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Hunger in Vermont

The COVID-19 pandemic has led to an urgent and unprecedented hunger crisis in Vermont. Lack of affordable housing, low wages, high unemployment, a decrease in the number of local, affordable grocery stores, and lack of public transportation were all already contributing to hunger and food insecurity in Vermont, and the COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated these inequities. Prior to the pandemic, food insecurity rates had been declining steadily since spiking during the Great Recession and had been holding steady at 1 in 10 Vermonters for several years. While food insecurity rates were relatively static, there were still too many people in Vermont struggling to put food on the table. 10% is an unacceptable level of hunger in our state.

Food insecurity in Vermont rose dramatically during the pandemic, from 1 in 10 before the pandemic to 1 in 3 in March. State and federal supports helped lower hunger to 1 in 4 in June. **According to a recent study released by the University of Vermont, 1 in 3 Vermont households have struggled with food insecurity at some point during the pandemic. These rates of hunger are higher than at any point in over 20 years and are not letting up.**

What's more, Vermont is experiencing one of the most dramatic increases in hunger in the country. Weekly survey data from the U.S. Census Bureau and an annual study by the U.S. Department of Agriculture show that hunger is rising, particularly in rural states, after a decade of decline. By late September, Vermont, West Virginia, and North Dakota topped the Bureau's list, with a more than 50% increase in respondents saying they lacked enough to eat.

As we look ahead to recovering from the pandemic, our goal cannot be to return to where we were; we must do better.

Universal School Meals

School meals have been available to all children for free, regardless of their family's income, since mid-March. Schools have gone above and beyond to ensure children have access to nutritious meals during the pandemic, including through school closures last spring, and hybrid and remote learning this school year. Schools are reporting that stigma around the school meal program has been eliminated, more students are eating at school, and students are more attentive and ready to learn because they are not hungry and worrying about when they will eat next. **Legislation being proposed in the House and the Senate this year would assure Vermont families that the State has enacted a pathway to permanently ending the inequities in our school meal program, so that all students are able to eat school breakfast and lunch and focus on learning while at school.**

H.32 and a forthcoming bill in the Senate establish a five-year phase-in period after which all public schools in Vermont will be required to participate in a federal option to make available school breakfast and lunch to all students at no charge to their families. As is current practice, the cost of school meals that is not reimbursed

through federal funds or other funding sources would be borne by school districts, and therefore ultimately borne by the Education Fund. Schools are required to maximize federal reimbursements, and the Agency of Education will work with partners and schools to develop and implement a Household Income Form that collects important data about the student population needed for eligibility for other federal funds that support education and other child nutrition programs. The bill establishes a five-year transition period so that schools have the time they need to implement universal school meals. A bill summary with more details is attached in this testimony.

An additional Agency of Education position within the Child Nutrition Program is needed

All schools in Vermont are temporarily providing universal school meals in the 2020-21 school year. Many schools have indicated that they would like to continue providing universal school meals after the temporary waivers end. They are able to do so by participating in a federal option that allows them to serve universal school meals. If many schools choose to opt in to universal school meals for the 2021-22 school year, the Agency of Education will need additional staff to support schools in enrolling in and implementing the federal option and thus, maximize the federal funding we draw down to support school meals. We request that the Legislature authorize an additional position with the Child Nutrition Program from current vacancies in the position pool, to be filled in FY22.

Food access resources for your constituents

We know that constituents often reach out to you for help and resources. You can help connect people struggling to afford food with programs that can provide support. Thank you for spreading the word about important nutrition programs like 3SquaresVT, WIC, school meals, and Meals on Wheels! One of the easiest ways that you can help your constituents facing hunger is to share the Stretch Your Budget flyer included in this testimony (and found [on Hunger Free Vermont's website](#)). Share this flyer on social media, in your newsletters, local papers, and Front Porch Forum. You can also connect constituents in need with Vermont 2-1-1 or your local Community Action Agency for comprehensive support.

Supplemental materials included in this testimony

1. Universal School Meals bill summary
2. Stretch Your Budget flyer for constituents

PLEASE SUPPORT THE UNIVERSAL SCHOOL MEALS BILL.



Every student. Every meal. Every school.

The Universal School Meals bill would:

- Require all public schools in Vermont to make available school breakfast and lunch to all students at no charge to the individual student or family.
- Maximize federal reimbursement for meals at all schools.
- Require that costs of providing school meals that are not reimbursed through federal funds would be borne by school districts, and therefore ultimately borne by the Education Fund.

WHAT IS HAPPENING NOW AND WHAT WOULD CHANGE?

Currently, some schools offer Universal School Meals for one or both meals. Many of these schools have shifted the cost of their meal programs to their school's general fund, and thus it is covered by the Education Fund. Other schools keep their school meals program budgets separate and expect the meals program to "pay for itself." If a school does not offer Universal School Meals, then families not eligible for free school meals must pay for each of their children's meals. When families fall behind, the student can be singled out. At some schools they receive an "alternative meal" or no meal at all (because they might be too embarrassed to go through the line, knowing that they have debt). This situation creates inequity in our educational system, and it also means that students might be hungry, less ready to learn, and potentially more of a challenge for their peers and teachers. At the same time, the state of Vermont is leaving federal funds on the table because many schools have not been able to maximize student participation under the traditional meal program model.

FUTURE VISION:

If enacted, the Universal School Meals bill would require all schools to transition over the next five years to providing Universal School Meals – both breakfast and lunch – so that every student would have access to two free meals every school day. The bill would also require all schools to draw down as much federal reimbursement as possible by participating in either the Community Eligibility Provision (CEP) or Provision 2 (P2) programs – see the sidebar on this sheet for information on those two federal provisions. Schools would also be required to do all that they can to ensure the highest participation rates possible for school meals. High participation is good for students and for the state – when students eat, they are more ready to learn and be engaged, and when participation rates are high, more federal funds are available for reimbursements and schools are better able to afford local food. And, finally, after 5 years, all schools would include their meals program budget in the school's general fund, thus ensuring that Education Fund dollars are paying for the portion of this educational expense not covered by federal funds. The General Fund would no longer be partially covering this educational expense.



Every student. Every meal. Every school.

Universal School Meals Facts:



Universal school meals improves student performance in math and English Language Arts by up to **10 weeks of learning**.



Up to 42% of Vermont children in food-insecure households are not eligible for free school meals or 3SquaresVT. Universal school meals would reach them all with meals during each school day.



72% of staff at Vermont schools with universal school meal programs agree that universal school meals has produced **an improved social climate**.



64% of Vermont schools currently providing universal school meals have **increased their local food purchasing** as a result.



TRANSITION PERIOD:

- The bill would allocate \$1million in one-time funding, available over the next five years, to provide grants for schools who might need equipment or training to make the transition to Universal School Meals. The grants may also help with the initial expenses of implementing a meal program or the process of getting into the CEP or P2 programs.
- These grants would be administered through the Farm to School Grant Program, but the funding would be kept separate and used only for this purpose. After the five year transition period, any unused funds would revert to the regular Farm to School Grant Program.

AGENCY OF EDUCATION REQUIREMENTS:

- The bill would require the Vermont Agency of Education (VAE), in collaboration with Hunger Free Vermont and the Vermont Association of School Business Officials, to update the Household Income Form right away and to review it annually to ensure it is up to date with best practices.
- The bill would also create one full-time, classified position specializing in the administration of school food programs in VAE. The position shall be transferred and converted from an existing vacant position in the Executive Branch of State government.
- The bill would allocate \$100,000 base funding for this position at VAE.

The Community Eligibility Provision and Provision 2 are two paths created by the USDA for schools to offer universal school meals. Each provision establishes reimbursement rates for school meals based on the socioeconomic status of the school population. Enrolling in these provisions helps schools maximize their federal reimbursement while offering school meals at no charge to students. CEP may be used by schools with high numbers of low income students. Any school may use Provision 2.



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STRETCH YOUR BUDGET with Vermont Food Programs.

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Keeping yourself and your whole family well nourished is one important way to support your health and our whole community. In this stressful time, no one should be stressed about having enough food at home. Hunger Free Vermont wants you to know that there are a number of food resources available to help you and your neighbors—we're all in this together!

- **3SquaresVT:** The COVID-19 pandemic is impacting all of us across Vermont and 3SquaresVT is here to help you put food on the table. It is an important program that helps households buy food from grocery and convenience stores, farmers markets, and co-ops. 3SquaresVT benefits are given to you each month on an EBT (electronic benefits transfer) card, which works like a debit card.

If you and your family were receiving the additional unemployment benefit that ended in July, you may now be eligible for 3SquaresVT, even if you weren't eligible before. Individuals who are unemployed, or who have experienced a partial or total decrease in their work hours during the COVID-19 outbreak do not need to meet a work or work training requirement. To find out more and get help applying visit www.vermontfoodhelp.com or text **VFBSNAP** to **855-11**.
- **Meals for Kids:** Wholesome food is important for children's ability to learn and grow. This school year, meals are available for kids through local schools, no matter where your child is learning. Meals are also available through some childcare providers. These meals are nutritious and are prepared following strict health and safety guidelines. Contact your child's school or childcare provider to learn more! If you're asked to complete a school meal application, please fill it out. Filling out the application helps our communities run meal programs throughout the year and helps make sure schools can get important federal funding.
- **WIC:** The WIC nutrition program offers healthy foods, nutrition education and counseling, breastfeeding support, and community referrals to other important services. If you're pregnant, a caregiver or a parent with a new baby or a child under five, WIC is for you! To find out more about the ways we are working to keep families safe and to start an application visit www.healthvermont.gov/wic or text '**VTWIC**' to **855-11**.
- **Meal Programs for Older Vermonters:** People age 60 and older are especially encouraged to stay at home in order to protect themselves from COVID-19, but staying well nourished is also critical for your health. To help, you may be able to pick up meals to go or have meals delivered to your home. For more information about meals for older adults, please call the Helpline at **1-800-642-5119**.
- **Food assistance through the Vermont Foodbank network:** The Vermont Foodbank is dedicated to supporting Vermonters during all times of need. To get help during this time of crisis, visit vtfoodbank.org/gethelp or call **1-800-585-2265**.

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