



38 Eastwood Drive, Suite 100  
South Burlington, VT 05403

P: (802) 865-0255  
F: (802) 865-0266  
[HungerFreeVT.org](http://HungerFreeVT.org)

March 19, 2019

Testimony submitted to the House Committee on Human Services  
by Faye Mack  
Advocacy & Education Director of Hunger Free Vermont  
[fmack@hungerfreevt.org](mailto:fmack@hungerfreevt.org) / 802-231-1071

Thank you for the opportunity to testify about food insecurity in Vermont and its connection to the work of this committee. Hunger Free Vermont is Vermont's statewide anti-hunger advocacy organization. We are a non-profit with the mission to end the injustice of hunger and malnutrition for all Vermonters. Over the last 25 years, Hunger Free Vermont has helped Vermont make the most of federal nutrition programs like 3SquaresVT and school breakfast and lunch, while also working to help more Vermonters reach economic security so that they do not need to rely on 3SquaresVT and the emergency food system to put food on their table.

While hunger in Vermont has improved in recent years, far too many Vermonters are food insecure and many more are just one missed paycheck or unexpected expense away from food insecurity.

- Currently, 1 in 10 Vermonters are food insecure, which means they struggle to access food, especially food that is nutritious and culturally appropriate, in a dignified way.
- Families with young children are more likely to be food insecure. 1 in 7 children live in homes struggling to put food on the table.
- Many Vermonters who are working don't make enough to cover all their basic needs, like food, shelter, childcare, and medicine. For those who are eligible, 3SquaresVT, school meals, WIC, and other nutrition programs help make up the difference.
- Many working families earn too much to qualify for these programs, yet still face shortfalls in meeting their basic needs. For example, as many as 42% of the children who are food insecure in Vermont may live in families that are not eligible for free school meals or 3SquaresVT.

At Hunger Free Vermont, we know that food insecurity does not occur in isolation, and we will never fully end hunger by only addressing how Vermonters are putting food on their table today, tomorrow, or next month. Not only do we believe that all Vermonters should be able to access enough food, we also believe they should do so with dignity. Doing so means protecting access to programs like 3SquaresVT, expanding access to meals for children wherever they are in their day, and advancing policies that support economic security. I'd like to touch on a few examples of this work that are related to the work of this committee.

### **Maintaining the strength of 3SquaresVT**

Last year, the legislature passed a bill sponsored by Representatives Pugh and Haas that protected the level of community engagement and government transparency that is current practice for the 3SquaresVT program

within the Agency of Human Services (AHS) and Department for Children and Families (DCF). DCF and leadership in AHS have long supported a high level of transparency and a strong working relationship between Economic Services Division staff and community partners like Hunger Free Vermont, the Vermont Foodbank, Vermont's five Community Action Agencies and its five Area Agencies on Aging. Practices like attending monthly meetings, asking for feedback on outreach strategies, and more were crucial during the recession, and remain so today. The bill passed last year protects this important dynamic and also codifies communication between AHS and the legislature when federal changes to 3SquaresVT are issued.

These practices, and the new law, proved important multiple times since it went into effect, but especially so during the partial shutdown of the federal government earlier this year. While the government was shutdown, the USDA decided to issue SNAP/3SquaresVT for February in January while it still had money. This was an unprecedented, and complex move. Soon after the announcement, DCF staff reached out to us at Hunger Free Vermont to coordinate communication with community partner organizations and to 3SquaresVT participants and applicants. We were able to quickly and effectively work together to pull together a call with community partners to share information and answer questions, and to get the word out to Vermonters who might be impacted. Our communication was much more streamlined, clear, and effective than in other states where state agencies weren't working closely with community partners. These are the kinds of practices the law protects. Thank you for your leadership in this important work!

### **Supporting families and providers by investing in early childhood**

Hunger Free Vermont believes that all Vermont families should be able to access high-quality affordable childcare, that providers and their employees should be able to earn a living wage and also run financially viable businesses. We know that childcare is one of the biggest financial drains on families, and when struggling to make ends meet, families face impossible choices between paying for nutrition food, childcare, housing, and other basic needs. Further, the agreed-upon definition of high quality childcare in Vermont includes meal programs. Access to good nutrition plays an especially important role in the health and development of a child during their first years. Childcare programs are better able to provide nutritious meals and snacks when they are financially stable, and the cost of serving food is incorporated in the long term vision for many of the early childhood proposals presented this session.

Hunger Free Vermont works closely with the early childhood community, serves as an expert on food insecurity and nutrition programs, and plays a leadership role in groups like the Vermont Early Childhood Advocacy Alliance and Building Bright Future's Think Tank and Early Childhood Action Plan Committees. We strongly support the many early childhood proposals this committee and the legislature are working on this session.

### **Supporting youth of all ages through afterschool programs**

Access to afterschool and summer programs that serve meals and/or snacks is critical to maintaining good nutrition and learning when school is not in session. Unfortunately, only about 20% of children who rely on school meals during school hours also have access to out-of-school-time meals during summer, school breaks, and the afterschool hours. We know that meal programs and afterschool and summer programming are more successful when they are coupled together. Having access to successful programs can have a huge impact on children and their families. Unequal access to summer learning opportunities accounts for more than half the achievement gap faced by low-income students. Children at risk of obesity are more likely to gain weight in the summer when access to nutritious food is less stable. And, adding the cost of free meals at school back in to

the family food budget during summer and school breaks puts a big strain on the household budget overall forcing families to make difficult financial decisions.

Thanks to funding approved in the last legislative session, Vermont Afterschool and the Agency of Education are establishing the Afterschool for All Grant Program, which will support efforts to increase access to afterschool and summer learning programs in Vermont. We are excited, and proud, to join the cross-sector Oversight Committee for this new program. You may have read an article in *VT Digger* last week about a study that was just released by the Urban Institute titled, "Evidence-Based Strategies to End Childhood Food Insecurity and Hunger in Vermont." This report found that many older and disconnected youth, who are commonly overlooked by the programming available and are often at a greater risk of food insecurity, don't think afterschool and summer programs are for them. With this new grant program, we have an opportunity in Vermont to change that - to support programs that are welcoming and inviting for these youth - and make a difference in their lives.

### **Ensure Vermont children have their basic needs met through Reach Up**

The Reach Up program is a critical support for many of Vermont's most vulnerable children. The goal of the program is to "improve the well-being of children by providing for their basic needs", yet current grants only cover an average of about 35% of participants' basic needs. It is nearly impossible for a family to take the steps necessary to move out of poverty when their focus is on simply surviving - their ability to pay their bills, put food on the table, and get by day-by-day. As caseloads for Reach Up decline, rather than view the funding not being spent as "caseload savings" and reduce the budget for Reach Up, we encourage you to see this as an opportunity to better meet the goal of the program by increasing benefits for current and future participants. A child whose basic needs are being met is able to focus on their job - learning in school. A parent whose child's basic needs are being met is better able to focus on finding stable employment and moving out of poverty. This is how multi-generational cycles of poverty can end. Adequately supporting Reach Up participants is a powerful opportunity to do just that.