



February 14, 2022

TO: Vermont House Committee on Agriculture and Forestry

FROM: Vermont Sustainable Jobs Fund, on behalf of the Farm to Plate Network

RE: One-time Funding Request - \$150,000 to complete Priority Strategy 24 as outlined in the [Vermont Agriculture and Food System Strategic Plan 2011-2030](#)

**The Need:**

The substantial increase in the need for supplemental food assistance and the rising food prices caused by persistent disruptions to national food supply chains due to the COVID-19 pandemic, alongside the growing awareness of the value of a strong local food system in meeting the food needs of Vermonters in times of emergency, has created an urgent need to increase food system resilience by 2030. In order to reduce climate and pandemic-related risks to our food security, and to protect the most vulnerable, we need to develop a well-coordinated statewide Food Security Action Plan.

- Household food insecurity has risen since March 2020, with estimates ranging from 1 in 7 Vermonters struggling with hunger<sup>1</sup>, to nearly 30% of Vermonters experiencing food insecurity during the pandemic. Food insecurity is caused by social and economic factors often out of the control of individuals and families. It affects Vermont residents inequitably. UVM research shows that households with greater likelihood of food insecurity include lower income households, those with a job loss, those without a college degree, and those with children. Populations such as rural Vermonters, elders, BIPOC Vermonters, LGBTQ+ Vermonters, and Vermonters with disabilities are also at higher risk for food insecurity.
- Vermont farms and locally owned and operated food distributors are a vital component of food access, a secure food supply, and community-based responses to hunger and national food system failures. The COVID-19 pandemic revealed the benefit of a thriving agricultural economy in buffering national food supply chain disruptions, particularly for those already struggling to obtain adequate food. Examples across the state include Vermont Everyone Eats, , the Vermonters Feeding Vermonters program run by the Vermont Foodbank, the Vermont Farmers to Families Food Box program, Vermont Crop Cash for 3SquaresVT, and innumerable unique community-based projects.
- According to the United Nations' Committee on World Food Security, food security is defined as meaning that all people, at all times, have physical, social, and economic access to sufficient,

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.vtfoodbank.org/about-us/newsroom/household-food-security-report#:~:text=The%20United%20States%20Department%20of,for%20all%20their%20family%20members>.

safe, and nutritious food that meets their food preferences and dietary needs for an active and healthy life.

As articulated in the opening letter of its [report](#) to Governor Scott, the Governor’s Commission on the Future of Agriculture stated, “this relentless pandemic has exposed and exacerbated our vulnerabilities and highlighted our capabilities and strengths. One lasting lesson that we need to both appreciate and address is the critical importance of Vermont farms and local food. Although Vermont agriculture is resilient, it needs attention and care. Vermonters need a reliable source and network of healthy and sustainable local food. The pandemic has repeatedly challenged us, but we now have access to a rare infusion of resources that can strengthen our agricultural infrastructure and help us innovate and rebuild.”

### **Implementing a Key Component of the [VT Agriculture and Food System Strategic Plan 2011-2030](#):**

Vermont has benefitted from the determined and ongoing response of Vermont farmers, state agencies, businesses, community agencies, nonprofits, and individuals to pandemic-related disruptions in the food supply chain; the economic and nutritional impact of intermittent school, institution, and business closures; increases in household economic and food insecurity; and other related impacts on food access, production, and supply. The best time to create a food security action plan based on community responses to food insecurity and disruptive events is while the lessons learned by the pandemic are present and pressing.

The Healthy Local Food For All Vermonters Goals 10-14 in the [Vermont Agriculture and Food System Strategic Plan 2011-2030](#) include:

- **Goal 10:** The amount of Vermont-grown food that fulfills the dietary and cultural needs of people in Vermont will increase
- **Goal 11:** All people in Vermont increasingly have the financial resources to access local food, including through programs that provide support for purchasing local food
- **Goal 12:** All people in Vermont are able to access locations in which local food is sold, served, or provided.
- **Goal 13:** All people in Vermont can access the knowledge, skills, and resources to select, grow, hunt, fish, forage, process, store, and prepare local food
- **Goal 14:** Vermont’s food system is resilient and able to provide adequate and accessible healthy local food in the face of emergencies-including climate-related natural disasters

**Priority Strategy 24** in the Plan, calls for the development of “*a Vermont food security plan, centered around a thriving food system and inspired by community-based responses to food insecurity and disruptive events. Involve food insecure individuals as well as farmers in the planning, and investigate questions including, but not limited to, affordable housing, health care, transportation, siting of retail grocery stores, food distribution, and ensuring the continued production of food in Vermont. Work to adopt state and regional level policies, procedures, and plans to ensure that the Vermont food supply is sufficient to withstand global or national food supply chain disruptions caused by climate change and other disasters.*”

In addition, in the ***Pathways for Adaptation and Building Resilience in Natural and Working Lands*** section of the [Vermont Climate Action Plan](#) (adopted in December 2021) includes this same food security plan strategy as a priority, noting that 1 in 3 Vermonters are food insecure and additionally many of our frontline and impacted communities face massive barriers to access when trying to sustain

themselves and their families, including many of the very people who produce food for others. As was witnessed during the pandemic, the brittleness of our food systems impacts people quickly. The ability of our state to feed its people will be imperative as climate change and its realities take further hold.

- **Strategy 1:** Develop, expand, and sustain local markets specifically for food, agricultural, and forest products in ways that ensure food sovereignty and security and provide for all Vermont's peoples. (pg. 183)
- **Strategy 5:** Develop a Vermont food security and sovereignty plan, centered around a thriving food system, and inspired by community-based responses to food insecurity and disruptive events. (pages 187-188)
  - a. Involve food insecure individuals as well as farmers in the planning, and investigate questions including, but not limited to, affordable housing, health care, transportation, siting of retail grocery stores, food distribution, and ensuring the continued production of food in Vermont to increase resilience and adaptation for all.
  - b. Work to adopt state and regional level policies, procedures, and plans to ensure that the Vermont food supply is sufficient to withstand global or national food supply chain disruptions caused by climate change and other disasters.

This project also aligns with the 2021 report from the **Governor's Commission on the Future of Agriculture** which includes the following:

**Priority I: All Vermonters benefit from healthy nutritious food and a robust local food system**

Strategies:

1. Provide annual pool of grant funding for projects that support access to local, healthy, nutritious food
2. Establish program for K-12 local food purchase reimbursements
3. Create a new Director of Food Security position
4. Commit to a Plan of Action to promote equity and inclusion in Vermont's food system and operationalize the NASDA principle on racial equity

**Strategy 3:** Vermont creates a Director of Food Security position, a non-political appointee who works to enhance communication and coordination among all Vermont Agencies related to food, and coordinates with businesses, charities, and NGOs to scale positive impact.

- Description/rationale: Various state agencies scaled up their capacities and data collection to address food insecurity during the COVID emergency, but their efforts have never been coordinated. Businesses, charities, and NGOs similarly operate without high-level coordination. This has resulted in significant missed opportunities to scale up collective impact. This position can align with current state emergency and food security planning efforts.

*Note: this position was not included in the Governor's FY23 Budget request; it is included here simply to illustrate the Commission's apparent support for the concept of greater food security coordination across the state.*

**Our Approach:**

A newly formed **Food Security Planning Strategy Team** has been formed within the Farm to Plate Network, made up of stakeholders and subject matter experts from state government, state emergency

management and preparedness personnel, non-profit organizations, regional planning commissions, educational institutions, and community-based initiatives.

Over the coming year, a robust public engagement process, following the [Just Transitions Guidelines](#), will collect, aggregate, and connect knowledge, information, and solutions from Vermonters farmers and other food producers as well as community based organizations. The design of the process will ensure that Vermont residents disproportionately impacted by daily household food insecurity and food system failures are meaningfully involved in the creation of the action plan. The Plan will:

- capture lessons learned, examples and case studies about meeting the food needs of Vermonters during the pandemic so that we are better prepared for the next emergency and can continue the most proven and impactful ways of reducing food insecurity as we come out of the pandemic;
- create an inventory and highlight the inter-connected relationships of the wide array of food security organizations and initiatives existing statewide, many of which arose during the worst months of the pandemic, so that these organizations can maintain a high level of coordination during both emergency and non-emergency times;
- provide an overview of the current status and barriers to each aspect of achieving universal food security (i.e., food access, availability, utilization, and cultural appropriateness) as well as how these elements will be affected by climate change; and
- provide specific recommendations for short- and medium- term action at four levels (household, community, market and state levels), including state-level policy needs, to increase our local food resilience and household food security. These recommended actions will have been prioritized by stakeholder participants in the planning process.

This planning effort will also dovetail with other local and state level initiatives already underway to update the state's emergency management and emergency preparedness plans, and to increase overall production and distribution of local food. **By more effectively linking the increased production and distribution of local food during non-emergency times with local market and charitable outlets for that food, we will be more prepared to effectively and efficiently respond during times of emergency.** These efforts will simultaneously strengthen the economic vitality of farms and food businesses and our rural communities where most food production occurs.

**FUNDING REQUEST:** The Vermont Sustainable Jobs Fund has worked with a number of partners to raise partial funding for this important project. We are requesting a one time appropriation from the General Fund of \$150,000 to enable us to complete this statewide, inclusive, stakeholder engagement process outlined in Priority Strategy 24, that will lead to actionable recommendations that will enable us to achieve Goals 10-14 in the [Vermont Agriculture and Food System Strategic Plan 2011-2030](#) by 2030.

Thank you for your consideration.

**Note: Farm to Plate is administered by the Vermont Sustainable Jobs Fund.**

<https://legislature.vermont.gov/statutes/section/10/015A/00330#:~:text=The%20intended%20outcome%20of%20the,the%20face%20of%20climate%20change>.