

For the record, my name is Representative Esme Cole of Hartford.

Thank you for the opportunity to speak today. I am here in support of an \$85,000 appropriation for a Restaurant Meals Program Navigator position to be housed in the Agency of Human Services. This position is vital in assisting restaurants with navigating the federal approval process, and in ensuring the program achieves its goals of being geographically diverse and prioritizing local foods and restaurants.

To provide some background, Vermont can opt in to the federal Restaurant Meals Program, which would make it easier for folks who might have the hardest time preparing or storing food to have access to ready-made or hot meals. The Restaurant Meals Program allows for certain 3SquaresVT/SNAP recipients to use their benefits at approved restaurants. Those eligible are some of our most vulnerable neighbors—older Vermonters, Vermonters with disabilities, and those experiencing homelessness.

By opting into the Restaurant Meals Program:

- The State can help its community partners to ensure that the most vulnerable people know that they can access ready-made or hot meals with their EBT cards;
- We can bring in a whole new set of permanent partners for food security - our restaurant community, who showed they are willing and able to step up during the pandemic.

- Not only is 3SquaresVT a successful federal nutrition program, it is an effective economic stimulus program. Launching a successful Restaurant Meals Program, with the vital support of the Navigator position, we can provide an economic boost to our local restaurants.

Separately, I am also here to request the return of \$331,686.47 in base funding for VT 211, 24/7 services. VT 211 is the statewide information and referral service that is relied upon by thousands for access to critical programs and local resources like food shelves, shelters, and other safety-net infrastructures.

Prior to July 1, 2023, VT 211 was a 24/7 service. In the Governor's recommended budget there is only enough funding to continue the current service level, which is not staffed between 11pm and 7am, for 8 hours. Returning to 24/7 service is important for certain groups of people who may ONLY be able to call late at night and find themselves in a desperate situation. A person answering to help guide them through their options and consider solutions is a critical voice on the other end of the line. I am requesting that we follow the House Human Services recommendation and include an additional \$331K of base state funding in FY25 to allow for full-time service, maintenance of information databases, and capacity to assist the state and municipalities in times of disaster and emergencies. This is a reasonable investment for a service that the State relied on as the single point of contact

during the flood emergency. It seems unwise to both promote this system broadly while simultaneously cutting its funding, so people who need resource assistance at what we might consider “unusual” hours can’t acquire it. On a personal note, I can attest to the exacerbated consequences that arise from delayed support in crisis situations, when I found myself in crisis a few years back during the night, and tried calling the 211 equivalent in another state. I discovered that the service was unavailable at odd hours, and had no one else to turn to for help. We have the ability to prevent other folks from experiencing the same.

Thank you again for your consideration of both the Restaurant Meals Program navigator position and the 24/7 211 service.