Chair Ghanberi, Vice Chair Loychick, Ranking Minority Member Miller and members of the Committee, I am Matt Habash, President and CEO of Mid-Ohio Food Collective. Today, I am sharing this written testimony to state our strong support and appreciation of House Resolution 75.

Mid-Ohio Food Collective is the largest food relief agency in Ohio and one of the largest in the nation, serving 20 urban, rural and Appalachian counties from Chillicothe to Marion and Marysville to Belmont, including Columbus. We do so through a network of approximately 680 agency partners, channels and programs.

To give you some context of our work to connect nutritious food to those struggling during the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic - over a 20-month period beginning March 1, 2020, we distributed more than 137 million pounds of food, a 7.2 percent increase over the same previous period. In that same timeframe, we had nearly 1.85 million total visits through our network, 35 percent of whom were asking for food for the first time.

Through the height of the pandemic and resultant economic disarray, we were moving more than 7.5 million pounds of food a month with a 20 percent-plus increase in customer visits.

While we have staff for our services, we rely heavily on volunteers to help us meet community need, and now, increased demand. Prior to the pandemic, we hosted more than 13,000 volunteers a year giving 64,000 hours of donated time. In the fiscal year from July 1, 2020, to June 30, 2021, these numbers dropped by approximately 80 percent. As companies moved to work-from-home and those with underlying health concerns stayed home, our volunteer network was decimated. Fortunately, Governor Mike DeWine and the Ohio Legislature saw this need and responded. Thank you for your action; we honestly do not know how we would have met the dramatically increased need without the assistance of the Ohio National Guard.

The Ohio National Guard (ONG) came in and took over duties previously handled by volunteers, helping us to increase efficiency in a number of areas. As we moved to a no-touch, drive-through model for health safety, the Guard delivered a food cart of groceries to customers at a rate of one every 32 seconds. Additionally, they helped us revamp distribution operations—including the installing of ramps to deliver grocery carts of food more quickly to vehicles. The Guard also assisted with multiple locations outside of our Franklin County facility, helping partners in Marion, Belmont and other counties; their service included special distributions for seniors, children and the homeless, assisting some of the most vulnerable populations in our communities.
Most telling perhaps is the response of the Guard Men and Women to Operation Steady Resolve. As one Guard member said:

“This mission has made every second I have spent away from my family worthwhile. To meet someone who has come on hard times and is struggling with homelessness or is making a decision between feeding their families or paying the rent and be able to give them a carload of groceries is proof positive that what we do matters. The appreciation that I have seen on people’s faces is something that will last with me for the rest of my life.”

I am also proud to share that three of the Guard members who served with us on this mission are now part of our One Team staff here at Mid-Ohio Food Collective. It is humbling to know that they served us during these unsettling and confusing times and now, were so moved that they sought employment with us. We are proud to now call them team mates. We are in the process of recording their experience with us which we can share with the committee. Mr. Chair, we will get that video to you.

Mr. Chair and members of the committee, thank you for your time and consideration. We at Mid-Ohio Food Collective are happy to answer questions or follow up with additional information. I will also ask each of you to visit your local food bank to see firsthand their operations and to learn more about what we are doing toward ending hunger. We are always happy to host at our facility for anyone interested in visiting.

We appreciate Rep. Miller and his peers sponsoring this Resolution to recognize a truly remarkable humanitarian mission and the extraordinary men and women who gave their all, day in and day out. We urge adoption of HR75.

Thank you,

Matt Habash
President/CEO Mid-Ohio Food Collective
mhabash@mindohiofoodbank.org
(614) 274-7770