



**TESTIMONY TO: House Government Operations Committee**  
**RE: S.310 *An act relating to natural disaster government response, recovery, and resiliency***

**April 17, 2024**

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Thank you for your time today and for your work on this important bill. We appreciate the opportunity to talk to you about the importance of including food security in emergency response planning and execution.

We are members of the team that created the Vermont Food Security Roadmap to 2035, and we have the additional perspective of members of the Mass Feeding Workgroup, now known as the Food Access Information Network (FAIN). This group, comprised of staff from multiple state agencies and statewide nonprofits, was convened in 2020 under the auspices of the SEOC when it became clear that the pandemic was also a hunger crisis. Our experiences working within this group to address the lack of food security emergency response planning led to the inclusion of a set of strategies within the [Vermont Food Security Roadmap](#) focused on creating a food security emergency response system in the state. We are excited for this opportunity to bring some recommendations to you that will advance this critical Vermont Food Security Roadmap goal, and come from the Vermont Foodbank and Hunger Free Vermont's direct experiences working to strengthen food security for everyone in Vermont over these past four years.

As this Committee revises our state's response to natural disasters in the aftermath of both the COVID-19 pandemic and the 2023 flooding, you have an incredible opportunity to address some of the most challenging issues which directly impacted our neighbors - your constituents - that were identified during these two most recent disasters.

During both COVID and the floods, our organizations were shocked to discover that understanding who needs food and who is in charge of collecting and sharing that information is not in any town emergency plan, is not in the State emergency planning template, and is not identified as the role of any State office in particular. In the chaotic moments during and directly after the onset of an emergency or a disaster, it has been clear that food to support communities

at-large has been left out of the broader planning process and has relied on community organizations to fill the gap and serve the need as it emerges. There are many examples, and we will share a few so that you understand how future planning can help our local, regional, and statewide food access organizations to understand the responsibilities they do or do not hold in an emergency—and ensure they are resourced to meet them.

While the state recommended that everyone call 211 for more information, for example, data about food needs or food security was not always collected or conveyed to those coordinating emergency response, especially since 211 had just recently ceased their 24/7 phone line staffing due to a lack of sufficient state funding.

The lack of planning to ensure food access organizations were included in response processes led to situations like the emergency team at the BOR in Barre calling the Foodbank to bring bottled water to the shelter after floods hit in July. The Vermont Foodbank does not always have bottled water on hand, so one of their Barre warehouse staff drove to Hannafords, bought a pallet of water, and drove it to the BOR for those sheltered there before other sources of water were able to get there. While the Foodbank's staff was quick-thinking and resourceful, this is not a sustainable response for future disasters.

When it became apparent that there was no system in place to accurately track where prepared meals were needed throughout the many regions affected by the flooding, so that the Red Cross and Salvation Army and World Central Kitchen could effectively plan and distribute them, Hunger Free Vermont was asked by the SEOC to figure out a way to get this data to these national emergency response organizations. We did our best, mobilizing our network of Hunger Councils, piecing together what they relayed to us, and working with partners like Feeding Chittenden and small businesses to send food trucks with prepared meals to isolated and hard-hit towns like Marshfield.

In the first three weeks after the summer floods, when the food pantry in Montpelier was under water and there was no other charitable food available to the community - there was no entity prepared to step in to support food pantry clients. Without these additional support systems stepping in to help, the Montpelier food pantry continued to serve their regular guests as well as flood impacted neighbors with pop-up sites using coolers, making frequent trips to pick up donated food and water, and relying on an already stretched flood-impacted community to step in for support while trying to recover what they could from their flooded space, find a new space, continue to support their neighbors. The Foodbank was able to step in with philanthropic grant funding, but received no resources to support their network to do this critical flood response work, let alone mobilize additional support for flooded network partners .

During this initial three week period of floods, when all of the churches in Montpelier sustained so much damage that they had to abruptly end their food shelf and free congregational meal operations, The Skinny Pancake began serving free meals to all who needed them, but let us know that without a source of funding, they would not be able to keep going. We scrambled to secure private funds to cover some of their costs so they could keep providing this critical food

lifeline for our state capitol. Many restaurants and food trucks all over Vermont jumped in to provide free prepared meals in the first weeks immediately following the July floods, yet there was no provision in place at the State level to fund these efforts. It was left to SEVCA, Hunger Free Vermont, and private philanthropy to cobble stipends together to keep these valuable small businesses open and help cover some of their losses.

While I'm proud of our staff's efforts, Hunger Free Vermont is not an emergency response organization, and we were not equipped to suddenly create a system for accurately mapping and responding to where food and meals were needed. Food security during the next disaster cannot be left to community and nonprofit organizations alone to address—this planning needs to happen at the highest level of government, just like all of our disaster management planning, and be on the top of our minds well before the next disaster or emergency occurs.

### ***Recommendations***

We have some specific language suggestions for S.310 detailed below.

#### **Integrated Enrollment & Eligibility System Rollout**

One long-term strategy that directly relates to this committee's work, and that will allow Vermont to leverage more federal funding to support food security for low-income families during disasters is to continue to support meeting the established goal of completing the rollout of a fully Integrated Enrollment & Eligibility (IE&E) system by 2027. Investing in information technology changes required to allow all federal nutrition program options and flexibilities to be activated in case of an emergency would help sustain food security during times of emergency. For example, although families enrolled in 3SquaresVT who lost food in the nine most flood-affected counties would have been eligible for Disaster-SNAP benefits to replace this lost food, the current IT system at AHS is incapable of separating 3SquaresVT households by county, which prevented our state from providing this benefit to many low-income people during this recent natural disaster.

The following suggestions are based on the [bill as passed by the Senate](#), "unofficial" version.

#### **Section 7 - page 14 - subsection (C):**

(3) The Division shall advise municipalities that when a shelter is sited under a local emergency plan, the municipality should work with the Agency of Human Services and the American Red Cross to assess the facility, including the characteristics of the surrounding area during an all-hazards event and multiple routes of travel and possible hazards that could prevent access to the shelter. **The municipality should also consult with the Vermont Foodbank or the community-based emergency or charitable food providers as secondary responders to ensure that the plan addresses the need for the shelter to have immediate and sustained access to food and water for individuals using the shelter.**

#### **Section 7 page 15 - line 6 - subsection (3)**

(3) A regional emergency management committee shall consist of voting and nonvoting members.

(A) Voting members. The local emergency management director or designee and one representative from each town and city in the region shall serve as the voting members of the committee. A representative from a town or city shall be a member of the town's or city's emergency services community and shall be appointed by the town's or city's executive or legislative branch.

(B) Nonvoting members. Nonvoting members may include representatives from the following organizations serving within the region: fire departments, emergency medical services, law enforcement, other entities providing emergency response personnel, media, transportation, regional planning commissions, hospitals, the Department of Health's district office, the Division of Emergency Management, organizations serving vulnerable populations, local libraries, arts and culture organizations, regional development corporations, local business organizations, community-based emergency or charitable food providers, and any other interested public or private individual or organization.

**Section 9 - page 16 - subsection (b):**

(b) All local emergency planning committees shall include representatives from the following: fire departments; local and regional emergency medical services; local, county, and State law enforcement; other entities providing first responders or emergency management personnel; media; transportation; regional planning commissions; hospitals; industry; the Vermont National Guard; the Department of Health's district office; community-based emergency or charitable food providers; and an animal rescue organization, and may include any other interested public or private individual or organization. Where the local emergency planning committee represents more than one region of the State, the Commission shall appoint representatives that are geographically diverse.

**Section 11 - page 20 - subsection (a):**

Sec. 11. VERMONT EMERGENCY MANAGEMENT DIVISION DISASTER PREPAREDNESS REVIEW

(a) Review. On or before June 30, 2025, the Department of Public Safety's Division of Vermont Emergency Management (VEM) shall conduct an after action review of the State's disaster preparedness leading up to, during, and after the 2023 summer flooding events throughout the State, overseen by the Director of VEM. The review shall examine all aspects of the State's response and shall include input from the whole community. In addition to the federal Homeland Security Exercise and Evaluation Program's requirements, the review shall include examining the adequacy of early warning and evacuation orders, designated evacuation routes and emergency shelters, the ability to provide food and water where it is needed, the present system of local emergency management directors in wide-spread emergencies and the State's present emergency communications systems.

**Section 32 - page 55**

Sec. 32. 20 V.S.A. § 30 is amended to read:

**§ 30. STATE EMERGENCY RESPONSE COMMISSION; CREATION**

(a) The State Emergency Response Commission is created within the Department of Public Safety. The Commission shall consist of ~~17~~18 ~~20~~ members: ~~eight~~nine ex officio members, including the Commissioner of Public Safety, the Secretary of Natural Resources, the Secretary of Transportation, the Commissioner of Health, the Secretary of Agriculture, Food and Markets, the Commissioner of Labor, the Director of Fire Safety, and the Director of Emergency Management, the Chair of the Food Access Information Network, or designees; and ~~nine~~ten ~~eleven~~ public members, including a representative from each of the following: local government, the local emergency planning committee, a regional planning commission, the fire service, law enforcement, public works, emergency medical service, a hospital, the Vermont Foodbank, a transportation entity required under EPCRA to report chemicals to the State Emergency Response Commission, and another entity required to report extremely hazardous substances under EPCRA.

(b) The ~~nine~~ten ~~eleven~~ public members shall be appointed ~~by the Governor~~ for staggered three-year terms as described in this subsection.

(1) Three public members, appointed by the Speaker of the House.

(2) Three public members, appointed by the President Pro Tempore of the Senate.

(3) Four public members, appointed by the Governor.

- NOTE: one additional member would need to be appointed by one of these three in order to get to the 11 members.

**We are requesting that you add these items to the bill as well:**

**RESTAURANT MEALS PROGRAM from H.703 - *An act relating to 3SquaresVT***

33 V.S.A. § 1701 is amended to read:

**§ 1701. SUPPLEMENTAL NUTRITION ASSISTANCE PROGRAM**

(a) The State of Vermont ~~may~~shall participate in the federal Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) pursuant to 7 U.S.C. chapter 51. The purpose of SNAP is to alleviate hunger and malnutrition among households with low income by increasing their food purchasing power and access to nutritious, safe food.

\* \* \* Restaurant Meals Program \* \* \*

33 V.S.A. § 1704 is added to read:

**§ 1704. RESTAURANT MEALS PROGRAM**

(a) The State shall participate in the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program's Restaurant Meals Program. The Restaurant Meals Program shall be administered by the Agency of Human Services, in consultation with the Agency of Commerce and Community Development.

(b) Restaurant participation in the Restaurant Meals Program shall be voluntary. The Agency of Human Services, in consultation with the Agency of Commerce and Community Development, shall develop and publish on its website a list of eligibility criteria for restaurant participation in the Restaurant Meals Program, including that participating restaurants are licensed pursuant to 3 18 V.S.A. chapter 85. The eligibility criteria shall advance the following goals:

(1) Locally produced foods are widely available to Restaurant Meals Program clients.

(2) Restaurants serving foods that represent diverse cultural traditions participate in the Restaurant Meals Program.

(3) Participating restaurants are located in geographically diverse regions of the State.

(c) The Agency of Human Services, in consultation with the Agency of Commerce and Community Development, shall provide technical assistance to those restaurants applying to and participating in the Restaurant Meals Program

POSITION AUTHORIZATION; APPROPRIATION; RESTAURANT MEALS PROGRAM

(a) In fiscal year 2025, one new permanent classified position, Restaurant Meals Program navigator, is authorized for establishment within the Agency of Human Services.

(b) In fiscal year 2025, \$85,000.00 is appropriated from the General Fund to the Agency of Human Services to support the position established in subsection (a) of this section. The position shall provide technical assistance to restaurants applying to and participating in the Restaurant Meals Program pursuant to **Sec. 2** of this act.

**NOTE: Sec.2 is a reference in H.703 - we don't know which section this would refer to in S.310.**

**EXPLANATION:** The Restaurant Meals Program is run through the USDA Food and Nutrition Service (FNS), and allows certain SNAP recipients to use their benefits at approved restaurants. To qualify, the SNAP recipients must be:

- Elderly (60 years of age or older);
- Disabled (receives disability or blindness payments or receives disability retirement benefits from a governmental agency because of a disability considered permanent);
- Homeless;
- or be the spouse of a SNAP recipient who meets one of the above criteria

For restaurants to qualify, they must get approval from the State of Vermont as well as the USDA Food and Nutrition Service. Each State can set their own rules for how many and which restaurants can participate. A position is needed to ensure that Restaurants have the support they need to apply to participate and the Agency has the capacity to implement the program.

The above language comes from H.703 and S.215. S.215 was passed out of the Senate Health and Welfare Committee. Further action on the bill was deferred in Senate Appropriations. While we understand that an appropriation for the Restaurant Meals Program navigator position is not likely this session, we do emphasize that, based on informational interviews with other states

that have implemented the SNAP Restaurant Meals Program, this position is absolutely essential to the program's effectiveness.

Establishing the SNAP Restaurant Meals Program in Vermont would support the ability to quickly make and distribute prepared meals at the local level during disasters by establishing a network of restaurants, food trucks, deli counters, etc. already working with AHS and ACCD, which could be quickly mobilized to also use federal and state disaster funds to set up a prepared meal distribution program. This program flexibility is critical in times of a disaster because, as we saw during both the COVID-19 pandemic and the flooding in 2023, prepared meals are a critical resource for feeding people, and our local restaurants are often one of the businesses most impacted by changes in economic conditions brought about by disasters.

*By establishing the SNAP Restaurant Meals Program in Vermont now, we will ensure that our restaurants are ready and able to accept SNAP during future disruptions and provide much-needed prepared meals to households that qualify and need them, using a stable source of federal funds to do so.*

The SNAP Restaurant Meals Program supports critical future infrastructure—for example, in Barre during the 2023 floods, businesses were not as strongly impacted, but many low-income city residents became homeless. Had the Restaurant Meals Program been available, federal SNAP benefits could have been used more flexibly to allow people over age 60, people with disabilities, and people who were homeless impacted by the flood to access prepared food that did not require home kitchen facilities. Participating local restaurants would have been able to receive the federal funds that would pay for these meals through the SNAP program immediately at the point of sale.

### **BASE FUNDING FOR THE VERMONT FOODBANK - \$1.5 million, starting in FY2026**

**Goal:** Establish a base appropriation for the Vermont Foodbank of \$1.5 million in the Department of Public Safety, beginning in FY2026 as we recognize that it is too late for this process in FY2025, for the purpose of operating and maintaining a statewide food storage and distribution system that operates year-round and can be utilized to provide food during the emergency response phase, in coordination with state and local partners, as well as provide continuity for longer-term food response that is often needed beyond the initial emergency timeline.

*This funding would allow the Foodbank to ensure that specific emergency quantities of food and water are available and ready for distribution, as well as to support its 300 community partners, food shelves and meal sites in communities across the state so that wherever an emergency happens, food and other basic necessities can be provided in a timely manner.*

In addition, we would expect that the Vermont Foodbank may have an annual “one-time” funding request to address actual crisis/emergency response food purchasing. The amount of this annual request would be based on actual need throughout the state.

*\*\*we are not sure how to write language for this particular goal, but we are happy to work with legislative counsel if the committee is willing to include it in the bill\*\**