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Emily Cohen, Director of Community Resources
Vermont Foodbank

My name is Emily Cohen. I'm going to talk about the upcoming SNAP benefit reduction, the impact it will have on 72,000 people in our state starting in April, and what you can do to help.

I live in Waterbury and have worked at the Vermont Foodbank for the past 5 years. That whole time, I have been part of a team that helps people all around our state learn about and apply to a program called 3SquaresVT, also known federally as SNAP, which stands for Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program. This program is our country's first line of defense against hunger. It provides money for people to buy the foods they want, where they want, when they want. In other words, 3SquaresVT offers choice and dignity around food purchasing, something we all deserve.

Let's take a minute to understand how 3SquaresVT works. Eligibility depends on your income and expenses, and guidelines are determined by the federal government and the state of Vermont. In Vermont, for example, I can earn up to the 185% of the federal poverty level (roughly \$2000/month) and be eligible to apply, but the actual benefit amount I qualify for depends on my specific income and expenses. The minimum benefit amount for a household of 1 person is \$23/month, the maximum is \$281/month, and a person can receive any amount in between. People receive their "regular" 3SquaresVT payment at the beginning of the month.

However, for the past 3 years due to the pandemic, people enrolled in 3SquaresVT have been receiving an extra mid-month payment called an "emergency allotment." This payment ensured that every household enrolled in 3SquaresVT was receiving the maximum benefit amount for their household size. So for example if I, as a single person, qualified for \$23/month, I would also receive a mid-month extra payment to boost me up to \$281 total. These payments have been critical to addressing food insecurity, but due to recent federal legislation these emergency allotments will be ending soon. The last payment will happen mid-March.

This change will have a drastic impact on the 72,000 people in our state who depend on 3SquaresVT to purchase food, as well as the food retailers and farms where they purchase that food. Overall, it's a loss of \$6.5 million/month in federal funding to Vermont. The majority of 3SquaresVT households will lose \$100-500/month, some will lose more.

While those are big numbers, I'm here today because of 1:1 conversations I've had. Because of the courage, resourcefulness, and yes, at times, desperation in the voices of people I've spoken with over the past 5 years. It has been my privilege to connect with thousands of people asking about 3SquaresVT through phone, text, email, in person, and even home visits. I've sat at kitchen tables as people have been generous with me about their life stories, sharing why they need the boost to their grocery budget or what is finally pushing them to apply. I feel a responsibility to all these people, to convey to you, how vital this program is now to their daily lives and how much worry and concern they feel about what's coming next.

Equally, our Vermont Foodbank network partners (local food shelves and meal providers) are also worried. Yesterday at a listening session, a partner told us that they are already seeing increased need this month. During that last extreme cold weather we had, on a -35 degree day, 17 families still showed

up to their local food shelf. What are our towns and dinner tables going to look like when April rolls around?

\$6.5 million is a big change and not something any of our community organizations, partners, or neighbors can make up on their own.

So here's how you can help as legislators:

- Support the Vermont Foodbank's \$3 million base funding request to purchase food and support community partners, so we can better respond to this increased need
- Make Vermont's Universal School Meals Program permanent with funding off the top of the Education Fund
- Support additional funding for Older Vermonters Nutrition Program (H.109)
- Sign on to support the priorities of the Vermont Farm Bill Nutrition Coalition

I truly appreciate your listening today and the work you do here. A reminder: our Vermont Foodbank team is always available to support folks in applying to 3SquaresVT, maximizing their benefits, or connecting with more resources. Please share our contact info with people you speak with. I am happy to answer questions here or 1:1.