

January 24<sup>th</sup>, 2017

## House Human Services Testimony

**Marissa Parisi, Executive Director, Hunger Free Vermont & Member of Governor Shumlin's Pathways From Poverty Council**

Thank you for the opportunity to join you today. I am Marissa Parisi the Executive Director of Hunger Free Vermont and a founding member of Governor Shumlin's Pathways From Poverty (PFP) Council. As part of the PFP Council, I chaired the Administrative Systems Subcommittee.

### **Brief overview of the PFP Council:**

- Governor Shumlin signed an Executive Order in December, 2013 creating the PFP Council to advise the Governor by:
  - determining the nature and primary causes of poverty in Vermont
  - reviewing the extent to which public and private agencies are addressing poverty in Vermont:
  - making recommendations on action that should be taken to respond to poverty in Vermont including actions by federal and state governments to private agencies including business and charities.
- The council is made up of **30 members** and include non-profit leaders who serve the low-income community, public members with a commitment to fighting poverty, individuals who have qualified for and received state benefits, and members of the business community.
- While this council had a connection to the Agency for Human Services, there are **no members of the administration** who were official members. Our Council agreed that was a great strength of the group process. We were an independent group that advised Governor Shumlin and the Agency on programs, systems, and policies that, after rigorous discussion and consultation on all aspects of the safety-net, can end poverty in Vermont.
- We had some **key successes** from the council including the **driver restoration program** and **"banning the box."** We were also successful at helping to **regulate the rent-to-own industry** as well as **many other policy victories individual members and their organizations took the lead on with full support from the Council.**
- Our Council was beautifully and **strongly led** by **Christopher Curtis** from Vermont Legal Aid and **Linda Ryan** from Samaritan House. In the committee room today are also my fellow subcommittee chairs:
  - **Karen Lafayette** from Vermont Low-Income Advocacy Council chaired the Economic Security, Empowerment, and Well-being Committee
  - **Erhard Mahnke** from Vermont Affordable Housing Coalition chaired the Housing & Homelessness Committee
  - **Martha Allen** from Vermont NEA chaired the Education Committee

### **Food Insecurity:**

- I've been asked here today to specifically speak about the food insecurity aspects of this report and give an overview of the status of hunger in Vermont.
- The final PFP Report is lengthy, but I encourage all committee members to read it as it is one of the most comprehensive reports on how the state of Vermont can tackle and make significant

progress in ending poverty in our state. **Christopher Curtis also wrote an outstanding historical piece within the report on this history of poverty programs in our state.**

- As the leader of one of the state's largest anti-hunger organizations I can confidently say that **implementing any one of the recommendations within this report will improve the status of food insecurity** as so many issues in our low-income community are interconnected:
  - If you improve access to housing, food security improves.
  - When you restore people's driver's licenses so they can get to work, food security improves.
  - When you prevent rent-to-own stores from predatory lending practices, food security improves.
- Now let me tell you a little bit about the issue of **food insecurity in Vermont**:
  - **11.4%** of all Vermont households are food insecure (**1 in 9**)-they don't have enough food on a daily basis to meet their basic needs-**this equates to the entire population of all counties in the Northeast Kingdom** not getting enough nutritious food every day.
  - **13.82%** of children under the age of 18 live in food insecure households (**1 in 7**).
  - Vermont has a rapidly growing senior population which is predicted to have the most severe food insecurity issue by 2025.
  - There is good news-because of the work our state and groups like Hunger Free Vermont have done, food insecurity has improved! From 2010-2015 we saw a **37% reduction in food insecurity among children** and a **23% reduction in households reporting food insecurity**. However, the problem of senior hunger is getting significantly worse.
- The **reason we believe these statistics are improving** are a few key factors:
  - The economy is improving which is the key to long-term food security for working families.
  - New, high-impact programs have taken root.
    - We now have **60 schools (12,000 children) participating in the universal free school meal program** where all children eat free breakfast and lunch regardless of their families incomes. These schools are in our highest poverty areas and are receiving federal funds for these meals.
    - There are a **record number of summer programs (approx. 300)** feeding children who need the free school meals during the school year.
    - Afterschool meal programs and childcare meals programs continue to grow in our schools and afterschool programs.
    - Over **85,000 Vermonters currently use 3SquaresVT** to supplement their food budget which can be used at farmers' markets and CSA programs across the state supporting our local agriculture economy.

#### **Report recommendations on improving Vermonter's food security:**

- We don't have enough time to completely go through every recommendation in this report, so I would like to point out specific recommendations that relate to food insecurity.
  - First, the administrative systems committee has recommended **capital investments in the IT infrastructure to support an integrated system or "no wrong door" model for people who need services to access them**. Currently there are lengthy applications for

every safety-net program and an integrated IT system will help all people to more seamlessly access programs they are eligible for. This should also cut down on time and cost on administration of these programs.

- Second, our committee encouraged the Agency of Human Services to offer an option called the **Transitional Benefits Alternative (TBA)**. This allows the state to provide federally funded 3SquaresVT benefits to households leaving Reachup. **TBA provides a food benefit for five months at an amount equal to the amount the household was receiving before leaving Reach Up.** This program would greatly help these households in transitioning to work by providing **additional food benefits** and bring **an additional \$2.9 million annually in to the state spent a local grocers**. This is great benefit cliff prevention! The Agency of Human Services has expressed interest in implementing this option but have continually cited issues with the current IT as the barrier.
- Lastly, outside of the Administrative Systems committee there is a recommendation from the Education Committee to continually support expansion of the **universal free school meals program in Vermont**. Hunger Free Vermont will continue our work at the local, state, and federal level to continue expansion of this program. We are excited to be implementing a pilot granting program this year with Vermont's Agency of Agriculture to bring more schools on to the program and invest in farm to school activities.
- I do hope you will read the report and invite other council members to your committee to discuss their recommendations. Given the success of this council, we have encouraged Governor Scott to reauthorize the council so that together we can continue our work.

#### Questions?

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