to affordable, healthy food is fundamental to health and well-being. MOFC supports the expansion of Medicaid waivers for reimbursement for nutritious foods. This can be significant in reducing the risk and prevalence of diet-related disease resulting in reduced health care costs among those on Medicare and experiencing food insecurity.

5. Promotion of Equitable Strategies to Address Food Insecurity for Individuals of All Races, Ages, Genders, Sexual Identities, Cultural Backgrounds

- a. To successfully address hunger in Ohio and across the U.S., we must ensure that anti-hunger policies and strategies are focused on the most vulnerable populations, including but not limited to: children, women, people with physical and mental disabilities, BIPOC individuals, members of the Native American community, veterans, older adults, immigrants, LGBTQ+ people, people experiencing homelessness, individuals from rural areas, and formerly incarcerated citizens. MOFC applauds major legislative efforts to protect our neighbors, such as the Equality Act, which protects individuals from discrimination in areas such as employment, education, housing, credit, and public accommodations. Lived experiences of specific populations have been linked to a wide range of negative mental and physical health outcomes, including food insecurity.

6. Capacity Building of System of Emergency Food Response

- a. As the COVID-19 pandemic has shown us, the emergency food system is volatile and vulnerable to disrupted supply chains, reductions in workforce, and limited food availability. It is important for policymakers to address the need for logistically and financially strengthening the system. This can be done through building out and expanding foodbank storage and distribution facilities, preparing food in commercial-grade kitchens, and making wraparound services more accessible.
- b. Mid-Ohio Food Collective supports multi-jurisdictional initiatives that support sustainable food production and acquisition. This enables MOFC to access more local product from marginalized retailers, including BIPOC, immigrant, and low-income farmers and producers.
- c. Supporting innovative programming through public and private cross-jurisdictional funding and operational support to address hunger and related root causes.
- d. Mid-Ohio Food Collective, in partnership with the Ohio Association of Foodbanks and its sister foodbanks, is grateful for the support provided by Governor Dewine, the Ohio General

Assembly, and local governmental stakeholders. MOFC advocates for the continued support of its services through ad hoc funding support such as the American Rescue Plan, the State Capital Budget, and other local funding sources.

- e. MOFC advocates for collaborative work with local partners, specifically County Commissioners, agencies, non-profits and the business community, building upon local resources and relationships to maintain and expand services through community partnerships.

7. Addressing Root Causes of Hunger

- a. Lifting people out of poverty is the best way to eliminate food insecurity in our communities. Mid-Ohio Food Collective actively works and advocates through its five assets, such as the Mid-Ohio Markets, to connect neighbors to resources crucial to alleviating poverty. By addressing the below root causes, supporting policies that promote the following can help to stimulate the economy while improving nutrition, health, and well-being among people experiencing poverty:
 - i. Safe and Affordable Housing
 - ii. Safe and Reliable Transportation
 - iii. Training and Workforce Development
 - iv. Education Access
 - v. Increase Benefit Access
 - vi. Wage Increases
 - vii. Access to Affordable Child Care
- b. MOFC believes that localized working models for tackling poverty and food insecurity are crucial in addressing social determinants of health within our communities. Holistic, collaborative efforts such as the Columbus Community Information Exchange (CIE), can provide a platform for human services agencies to work collectively in order to provide greater access to services with efficiencies for all. Additionally, ongoing local partnerships within Columbus and Franklin County can lead to more affordable housing opportunities within the community offering stable, safer neighborhoods where individuals and families can thrive.

8. Benefits Cliff Solutions

- a. MOFC urges policymakers to address the “benefits cliff” when developing policies that impact benefit programs. Benefits cliffs can create limitations on support systems that de-incentivize people who are being supported by benefits to move up and get a higher wage in fear of losing their benefits. Individuals can face a benefits cliff when they receive public benefits from the government, earn a raise, and then discover that they make too much money to receive the benefits. While it is applauded that individuals are moving up the ladder, often, they are not making enough money to sustain themselves and their household.