

My name is Carrie Stahler, I am the Government and Public Affairs Officer at the Vermont Foodbank and I live in Lyndon.

The Foodbank, together with our more than 220 network partners, including food shelves, meal sites, schools, hospitals, and housing sites, serves the needs of food insecure people across Vermont. On behalf of our network, I want to thank you all for the support you have given to us over the past two years. We could not have done the work at the scale that was required without the support of the State and the Legislature. That is why I am here today. I'd like to ask for your continued support for the Vermont Foodbank and our network with an appropriation of \$6 million dollars in the FY23 budget.

I'd like to share with you a bit of what we are seeing on the ground across the state right now, what we are projecting or anticipating, and then continue the conversation that Becka started about where within the Legislature this broader food security effort fits.

So, first, where we are right now: For many of our neighbors across the state, March was a challenging month. One of the best ways we have to “take the temperature” of where people are at right now is through the numbers of attendees and households served at our VeggieVanGo events. Over the course of the pandemic these events have seen large increases in attendance and continue to serve a similar role that the Farmers to Families food box program did for many people who still need food support. These events are done in partnership with local schools and hospitals – these local partners choose how to advertise these produce distributions because they were originally intended as very localized events to improve access to fresh produce for hospital patients or school communities and families. Instead, over the course of the pandemic, many in our communities have come to rely on these food distributions to supplement their household food supply. In March alone we saw increases of between 5% and 50% at 18 of the 24 events we hold monthly. In fact, we had the highest one-day attendance at a VVG in Newport where 643 households drove up to receive food at this one 90-minute event. For comparison, November – January is usually the busiest time for VeggieVanGo and the previous peak was 615 households. This increased attendance is one of the factors that has caused us to increase projections about the amount of food we will distribute this year. We are estimating that instead of a decrease from last year we may actually increase the amount of food we distribute this year

[for reference, in 2020 we distributed 19.6 million pounds of food, in 2021 we distributed 17.6 million pounds, we expect this year to end closer to 17.6 million pounds]

Additionally, our network partners are seeing increased pressure on their services. Last week I spoke with Tracy at Fair Haven Concerned. She shared that many of her clients are unable to afford food because of the high costs of heating fuel, gasoline, and food. By one measure, the cost of a dozen eggs is 63% higher than it was just a few months ago. As these pressures increase, more people are using her food shelf because it is the only one in the region that is open 5 days a week.

And a meal site in the Northeast Kingdom shared that although they have reopened their doors for meals, the folks who used to join them every day are still not comfortable coming back. They have just 6 or 7 people a day but continue to serve many more people in their 14-town service area with prepared meals through take-out or home deliveries – essentially, they now offer those folks they serve, most of whom are seniors, 3 ways to get their meals, instead of congregate meals and home delivered meals, as they did prior to the pandemic. This means they need more volunteers to prepare, package, and deliver meals, in addition to volunteers serving meals on-site – and they are having trouble recruiting and keeping enough volunteers to keep this work going.

I share these anecdotes for two reasons, first, our network continues to work hard to address the needs of their neighbors – even as many other sectors in the state are moving back to the way they worked pre-pandemic or “going back to normal” - this sector is not and we are hearing from our network that they cannot go back because the need they continue to see is too high. Second, I share this because we know that every region is different, and many solutions are unique to their communities. Serving the needs of our neighbors in Bennington looks different than it does in Burlington. That is why we work together with a network across the state because we cannot do this alone and in order to address the hunger people in Vermonters are experiencing now, and to end hunger for Vermonters. This crisis continues and we need your support to continue to make sure there is enough food, and enough resources for our network to continue to meet the needs of people in their communities. Please support our appropriation request for \$6 million to help us continue this critical work.

Now, I'd like to shift gears a bit and share with you a situation that we helped to address just this past week as an example that might help frame the challenge we have in addressing food security more broadly with support from you and the legislature. One of our network partners contacted the Foodbank with an urgent request – he needed food to support guests at a hotel housing people who are experiencing homelessness. At this site there had been a COVID outbreak and to contain it, the hotel required all guests stay in their rooms - no one could leave the hotel. The guests were not even able to leave to get food – so our local partner stepped up to deliver the food that was needed for these guests. We quickly connected him with one of our grant programs so he was able to use the funding to address the need, and then our staff was able to procure additional food, including fruits and vegetables, that could be distributed, and he connected with other resources for prepared meals - but when this partner arrived on site people were fighting one another over food. Here. In Vermont. In 2022.

We have since been working with our partner to ensure that enough food is available to these guests during this outbreak and quarantine but this is a short term solution. I imagine you find this as shocking as I do and it underscores the fact that here in Vermont, the pandemic is not over – in fact, for many, this is the hardest part because many of the supports put in place at the peak of the COVID19 pandemic have ended and people are trying to navigate this new landscape without some of the resources that were keeping them afloat. And those resources made a huge difference. They have held food insecurity rates where they are now, according to the most recent data that is a rate of 27%. For reference, the food insecurity rate in Vermont was 9.6% in 2019. Both the USDA and a research team at UVM found that at the height of the pandemic, people were able to access and use food supports

and used them at higher rates than they had previously. The team at UVM also found that many people who had never before navigated the charitable food system, used that support – something we have also found anecdotally in our distribution events. Many people continue to share that they have used our services for the first time during the pandemic.

But this instance relates to the questions that Becka brought to you earlier. When these situations arise, and they have many times during this pandemic, we, as community partners, nonprofits, coalitions, and care-givers come together, we are working with various state agencies to address these immediate issues, but we do not know who in the Legislature to come to with this important information. No Vermonters should need to fight to access the food they need. But in order to address this issue, we need to know who in the Legislature is committed to thinking about the short-and long-term food security for people across our state in challenging situations where food access and food quality can make a huge difference. We need to understand who in the legislature will work with us to ensure there are broad and equitable solutions available to partners across the state. We hope you can help to find a home for food security in the Legislature so we can all work together to address these challenges.

And, before I go since you are the Ag committee, I'd like to share a few quotes from farmers who participate in our Vermonters Feeding Vermonters food procurement program because many of these farmers see food security as their food production work and as a way they connect with their community - to end on a more positive note:

- Kara Brown from Deep Root shared that, "We have a concern for the community. We are trying to feed our own. It's a very positive program. Everyone feels tied together. Talking about the work we do with the food bank and what we are able to do with our community means a lot to our growers."
- Timothy Hugh Muse of Laughing Child farm offered, "The Vermonters Feeding Vermonters program has allowed us to grow the farm. The markets are changing due to COVID. It is very helpful to have the stability of the Vermonters Feeding Vermonters program going into the fall."
- Christa at Jericho Settlers Farm shared that their "philosophy is about feeding our community. Feeding more people. It is important to be part of that and provide high quality nutrition to people that need it. When the program started, we were so excited for the opportunity. It makes so much sense for Vermont farmers to feed Vermonters in need."

I think these quotes from our partner farms really underscore how agriculture and food security are deeply intertwined here in Vermont. Individuals and organizations across Vermont are willing and interested in working together more closely to address the needs of our food-insecure neighbors. We would like to include the legislature in that coalition to address the needs of our neighbors and food security as a broad system.

I want to thank you all for your time and once again ask for your support for a \$6 million appropriation for the Vermont Foodbank to address the continued, sustained, high need we are seeing across the state and anticipate seeing through FY23.