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H.703, an Act Relating to 3SquaresVT: Boosting Food Access and Food Benefits to Strengthen SNAP in Vermont

Testimony provided to the House Committee on Human Services

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My name is Anore Horton, and I am the Executive Director of Hunger Free Vermont. Our mission is to end the injustice of hunger for everyone, by prioritizing the people most impacted by hunger in our state to make permanent systemic change. Thank you, Chair and committee members for participating in this second annual SNAP Awareness Day, and providing this opportunity to talk about SNAP, the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program—what we call 3SquaresVT—the most effective and far-reaching anti-hunger program in our country and in our state. More specifically, I am here today to speak in support of H.703, which will improve 3SquaresVT benefit adequacy and flexibility for key groups of people most affected by hunger in our state. H.703, and the other measures we are here to highlight on this second annual SNAP Awareness Day, show the concrete ways in which the State of Vermont can make policy choices that will ensure food security for everyone who lives here.

3SquaresVT benefits come on an EBT-card that works just like a regular debit card, so a trip to the grocery store with 3SquaresVT looks like any other shopper's experience. People can use their benefits at any authorized retailer, including large grocery stores, local food retailers like country stores or markets, or at farm stands and farmers markets. Each month, 3SquaresVT brings roughly \$12 million into our state economy, supporting our local farmers, growers, businesses, and communities. Not only is it a vital anti-hunger program, it is an effective economic stimulus program.

People who use 3SquaresVT must qualify by earning 185% of the federal poverty level or less. That is, roughly, an annual income of no more than \$26,000 for a single person household, or no more than \$55,000 for a family of four. Benefits are determined on a sliding scale, based on a household's size, income, and expenses like rent or mortgage and childcare. Eligible folks who make the least are eligible for a maximum benefit level, and those who make closer to the

income cut-off receive a smaller benefit. For a single person, the maximum monthly benefit is \$291 in FFY24. There is a guaranteed federal minimum benefit amount for households of 1 and 2—typically older adults—of \$23; however, for households of 3 or more, their qualifying benefit may be as low as \$1 per month.

In 2022, 40% of people in Vermont reported not having enough food, or running out of food, for at least some part of that twelve month period—the highest percentage of people at risk of hunger that we have ever recorded in Vermont. At the same time, only 11% of people in Vermont participated in 3SquaresVT. A main reason for this discrepancy is that the federal income cut-off for 3SquaresVT is so low that many people, especially in high cost-of-living states like Vermont, are at risk of hunger but are not eligible to enroll in SNAP.

However, about 20% of people in Vermont are likely income-eligible for 3SquaresVT, and for many of them, benefits are in no way a match for the actual cost of food. Over 68,000 Vermonters, including more than 20,000 children and 17,000 older adults, currently participate in 3SquaresVT, but this accounts for only half of the people in our state who may be income-eligible. Primary reasons for this discrepancy are the stigma and shame associated with applying for government food assistance—even if you are eligible, and your taxes help pay for these programs. In addition, applying can be time-consuming and confusing, and when you learn at the end of the process that you are only eligible for a minimum benefit of \$23—or \$1—you are unlikely to seek recertification.

While it is absolutely unacceptable that any of—let alone so many of—our neighbors, family members, friends, and fellow Vermonters are at risk of hunger, it is not a surprise, and it is not a new struggle. When Congress ended the temporary increase to SNAP benefits (called emergency allotments) in April 2023, the majority of 3SquaresVT households—72,000 people—lost between \$100-500 a month in their grocery budget. The impact was devastating to families, and is still felt today. It also put a tremendous burden on our charitable food network, to fill an impossible gap. The challenges Vermonters living with low incomes have endured over the last year alone—including the catastrophic flooding in July and August 2023, record-high inflation and food costs, the ending of federal pandemic-era programs—have caused cascading crises.

Recovery from these cascading crises is not something that any of our community organizations, partners or neighbors can accomplish on our own. As legislators, you can make policy choices that will ensure food security for everyone who lives here. Food security for all is

possible and once we achieve it, the ripple effects will be clearly visible in our communities and across our State.

There are four critical actions you can take now to help fill the gaps that policy decisions at the federal level have created. We urge you to:

1. **Support the request for \$5 million in base funding for the Vermont Foodbank to purchase food and support community-based partners**, because food pantries and food shelves and community meal sites across the state are seeing sustained, record-setting visitation. Community charitable food providers continue to share that not only is the need greater, but more people who have never had to visit a food shelf in the past are now leaning on their services to put food on the table.
2. **Support the request for \$2 million in base funding for the Vermont Area Agencies on Aging to support the increased demand for Meals on Wheels** to meet the nutritional needs of the growing demographic of Older Vermonters, as well as Vermonters with disabilities.
3. **Support the request for \$478,500 in base funding to strengthen Vermont farm viability and address food security by sustaining two proven NOFA-VT programs—Crop Cash (Plus) and Farm Share.**
4. **Support H.703**, which seeks to establish a Restaurant Meals Program for SNAP participants in Vermont, and to direct the state SNAP agency to produce a transition plan to increase the SNAP minimum benefit amount for all participants. I want to talk briefly about each of these actions within the bill.
 - a. Firstly, The Restaurant Meals Program is a state option provided by USDA, and allows certain SNAP recipients to use their benefits at approved restaurants. The SNAP Restaurant Meals Program was designed specifically to support elderly people, people with disabilities, and people experiencing homelessness, because these populations typically encounter access barriers and challenges with being able to buy, store and cook food. In expanding the use of 3SquaresVT benefits to include restaurants, the Restaurant Meals Program aims to reduce food insecurity among these vulnerable populations by giving eligible 3SquaresVT participants an option to purchase meals they might not be able to cook for themselves. H.703 would fund a new position within Agency of Human Services to provide the

technical support restaurants would need to get up and running with the SNAP Restaurant Meals Program, and based on our conversations with advocates in the other states that have already implemented this program, Hunger Free Vermont believes that without this dedicated technical assistance, the program cannot succeed.

- b. Please include the \$85,000 for the Restaurant Meals Program navigator position in the Agency of Human Services, which is part of H.703, in this Committee's budget memo to the House Committee on Appropriations.**
- c. Secondly, the existing formula for calculating the SNAP Minimum Benefit is woefully inadequate, outdated, and only guaranteed for household sizes of one and two. H.703 would direct the state to produce a transition plan to establish a state-funded supplement to the federal minimum benefit, which would provide more meaningful support to 3SquaresVT participants, and be a better match for the actual cost of living. H.703 would move Vermont toward aligning minimum 3SquaresVT benefits with the USDA's moderate cost food plan, which is already used by our Joint Fiscal Office to calculate Vermont's basic needs budgets.

We have heard many 3SquaresVT participants refer to this program as a lifeline, and in many cases, the only reason they are able to afford groceries. H.703 would put us on the road to making this food security lifeline more adequate and responsive. The changes contemplated in H.703 would encourage more people to apply for, and make use of, the strongest and most stable food security program we have—freeing up other income for Vermont families with low incomes to better meet all of their other basic needs. These changes would also support local restaurants, and infuse more money into our food system economy to benefit our communities.

Passing H.703 would also make progress toward fulfilling on the Farm to Plate Network's newly released Vermont Food Security Roadmap. One of the priority strategies for ending hunger for everyone in Vermont by 2035 is to provide supplemental payments to existing benefit programs, so that the total benefits to enrolled Vermonters provide financial assistance adequate to meeting all their basic needs.

Thank you for your time, and for your commitment to making informed policy choices to create food security for all of us in Vermont.

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The logo features a dark blue shopping basket filled with a green apple, a blue can, and a green leaf. To the right of the basket, the text "Give 3SquaresVT" is in dark blue, "A BOOST!" is in large green letters, and a large green arrow points upwards and to the right.

**Give 3SquaresVT
A BOOST!** with bills S.215 and H.703,
"An Act Relating to 3SquaresVT"!

Over the past year, individuals have been hit with a series of cascading crises; the historic floods of July 2023, rising costs and inflation, the housing crisis, and the end of many federal supports including the expanded SNAP/3SquaresVT emergency allotments.

In April of 2023, **72,000 Vermonters saw a significant drop in their monthly SNAP benefits as Congress ended the pandemic Emergency Allotments.** These Emergency Allotments, totaling around \$6.5 million each month, boosted monthly benefits for all households receiving 3SquaresVT. When these allotments ended, most households experienced a monthly loss of benefits ranging from \$100 to \$500, while some faced even greater cuts of up to \$2,000 each month. Many older adults saw a drop in benefits from \$280 to a mere \$23. This change happened abruptly, and gave families little time to prepare. The loss in benefits hit at a devastating time of high food and energy costs, and families are still struggling to recover.

During the past year, Hunger Free Vermont identified additional concern, through conversations with lawmakers, community members, and other stakeholders, to support those communities who are most-impacted by these challenges. These communities include: older Vermonters, homeless individuals, college students, single parents with children, and 3SquaresVT recipients generally.

To address these concerns, we are proposing to "Give 3SquaresVT a Boost!" through the following 3 actions listed on the reverse side:





Action 1: The College Student Option:

In addition to income and other eligibility criteria, college and graduate students enrolled at least half-time in an institute of higher education must meet or prove they are exempt from a harsh and burdensome student work requirement. This “work for food” rule requires, for example, students to report employment for an average of 20 hours/week. While states have the authority to exempt community college students from this rule, we currently do not have this practice in Vermont, and therefore are missing an important opportunity to support students who are the future of Vermont’s workforce—and more importantly, deserve to not go hungry.

Hunger Free Vermont is working with the Administration and other interested stakeholders to implement this option.



Action 2: The Restaurant Meals Program:

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 FNS. Each State can set their own rules for how many and which restaurants can participate.



Action 3: Give 3SquaresVT a Boost:

The existing formula for calculating the SNAP Minimum Benefit is inadequate, outdated, and only guaranteed for household sizes of one and two. The current guaranteed minimum benefit is a mere \$23 monthly, while households greater than two may receive a benefit as low as \$1 each month. To address this, we are proposing raising the minimum benefit by changing the formula to the following:

- Calculate the Minimum Benefit based on the USDA Moderate Food Plan, consistent with the Joint Fiscal Office Basic Needs Budget.
- The Minimum Benefit will represent 30% of the cost of the Moderate Food Plan
- ALL SNAP household benefits will be raised to ensure each household receives a monthly amount no less than 30% of the Moderate Food Plan

Legislative ask:

Support and pass S.215 and H.703 to ensure adequate staffing for AHS to implement the Restaurant Meals Program, and financial support for onboarding restaurants, including TA, equipment, and software costs, and to plan the transition to the new formula for the 3SquaresVT minimum benefit.
