

September 5, 2023

State Representative John Fitzgerald, Chair
Local Government & Municipal Finance Committee
P.O. Box 30014
Lansing, MI 48909

Dear Chair Fitzgerald:

We are grateful to Rep. Snyder for introducing HB 4861 and for the opportunity to present before the House Local Government & Municipal Finance Committee on behalf of this important legislation. Thank you also for the support you have shown Kids' Food Basket (KFB) as we work to increase critical access to healthy, nourishing food for children and families in West Michigan.

At the core of Kids' Food Basket mission is the deeply held belief that healthy food is a right, not a privilege. We exist to break down barriers and to increase access to healthy, nourishing food so that children and families can thrive. Through our flagship Sack Supper evening meal program, nutrition education and community-driven farming, we are bringing our community together with a shared goal of realizing a hunger-free West Michigan.

This letter is to request your support and approval of House Bill 4861, clearing the way for Kids' Food Basket to purchase the property at 97 E. Apple Avenue for our future permanent Muskegon location. KFB first expanded into Muskegon County in 2012. For over 10 years, we operated out of a local church basement, where we started by serving 389 healthy evening meals at one Muskegon school. Today, we serve more than 1,700 evening meals each weekday at seven schools across the county. We have reached the capacity to grow our food and nutrition programming in Muskegon County. Last year, we moved into a temporary location, but seek to acquire the property for a permanent Muskegon site.

Access to healthy food for children and families in Muskegon is more critical than ever before. According to the most recent available data from Feeding America, Annie E. Casey Foundation, the State of Michigan, and County Health rankings:

- 23.4% of children in Muskegon live in high-poverty neighborhoods.
- 17.4% of children in Muskegon County are considered food insecure.
- Since September 2021, KFB has increased Sack Supper evening meal service by 425 meals per day, a 36% increase in one year. Since September 2020, we have experienced a 53% increase in requests for nutrition and food access services.
- The entire city of Muskegon Heights is considered a food desert, meaning residents have little or no access to fresh, healthy food options.
- Countywide, 17% of Muskegon County residents lack proximate access to fresh, healthy food.

The acquisition of the former Muskegon County Health Department building at 97 E. Apple Avenue will enable Kids' Food Basket to significantly impact the lives of children in our community. It will allow us to serve more meals, host learning-focused activities, engage our community in volunteer activities and provide the necessary capacity to continue expanding our services to meet the increasing needs of our community.

Good food is the foundation of good health. Good health is the foundation of a healthy future. We are deeply grateful for your consideration of this request. Please do not hesitate to reach out if you have any questions.

With deepest gratitude,
Bridget Clark Whitney
President and Founding CEO, Kids' Food Basket