

Funding needs for the nonprofits and local schools as part of a statewide mass feeding program through the summer of 2020 and beyond.

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Introduction:

The tremendous physical and financial disruptions wrought by COVID-19 are surfacing many challenges. Basic human needs – food and housing – are the most immediate and must be addressed in both the response and recovery phases as the impacts unfold. In the past 6 weeks the state stood up the SEOC, and engaged members of the nonprofit community to join in creating a “mass feeding plan” that has 4 goals, with multiple strategies for each goal:

Goal 1: Provide emergency feeding to hotel/motel occupants, coordinate preparation and delivery of breakfast, lunch, and dinner through the most affordable and reliable means.

State funding ongoing: ongoing contracts through AHS.

Goal 2: Provide meals to COVID-19 positive or recuperating individuals that are staying in a Congregate Recovery Center (CRC).

State cost through June 2020: \$120,000 + storage costs for 20,000 frozen meals.

Goal 3: Support the Agency of Education

State funding need through September 2020: \$4-\$12 million depending on extent of federal waivers.

Goal 4: Increased Need for Supporting Vermont Food Shelves.

State funding need through calendar year 2020: \$4 million for food purchase, operating costs, and sub-grants as supplement to charitable and TEFAP food and funds.

Goal 5: Vermont Foodbank’s pilot program for Expansion of Meals on Wheels

State funding need through August 2020: \$2 million for statewide expansion of meal preparation by local providers for 4 months.

Goal 6: Ensure meals are delivered to Vermonters

Costs included above.

Implementation to date has seen significant progress and success, however challenges remain for both the response and recovery phases of this unfolding crisis.

Goal 1. The initial efforts after people were moved to motel rooms was largely regional, and in some cases was being executed and funded by Community Action Agencies and other nonprofit partners. Schools have taken over preparing these meals in some communities, and the state has contracted with

vendors in others. Contracts and details are still being worked out, for example in Capstone Community Action's Central Vermont region contract details are not final, and Capstone is using frozen meals purchased by the state (for CRCs) until a transition can happen.

The state is continuing to take this responsibility. It would be appropriate for the state to fund this work retroactively to people being vouchered, with reimbursement for those organizations that funded the feeding until state contracts took over. The cost has not been calculated, but is being compiled.

Goal 2: The need for congregate recovery centers has been less than expected, and the peak surge in novel coronavirus case has been less than expected. The state purchased \$20,000 in frozen meals from TRIO, a Mass. company that are available to meet the existing need until food service contracts are in place for the centers. The need is being covered with existing resources and contracts.

Goal 3: School Feeding

On 4/23/20, the Vermont Agency of Education stated that a very rough estimate of the extra costs incurred by Vermont schools due to the COVID-19 emergency to be at least \$4 million, with a large portion of those costs going to support the meal program and related necessary transportation costs.

Hunger Free Vermont is in the process of surveying Vermont school district business managers to obtain a more precise number of the costs of operating the system of meal distribution for children throughout the state, and also of projected costs to continue this meal service during the 10 weeks of summer break. We hope to have a reliable cost range by 5/8/20.

We do know that BSD and CVSD alone are projecting losses of \$200,000 and \$800,000 respectively in food service and transportation for the period of the school closure. We also know that some school districts are serving more meals than ever and are seeing reduced deficits in their meal program budgets.

Hunger Free Vermont and AOE will also have more reliable data about the number of children being kept from experiencing hunger and food insecurity through this school-based meal service by early May, but we know that thousands of meals are being provided to children right now, seven days a week, through this service. We also know that the provision of complete breakfast and lunch meals to these children on a regular basis is helping to sustain thousands of Vermont families right now, and is a critical piece of the food access puzzle that—along with the other federal nutrition programs (3SquaresVT, WIC, and Meals on Wheels)—is preventing Vermont's charitable food system from becoming overwhelmed as has happened in many other states. This system of providing healthy meals for children must be maintained and expanded throughout the summer months to ensure that Vermont children and families do not go hungry.

Vermont's state government must guarantee funding to cover all costs incurred by school districts to feed children during the current school system closure, and must also commit to providing whatever funds are needed over and above federal Summer Food Service Program reimbursements, to continue the provision of these meals until the start of the next school year. To do otherwise would either leave children hungry or require a more expensive and more complex solution to avoid that avoidable outcome. This will require the recruitment and support of new program sponsor organizations in regions where the school district does not continue meal operations through the summer.

Explanation of the Federal Summer Food Service Program

Currently, every Vermont school district, and some independent schools, are providing breakfast and lunch to all children, ages 0-18, whose families request this service. The children do not need to be enrolled in the school district, nor do they need to provide proof of income eligibility. The meals are being delivered to pick-up points along school bus routes, and directly to homes and apartment complexes in some cases. Children do not need to be present for their adult representatives to obtain the meals, which are packaged to go and taken back to homes where all children are staying home and staying safe. In many cases, school districts are delivering several days-worth of meals for each child at one time, including providing weekend meals along with the Friday delivery. No family is being charged for these meals, and school districts will be reimbursed a set rate for every meal they served by the USDA.

These meals are being provided through the Summer Food Service Program (SFSP). This is the program used every year by school districts and other nonprofit sponsors to provide free summer meals for children in many different towns and in many different settings throughout Vermont. It is also the program that operates during disasters to provide meals for children when schools are unexpectedly closed. It is proven, and it works.

The Threat to Continuing Meals for Children through the Summer Months

Congress provided USDA with additional funds and broad authority to waive many rules and requirements of the SFSP to accommodate the need to shelter in place and socially distance during the COVID-19 emergency. The SFSP is only operating as described above as a result of these waivers, and USDA has set these waivers to expire on June 30 or upon the lifting of the national state of emergency, whichever is soonest.

Hunger Free Vermont, our congressional delegation, and Democrats in Congress are advocating for USDA to exercise the option Congress has authorized to extend these waivers until September, but we do not yet know if USDA will take this essential step. If the waivers are allowed to expire, the normal requirements of the SFSP will be back in place for this summer:

- Children will have to congregate and eat meals on site—which obviously also means that children will have to be present to receive meals. This includes weekends.
- Breakfast and lunch will have to be served at separate times.
- Meals can only be served universally (free to any child who shows up, ages 0-18) in towns in which 50% or more of the children enrolled in the local school during the school year were eligible for free or reduced-price meals. In communities that don't meet this criteria, meal sites would have to be "closed" to registered groups of children that include at least 50%

Assuming that we in Vermont determine that it is unsafe for children to gather over the summer for summer programs, and also assuming that we are committed to ensuring that children continue to receive these critical meals, the state would have to incur additional expenses currently being covered by federal reimbursements to keep the program operating as it is now.

Even if the waivers are extended, transportation costs will definitely need to be covered by additional funds, since the SFSP does not include funding for transportation.

Given the minimal data we have right now from school districts, **we can estimate that providing meals for all children in Vermont who need them over the 10 weeks of summer break will require between**

\$4 million (if all the USDA waivers are extended) and \$15 million (if the USDA waivers are not extended, and the state needs to also pay for the cost of food and labor outside of the SFSP).

Goal 4: Increasing Needs for Vermont Food Shelves

The mass feeding needs in this goal go beyond service at food shelves, to encompass all the ways people who can't afford food can access it in the community. The COVID19 crisis in Vermont has resulted in unemployment in excess of 20%. Unemployment benefits have been slow to arrive, and in some cases is not available. People are exhausting resources quickly and are very concerned about food and housing security. Between 30-100% more people are showing up at food shelves and VeggieVanGo food distributions across the state. Recent distributions of FEMA MREs have distributed about double the expected number of meals, with more MRE and FEMA meal kit distributions scheduled in the next several weeks.

UVM researchers surveyed Vermonters and found a 33% increase people identifying as food insecure. Feeding America, the Vermont Foodbank's national partner, estimates that food insecurity will increase by 43% over the next 6 months. Foodbank food distribution in April is up more than 60% over April 2019.

Strategy: Fund the gap for the Vermont Food Bank through direct grant for response costs.

The Foodbank is seeing operating costs of over \$1 million/month (\$300,000 above "average") to serve the increased needs at current levels. All forecasts and research point to a slow recovery, which means that needs for food assistance will increase in the next 4-8 months and then decrease very slowly, depending on people's ability to work and obtain sufficient hours. The federal TEFAP program will be providing additional food resources beginning later this summer and the state has applied for "disaster TEFAP" designation that will temporarily eliminate TEFAP restrictions on recipient income requirements. The Vermont Foodbank will continue serving community food needs through its 215 "network partner" food shelves, meal sites, and senior centers. VeggieVanGo (grab-and-go distribution) will continue to occur twice monthly at twenty schools around the state. VeggieVanGo (grab-and-go distribution) will continue to occur monthly at ten hospitals, and at 38 SASH Senior Housing sties, around the state.

\$4 million in a state appropriation, grant, or contract would complement strained philanthropic and federal resources and ensure a robust response. This would be a "not to exceed" amount, a portion of which would be deployed monthly based on need and the changing conditions.

Strategy: Secure MREs from FEMA to supplement availability of meals to the Foodbanks.

6 MRE distributions have either occurred or are scheduled and there will be an additional 10-12 distributions through May with FEMA boxed meals instead of MREs. The state has incurred the state cost share on MREs, as well as the cost of deploying the VT National Guard to carry out the distributions.

Strategy: Leverage the Frozen meal option to fill gaps.

Frozen meals purchased by the state are being strategically deployed to fill gaps in the existing effort.

Goal 5: Vermont Foodbank's pilot program for Expansion of Meals on Wheels (to serve the aged Vermonters)

Strategy: Directly contract or provide financial support as need to the Vermont Foodbank on a pilot program to utilize area restaurants to develop an expanded “Meals on Wheels” program to have prepared meals for area seniors and other vulnerable Vermonters that are homebound without food access. Using philanthropic resources, the Foodbank has contracted with Skinny Pancake on a pilot run of 20,000 locally-prepared frozen meals that will be distributed strategically using existing Foodbank partnerships. It is hoped that this pilot could be expanded to other restaurant and food service companies across the state that would provide the dual benefits of feeding people who are food insecure, and putting people back to work by restating businesses and local supply chains.

The Skinny Pancake contract is 20,000 meals over 4 weeks for \$120,000. A **\$2 million** grant or contract would allow the Foodbank to contract for over 300,000 meals statewide over the next 4 months.

Goal 6: Ensure meals are delivered to Vermonters

Transportation is well-known as a barrier to Vermonters need to access all kinds of services, including food. Transportation costs are largely incorporated into the costs outlined above. Combined with parallel efforts and volunteer initiatives, no funds are being requested here.