

Faye Conte, Advocacy and Education Director
Hunger Free Vermont
Testimony on State Funding for AHS IT Systems and Farm to School
House Appropriations Committee
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My name is Faye Conte, and I work at Hunger Free Vermont. Thank you for this opportunity to speak today, and thank you for taking such care to hear from so many different groups throughout the budget process. I've been asked to combine my non-AHS related testimony with my AHS-related testimony today, and am planning to touch on two programs. At Hunger Free Vermont, we believe that part of the equation to ensuring that all Vermonters are able to access the nutritious food they need with dignity is to have robust safety net programs. I am here today with two requests of the Committee that would help maintain the strength of nutrition programs in Vermont. **We request that you maintain the \$2.1 million that was requested in the Governor's budget for the replacement of the AHS Computer System, and as part of the Vermont Farm to School Network, ask that you increase funding for the Farm to School Grant Program in the Agency of Agriculture budget by \$369,000.**

The AHS Computer system, ACCESS, no longer has the functionality needed to successfully administer key safety net programs like 3SquaresVT. The computer system is the largest barrier to making improvements to 3SquaresVT, from updating the notices sent to participants to remove scary and confusing language, to implementing a federal option called Transitional Benefits that helps families on Reach Up and Reach Ahead avoid the benefits cliff and move out of poverty. **Technology investments are costly, and I appreciate how expensive the effort to move AHS programs onto a new system has been, and continues to be.** However, the \$2.1 million in the Governor's budget this year is key to moving this effort into the next phase so that programs like 3SquaresVT and Reach Up can transition onto a new Integrated Eligibility system. **Funding this year is crucial: AHS is taking advantage of a 90/10 federal match that expires at the end of 2018. If the \$2.1 million is reduced or cut, the cost to Vermont for this new system will be even greater.** Investing in the AHS IT system now is a necessary part of supporting a strong and accessible safety net for Vermonters well into the future.

Child nutrition programs are another crucial safety net program that help thousands of Vermont families stretch their budgets and ensure children are eating nutritious food. Farm to School is a key component to successful nutrition programs because it increases the quality of school food so that more children of all incomes want to eat school meals. This means the stigma against eating a free lunch decreases and more children in need are eating meals at school. **We have made great gains in school nutrition programs in recent years and child hunger is decreasing in Vermont faster than for adults and faster than in other parts of the country. Farm to School is key to maintaining these gains.** The current funding for Farm to School is \$132,000 and we are asking for an additional appropriation of \$369,000. We arrived at this number with intention: a total budget of \$500,000 would allow the Agency of Agriculture to better meet the demand for Farm to School grants, expand into child care where access to good nutrition is so important for health and development of our youngest Vermonters, and ensure that school meal programs are sustainable in the long run, by supporting schools in efforts to increase participation in their nutrition programs. Farm to School helps end child hunger, supports nutrition programs and the local agriculture economy, and has long-term benefits for children's health, behavior, and academic performance.

Supporting our low-income residents with a strong and stable safety net as they try to stretch their budget and make ends meet is crucial to their success. Thank you for listening, and I encourage the Committee to protect vulnerable Vermonters by maintaining the Governor's budget request of \$2.1 million in technology for AHS and investing \$369,0 in the Farm to School grant program.