

Universal School Meals Testimony – Carrie Stahler for the Vermont Foodbank

Chair Webb and committee, thank you for having me today. My name is Carrie Stahler, I live in Lyndon, and I am the Government and Public Affairs Officer for the Vermont Foodbank. I'm here today to ask the committee to pass S.100, and include both breakfast and lunch at no cost to all Vermont students, starting with the 2022-23 school year, and paid for from the education fund.

I'm coming to you today with two different hats on, first representing the Vermont Foodbank, and second, as a parent of two students.

The Vermont Foodbank operates with a network of over 300 network and community partners, including many schools, to distribute millions of pounds of food each year. We operate VeggieVanGo Plus school-based food pantries at 4 schools, offer our VeggieVanGo produce distribution program at 32 school sites, and support Backpack programs at 40 school sites in Vermont which provide backpacks full of food to children over the weekend so they have enough food to eat at home when they don't have access to school meals. As you can see, schools are an integral part of the Foodbank's food distribution system, and schools and food are strongly linked. This is why the Vermont Foodbank enthusiastically supports universal breakfast and lunch at no cost to all Vermont students. While our programs support many students and their families, we recognize many students need more support and targeting support in-school is the best place to ensure they have the food they need to support their health, learning, and overall wellness.

I'd also like to talk more broadly about food insecurity in Vermont during the pandemic and what we see happening right now. During the past two years, the Foodbank has served many people who have never before needed food support through our network, direct distribution events, and community partners. We saw the rate of food insecurity peak at 31% in 2020 and with the most recent food insecurity number showed the rate at 27%, and this data also tells us that many more of our neighbors are accessing food than have before this crisis. And, thanks to the research team at UVM, we know that families with children are 5.1x more likely to face food insecurity than those without children.

For historical context, in 2018-19 fiscal year Vermont Foodbank distributed about 11.5 million pounds of food. In our fiscal year ending in 2020 that number spiked to 19.6 million pounds, in the year ending in 2021 we saw it come down a bit to 17.6 million pounds, and while we anticipated a steeper drop in our current fiscal year, we are seeing higher rates of people accessing our food network than originally anticipated, primarily due to inflation and now the steep and rapid rise in gas prices, as well as pandemic-related disruptions that have continued to make it challenging for families and individuals. We have had to revise our estimates upwards and now anticipate distributing between 14 and 15 million pounds of food across the state and that number may change again – the unpredictability of both the pandemic and other market forces continue to make it difficult to know what will happen.

We have heard from many people who are new to accessing charitable food that they didn't know how to get the food support they needed, were concerned about the stigma of using a food shelf, or were concerned that if they took food there would not be enough for others who need it more. Changes made during the pandemic like outdoor drive-through food events have made it easier and more accessible for people to get the food they need – including walk-through and drive through distributions at schools across the state.

Universal school meals in Vermont is an example of one of these positive changes that provides one of the most effective, accessible and dignified ways for kids to get the food they need.

Universal school meals including breakfast and lunch directly impacts households with children in a targeted way that alleviates the pressure of putting meals on the table – or in the backpacks and lunchboxes – five days a week and ensures that families who are struggling with food insecurity have a way for their children to get nutritious meals while they are in school. This legislation continues what we know works and has worked for families during the pandemic. And, it creates equitable access to food in schools, a place where children should not have to worry - free breakfast and lunch alleviates the stress for many students whose families are struggling to ensure their children have enough food to eat.

I'm also coming to you today as a parent whose children attended a school that was eligible for universal school meals... until it wasn't. When we bought our house, the school in the district we were moving into was one of the schools that had just lost eligibility to serve all students free school lunch. When my kids started school, we filled out the free and reduced-price meals form. I had recently received a raise at work, but didn't think too much about it when I filled out the forms. But soon the school called to let me know that we were ineligible. Our household income was just \$900 a year too much for us to be eligible. My recent raise at work had put us over the amount to qualify for free school meals. And, ironically, the cost of feeding two children school lunches for a year is just about \$900. It was often less expensive for me to make their lunches at home, so, our kids brought their lunches. And at this school, many children were eligible for free school meals – our kids got lots of questions about why they had to bring their lunches, what they were eating, why they had this or that. Not participating in the same kind of meals as other kids made my children stand out. It was a challenging experience for me as a parent. It was a catch-22. Doing well at work literally made it harder for my family to afford food. This is a paradox that other parents should not have to experience. Universal school meals solve this problem for parents across the state – and levels the lunch table playing field for all students. Please pass S.100 and include both breakfast and lunch at no cost to all students starting with the 2022-23 school year, and pay for this from the education fund so that the cost for feeding students is shared by many across our state.

Thank you for your time and for your consideration of this bill.

IN 2021 **27%** of People in Vermont Experienced Food Insecurity.

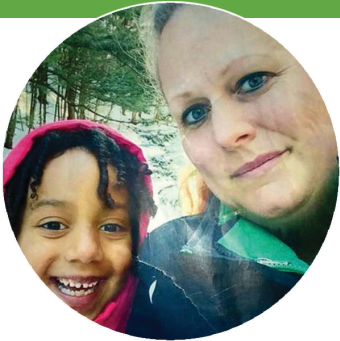
Prior to the start of the pandemic, food insecurity rates in Vermont stood at **9.6%**.

At the peak of the pandemic, that number increased to **31%** and the number of Vermonters utilizing food assistance increased by **87%** during that period.

During the pandemic...

Families with children were 5.1 times more likely to face food insecurity than those without.

5.1X



“You’re forced to forgo [something] to fix your car, or pay childcare for the week, or to have to pay a bill. You have to neglect something in order to put food on the table.”

~ Lottie, a single mom living in Concord, VT

Households that experienced job disruptions were 4.3 times more likely to be food insecure than those that didn’t.

4.3X



“This is really impacting me big time. I had to apply for food stamps so that I could have some way to eat while being on the front lines of the coronavirus.”

~ Tom, a volunteer EMT in Vermont who was out of work during the pandemic

Women were 7.3 times more likely to be food insecure.

7.3X



“I collect my social security, that comes third of the week. When that comes in that covers my rent...So I’m afraid to buy food. I’m afraid I don’t have money to pay my electric and my phone bill and TV.”

~ Jo, a retired teacher living in southern Vermont

Niles, Meredith et al. "Food Security Impacts of the COVID-19 Pandemic: Following a Cohort of Vermonters During the First Year". University of Vermont. <https://doi.org/10.1101/2021.10.20.21265283>

Niles, Meredith et al. "Food Security and Assistance Programs in Vermont Before and During COVID-19" (2021). College of Agriculture and Life Sciences Faculty Publications. 187. <https://scholarworks.uvm.edu/calsfac/187>

Coleman-Jensen, Alisha, et al. 2020. Household Food Security in the United States in 2019, ERR-275, U.S. Department of Agriculture, Economic Research Service.