

Hello members of the committee.

Thank you for letting me take the time today to express my support of the Restaurant Meals Program.

As a member of The Skinny Pancake team, I have witnessed first hand the impact of involving community restaurants in our statewide food security initiatives. In March of 2020, as restaurants across the state were mandated to shutter to the public, we knew there had to remain a purpose for our employees still willing to work, and the food in our walk-in fridges that was otherwise headed to compost.

In a few short weeks, we spun up our ShiftMeals program - inviting anyone in need of a meal to sign up in advance and pick up a “heat and serve” meal made in our kitchens. Instantly, we saw the gratitude this feeding program generated not only in the meal recipients, but also our entire team.

It was clear we weren't the only restaurant eager to feed those in need. Soon enough, our ShiftMeals program joined forces with many other initiatives across the state and became the state administered Everyone Eats program. Not only did Everyone Eats facilitate the purchase and distribution of restaurant prepared meals to community feeding programs, but also helped provide access for those in need to receive nourishing, ready-to-eat meals directly from the restaurants themselves. In true Vermont fashion, restaurant participation in this program was necessitated by sourcing a significant percentage of the meals' ingredients from local farmers and producers.

What started as a means to keep our teams busy during a pandemic, eventually provided real economic contribution to our restaurants. At times, over 10% of our revenue at some locations was made possible by the restaurant voucher program. And we certainly weren't alone. As some members of our admin team helped coordinate the “community hubs” that organized Everyone Eats we heard stories of restaurants being able to hire staff, expand operating hours, or even just keep their lights on. In our industry, where margins are razor thin, supplemental revenue from initiatives like these are crucial.

Somewhere along the course of this program, we were stunned as it became time to celebrate over 1 Million meals served. That was over 1 million meals of economic impact for these restaurants, and 1 million meals fed to those who asked for one.

When Everyone Eats and the digital voucher program finally ramped down, there of course was some relief in a return to normalcy. However, there was real regret that restaurants' role in providing food security to their communities was going away. The introduction of a permanent program connecting restaurants to feeding programs would be extremely welcome to our restaurants, and I am sure many others across the state.

I would also add that I think any discussion about a restaurant meals program should also include the values that made Everyone Eats such a powerful experience for those of us involved in it: that includes sourcing from local farmers and producers, close collaboration with existing community aid programs, and also prioritizing locally and independently owned restaurants.

In closing, all of the benefits that I've listed for the Everyone Eats program are found in the Restaurant Meals Program; it allows community members to use their SNAP benefits in community restaurants, it brings communities together, it provides restaurant-made, nutritious meals to those who might not be able to prepare those meals themselves, and it provides economic support to the restaurant community that has gone through so much over the past few years. I strongly urge this committee to pass S.215/ and stand up the Restaurant Meals Program in VT.

Thank you all for your time and consideration.

Michael Cyr