

Tom Gilroy, ECCO Volunteer
Written Testimony to the Senate Special Committee on Aging
November 16, 2022

Good morning to the Senate Committee on Aging, Chairman Casey, and Ranking Member Scott. I appreciate the opportunity to testify about my serving our community as a volunteer at East Cooper Community Outreach – better known in the community as ECCO. I am Tom Gilroy. I live in Mount Pleasant, South Carolina and my wife Marilyn and I volunteer in ECCO's Food Pantry each Thursday. I also serve on the Development Fundraising Committee.

ECCO was founded in 1989 by Monsignor James A. Carter, pastor of Christ Our King Catholic Church in Mount Pleasant, SC, in response to the devastation caused by Hurricane Hugo. The destruction caused by this category four hurricane exposed needs that many leaders in the community had not previously identified. Those needs included:

- Poverty
- Substandard housing
- Lack of access to health and dental care
- Hunger
- Threat of homelessness

The creation of ECCO answered this challenge to offer a permanent resource to provide hope and help to those in need.

Incorporated as a 501(c)3 organization in 1990, ECCO has fostered effective grassroots collaboration between neighbors in need of help and neighbors who have a passion to help the community around them.

While ECCO's beginnings quickly addressed housing damage, providing clothing, food and water, as well as providing financial assistance, ECCO has grown into a community-based organization that serves the whole person.

In the 2021-2022 fiscal year, over 2,000 families were served through ECCO's life-changing programs and services. At ECCO's main campus on 1145 Six Mile Road, and our satellite campus on 1111 Bowman Road, the organization provides the following services:

- Monthly food assistance
- Clothing closet
- Free medical & dental care
- Financial assistance for utilities, rent, mortgage and other short-term financial help for emergency situations
- Skill training like financial literacy and money management to help clients find stability and success.

ECCO's Client profile

- 78% female
- 57% are over 55 years of age – with 14% over 70 years of age
- 87 % are either divorced - separated – single or widowed
- Only 41% own their home
 - *The remaining clients rent, live with family/friends, heir's property, live in subsidized housing, or are homeless.*
- 57% rely on Medicaid or Medicare for their insurance
- 14% are disabled or live on social security
- 73% of ECCO clients live in Charleston County

ECCO serves men and women experiencing a wide array of challenges including financial distress. Our programs reach senior citizens, the disabled, unemployed or underemployed, veterans, families living in generational poverty, and those experiencing situational poverty.

We support those battling serious health conditions, fleeing domestic violence, or experiencing homelessness. All ECCO services are available to those who live or work East of the Cooper River in the 10 zip codes noted below, who are qualified by their income level.

Income qualifications are based on 250% of the Federal Poverty Guidelines. Last year, 2,852 local neighbors found help and hope at ECCO.

At this time, the average yearly household income of those ECCO is serving is \$15,094, while the median household income of the community is just over \$90,000. This is where ECCO's life-changing programs and services help to fill in the gap for struggling families.

Since 1989, food has always been ECCO's most requested and needed service. Our model and system allow clients to not only receive needed food, but choose specific food for their families. We believe the foods we eat are closely tied to our family and culture, and the Client-Choice food model makes that possible for the 500+ families we serve each month. In the Wellness Food Pantry, ECCO makes nutrition a priority. Twenty percent of the food that is distributed each month is fresh fruits and vegetables. Due to donations from the community, and retail partners like Costco, ECCO can also offer food to fit dietary needs like high blood pressure, diabetes, high cholesterol, gluten-free, and more. We firmly believe one's health is attached to the food they eat - and we make sure clients have the needed resources to make that possible.

Also, once a month ECCO hosts a free Farmer's Market to provide local families with enough fresh fruits and vegetables for the entire household and is open to anyone living in our community. This is made possible by food provided by the Lowcountry Food Bank and ECCO's USDA allotments.

Our annual funding comes from;

- 62% from individuals and local business contributions
- 26% From private foundations and business and corporate grants
- 6% from government funding
- USDA partnership provides ECCO 83,000 pounds of food

At ECCO we have seen an increase in our utilization in the past year.

- We serve an additional 50 families in our food pantry monthly – each family unit includes extended families in the household – average is 7 per household
 - However, food donations from our retail partners (Costco, Walmart, etc.) are down by 16%
- Distribution of clothing has increased by 43% over last year
- New medical & dental clients have also increased over the previous year by over 30%
- Financial assistance has increased by 9%

Contributing factors to this increase are simple: most monthly checks don't go as far as they used to.

Due to the rising cost of inflation which translates into **higher rents – groceries – clothing – and gas prices**. Our neighbors are turning to ECCO for help to help fill in the gap. This has significantly impacted our elderly and single family households.

The best part of volunteering is the people you meet and get to know as real folks. Such as – I will call her Ms. Harrison – a 72 year old who was in desperate need. She lives on a fixed income and although the pandemic was financially challenging, she remained healthy and made ends meet. Now she faces a new challenge after her 3 teenage grandchildren came to live with her, after being removed from their parents home. They now depend on her for care - for food, for clothing, for help. And inflation isn't making it any easier for her each day.

She told me she simply could not feed them or clothe them, if it was not for ECCO. And then she gave me a hug. Helping real people facing real problems really makes volunteering worthwhile.

The reason I volunteer is the joy we all receive from meeting neighbors and standing beside them in a difficult time in their life. Our slogan **neighbors helping neighbors** – sums it up for me.

I see ECCO as an organization that is committed to their mission and is well organized – ethical and managed well. Our volunteer team works together like a family that helps and supports each other.

Our plans for the coming year are to extend our reach into our more rural communities that have tremendous need and fewer resources for help. A staggering 30% of the clients we serve live in rural communities, and depend on ECCO to make ends meet. These communities are food deserts where food insecurity is more of a concern, without grocery stores nearby - neighbors are now relying on convenience stores and gas stations for their causing food supplies. In addition to these food deserts, transportation and distance create access issues. As part of our recent capital campaign, ECCO is planning on taking our services to these people, meeting their needs where they live and providing transportation for medical services.

ECCO continues to see needs arise, and every day they fight to find solutions. But it's only possible because of the support from our community. We can only help the community, with the support of the community.