

***Prepared Hearing Testimony in Response of LB1201 - Appropriate federal funds to the Department of Health and Human Services for grants to nonprofit organizations providing food assistance***

**Catholic Charities of Omaha  
Mikaela Schuele, Director, Emergency & Supportive Food  
March 2, 2022**

***Prepared Hearing Testimony***

Good afternoon, Chairman Stinner and Members of the Appropriations Committee. My name is Mikaela Schuele. I serve as the Director of Emergency & Supportive Food Services for Catholic Charities of Omaha, which is the charitable service agency for the Archdiocese of Omaha whose territory is Omaha and 23 counties throughout northeast Nebraska. I am also testifying on behalf of Catholic Social Services of Southern Nebraska which is the charitable service agency for the Diocese of Lincoln whose territory encompasses everything below the Platte River. As well, I offer this testimony on behalf of the Nebraska Catholic Conference.

I come here today with an important message: there is a hunger crisis gripping Nebraska communities. It is a crisis that existed pre-pandemic and has been exacerbated by the pandemic. It is a crisis that the Catholic Church, alongside of many other community partners, has been helping to alleviate. Unfortunately, it's not an issue that can be tackled at the local or even regional level alone. It is an issue that requires interventions and assistance from state government.

Catholic Charities' Emergency & Supportive Food Services program operates three pantry sites - one in North Omaha, one in South Omaha, and one opening this summer in Northwest Omaha.

We also operate a Senior Homebound Delivery Program and Mobile Pantry Program. In addition, we help lead our community's hunger battle by regularly distributing donated food to 44 collaborative partner organizations.

In 2019, our program served 55,000 people. In 2020, our program served 134,000 people. In 2021, our program served 222,000 people. Our latest projections show that we are on track to serve a heartbreaking 260,000 people in 2022.

This means, in just three short years, the number of people we've served has grown by nearly 400%.

Catholic Social Services runs food pantry programs out of all four of their offices, located in Lincoln, Auburn, Hastings and Imperial. In fiscal year 2020-21, Catholic Social Services provided over 302 tons of food. More specifically, their Hastings office runs 5 different food routes each week throughout south-central and south-western Nebraska communities to ensure

food access for rural Nebraskans. The Hastings office distributed over 200 tons of food during that fiscal year.

The value of this food assistance, throughout our urban and rural communities, is in the millions of dollars. And while it's making an impact, as I stated earlier: we are in a hunger crisis.

Just as Catholic Charities and Catholic Social Services have done for nearly a century, we're doing all we can to respond. But support is dwindling. Over the past year, our food supply at Catholic Charities has plummeted. Since the beginning of 2022, food donations have decreased by 27%. This is a problem since we're serving 13.5% more people than in 2021.

Our infrastructure was never designed to meet the hunger needs of a quarter of a million people and grow at a 400% rate. At one of our pantries, moving food in and out is only possible by - literally - taking doors off their hinges. Cold foods are stored in a refrigerated trailer in our parking lot that is prone to vandalism. And our pantry space is too small to safely invite patrons inside to shop for their own items, which we know is the most dignifying way to serve our neighbors.

When the pandemic first hit, everyone rallied. The USDA's Farmers to Families Food Box Program provided life-saving dairy and produce. We were able to access truckloads of food from major meat suppliers. Our community held countless food drives for our program. Our shelves were full, and so were the stomachs of those most hurting in our community.

At this moment, the pandemic is showing signs of retreating, but the hunger crisis is not. It's getting worse.

LB 1201 is more than an investment in Catholic Charities or Catholic Social Services. It is an investment in Nebraska communities. Access to capital builds sustainability for our agencies. In turn, we can sustain our work, which ultimately sustains the lives of our communities. And when these lives are sustained through local and regional efforts, it provides relief to state and federal programs and helps ensure a flourishing and fed Nebraska.

Thank you for your time and consideration and I welcome any questions.

## Additional Details

### **About Catholic Charities of Omaha**

Since 1926, Catholic Charities has served as first responders on the frontlines of everyday crisis. We provide life-changing - and often life-saving - services to our neighbors in need. We serve all; our clients represent all races, religions and nationalities. In 2021, we served 280,000 people through our programs and services:

- **Emergency and Supportive Food Program:** In 2021, we provided 2.8 million lbs. of food for 221,938 people through our three urban pantries, Senior Homebound Delivery Program and Mobile Pantry Program. We're also leading the fight in our community's hunger battle: we regularly distribute donated food to 44 local collaborative partner organizations who share items with others.
- **Domestic Violence Services:** We provide the only dedicated domestic violence shelter in Omaha's Douglas County. In 2021, we answered 1,182 calls through our 24/7 Crisis Hotline, our shelter provided a total of 5,522 nights of shelter for 82 adults and 83 children.
- **Behavioral Health Services:** Our School Mental Health Program provided 2,375 therapy sessions for 400 youth at 22 area Catholic schools. Our Outpatient Treatment program served hundreds of Nebraskans.
- **Family Strengthening Services:** Our Family Resource Center helped 377 work towards self-sufficiency; our Senior Program meets the social, emotional, and spiritual needs of senior adults and served 83 in 2021; Post-Adoption Services assists individuals searching for birth parents (we served 93 in 2021); and our Mentoring Moms Program guides young moms through motherhood (we served 24 in 2021).
- **Microbusiness & Asset Development Program:** In 2021, our Microbusiness Program served 387 low-income entrepreneurs, helping to create 91 FT and 18 PT jobs.
- **Immigration Legal Services Program:** Our Department of Justice accredited program helps Nebraskans navigate the immigration process. Last year, we helped 777 people work through reunification. We served clients from 53 countries.

### **The Need: Our Community is Hungry**

Someone who visited our pantry recently said Catholic Charities is "my lifesaver." We've heard that a lot lately.

That's because in 2021, Catholic Charities provided 2.8 million lbs. of food to 221,938 people. Our goal was simple: provide healthy food and support to help people experiencing poverty build sustainability and work towards independence.

Hunger is a symptom of a crisis; tens of thousands of community members are hungry. Agency data shows that we've gone from serving 6,000 people a month at our pantries in 2019 to an

astonishing 24,000 people a month in 2021. While we used to distribute around \$380,000 in food products each year, we're now distributing \$5 million.

We don't purchase food today, but that may soon change. Nutritional relief and grant programs are halting funding left and right. One of our top suppliers of produce - has recently notified our program they can only provide 8,000 lbs. of produce a week in 2022 (last year, we received 17,000 lbs. a week). Our largest supplier of protein is experiencing supply chain issues, depleting our meat supply. The break in the supply chain has decreased our food donations by 27% since the beginning of 2022; we're serving 13.5% more people than in 2021.

All of this comes while those we serve are facing growing burdens. Many COVID-fueled relief programs have dried up. Other moratoriums (helping with eviction or rent) halted at the end of 2021. And inflation on goods such as gas, food, and household items is at an all-time high. This is yet another crisis. (Experts predict inflation for food, hygiene items, paper products and cleaning supplies will rise by 20-30% in March.)

### **Our Response: Emergency & Supportive Food Services**

We provide the following supports to hungry Nebraskans:

**Urban Pantries:** Our North and South Omaha pantries provide pre-packaged boxes of food five days weekly; dairy, meat, fresh fruit and vegetables are available every day. We also provide diapers, paper products, hygiene products, dog food, laundry soaps, dish soaps, cleaning products, PPE and adult diapers. In summer 2022, we'll open a third pantry site at our new Bedford Building - a distressed area with limited resources. We expect to serve thousands each year in this area. In 2022, we'll continue our work to promote the dignity of clients and foster sustainability, by expanding our services to offer nutrition education classes (to a projected 100+ people) at our Bedford Pantry.

**Senior Homebound Delivery Program:** Through our Senior Homebound Delivery Program, each week we provide 170 food insecure, senior households with a one week supply of food. Deliveries are made two days weekly, serving 40 households on each delivery day. In total during the grant period, we will serve 4,000 seniors (an average of 320 seniors per week).

**Mobile Pantry Program:** We bring relief to areas outside of the metro where there are pockets of food insecurity, poverty and health concerns. We average 30 mobile pantries annually. This includes trips to Walthill and Macy, where 51% of residents live below the poverty level. Each month, we deliver 15,000 lbs. of food to these communities, serving 900 people from 200 families.

**Community Leadership:** To help our community combat hunger, we are a food distributor. We regularly collaborate with and distribute donated food to 44 local organizations (many who are smaller pantries who lack the ability to procure regular food resources) so they can share food items with the people they serve.

**Wrap-around Support:** We don't just battle hunger; we build stable futures. The pantry is an entry point to any of our programs that help people overcome obstacles and achieve self-sufficiency.

As we shared, we're also focused on providing nutrition education classes. Classes will be held in collaboration with our partners (local nonprofit organizations also working to end hunger) and highlight topics such as growing food, shopping for nutritious food, meal planning, and maximizing food stamp allotments. We'll also partner with Catholic Charities' Domestic Violence Services, which houses the only dedicated domestic violence shelter in Douglas County. Clients at our shelter will be able to access classes to learn how to meal plan, shop, and cook nutritious meals as a family.

Community needs are soaring; we're responding. In summer 2022, we'll open Catholic Charities' Bedford Building - a 36,000-square-foot master campus that will help us extend our reach into an area where there are minimal resources for families in need.

As we've shared, Bedford will include a new, state-of-the-art pantry. Here, we expect to serve many families. (At nearby Monroe Middle School, 92% of students are enrolled in free and reduced lunch assistance.) Bedford will intensify our fight against hunger. Our 5,000-sq.-ft. client-choice pantry is designed to address short-term hunger AND develop long-term stability in the lives of pantry patrons. We'll have room to host free nutrition classes, space for Omahans to shop for food, and room to expand and grow our Mobile and Homebound Delivery Programs.

At Catholic Social Services of Southern Nebraska, we want to share our story of what we do across the 23,000 square miles of the Diocese. These are true yearly statistics that show how God works through CSS to bring hope to people daily from Venango to Verdon, Palisade to Plattesmouth, Wauneta to Wahoo and all points in between: here is some of what God has done through our work in the past fiscal year: