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PA Senate Agriculture and Rural Affairs Committee Philadelphia Listening Session:  
Testimony of William Clark, Philabundance

Thank you for this opportunity to speak with you as your Senate committee identifies its priorities for the 2007-2008 session. My name is Bill Clark, and I am the President of Philabundance. Philabundance is a food bank. The Agriculture industry is fundamentally important to the missions and the very existence of food banks across the state.

In terms of pounds of food distributed to the needy, Philabundance is the largest food bank in the Commonwealth. Our service area covers the five Pennsylvania counties of Philadelphia, Montgomery, Bucks, Chester, and Delaware. The combined population of those counties accounts for about one third of the state's total population

Last year Philabundance distributed over 18 million pounds of good nutritious foods, more than half of which were perishable products like fresh fruit, fresh vegetables and dairy products. At an average value of about \$1.50 per pound, that's 27 million dollars worth of food. This is about 50% more the entire budget for the State Food Purchase Program that is administered by the Department of Agriculture.

Our fresh produce is acquired and distributed 52 weeks of the year, not just in the summer and fall when area farms are harvesting their crops, but also in the winter when the state's farms are under a blanket of snow. Our efforts support over 600 neighborhood-based agencies such as food cupboards, emergency soup kitchens and homeless shelters. Through these agencies, we reach about 100,000 people every week.

Unfortunately, we estimate that in our service area we are currently reaching less than 20% of the people who could benefit from, and some who desperately need, the food we should be making available. My board likes me to point out that what we do, and what

our agencies do, is done with virtually no financial operating assistance from the city, state or federal governments.

It is not in doubt that there are many food insecure and hungry families in our state. And while the USDA has moved to stop referring to them as “Hungry”, I can assure you that they are. There are many big picture ways to help the hungry in Pennsylvania. There is education and job training, also economic development to provide the jobs themselves. There are many income assistance programs, including food stamps and a host of other special programs.

Philabundance is committed to a more basic, direct approach. We get good food to hungry people. It’s a simple approach but it is not a simple task.

In fact, we break the task down into three main functions:

1. Acquiring the food itself
2. Storing it, moving it and getting it where its needed both safely and cost efficiently
3. Finally, distributing it to those that truly need it; and doing so dependably and without inequity.

To work well, these three functions must be in balance. Currently they are not. Most government programs focus on the first function – acquiring the food. From federal commodity programs to our State’s Food Purchase Program, they are very important. However, this government supplied food accounts for less than 5% of all the food Philabundance distributes.

The other two functions are where I believe you should focus a lot more effort. My recommendation: Give a whole lot more attention to the distribution infrastructure and supporting the operating costs of the distribution system.

I urge you to consider a small subsidy program (in the range of about 10¢ per pound of non-purchased food distributed) to both the parent food bank and to the qualifying neighborhood food cupboards they support.

Let me give you just two facts to consider. First, our Food bank purchases (mostly from local sources) about 10% of the food we distribute and in five years that is likely to triple as the growth in hunger outstrips the availability of donated food. Second, I mentioned earlier that last year we distributed 18 million pounds to our service area. What I did not say is that we actually acquired over 27 million pounds of food but we could only distribute 18 million of it to hungry Pennsylvanians.

We didn't have the resources to move more of it into our agency network and our agency network didn't have the resources to handle it. Therefore, one of every three pounds we acquired had to be shipped out of Pennsylvania to food banks in other states.

On average, it costs us about 22¢ to distribute a pound of food. Making more food available to us will not necessarily get it to hungry people until somehow we find the funds to buy the truck, pay the driver and put fuel in the tank. As legislators you know that for commerce to thrive, you need not just trucks, but roads and bridges. For public health to be effective, you need not just medicine, but hospitals and the trained professionals to run them. To effectively address the problems of thousands of Pennsylvanians who face hunger on a daily basis, you need not just food, but the means to actually get it into the hands of those who need it.

In the end, I believe that investing in the state's food banks and supporting the agencies they supply will turn out to be the most cost effective anti-hunger strategies you will ever find.

Thank you for your consideration.