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To: The Senate Committee on Agriculture and the House Committee on Agriculture and Forestry

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Thank you for inviting us all here today. Our organizations have partnered in different ways together for many years, but the pandemic has brought us all together in a much more intentional way as we grapple with how to address the historic levels of food insecurity in our state right now, and how to build structural changes that will address food insecurity. This increased collaboration has made our work better, and made our efforts more effective. We are here today to ask for you to support the different levers that address food insecurity, and for your support in creating a space within the Legislature for these levers to be discussed and addressed together - food security needs a home within the Legislature.

- **The Vermont Foodbank is continuing to distribute unprecedented amounts of food. Please help them meet the historic level of need with a \$6 million appropriation in FY23.** People across Vermont are really struggling. In 2021, 1 in 3 people in our state faced hunger. Many special federal COVID-19 pandemic support programs have ended, including expanded unemployment, extra food distributions, and the expanded child tax credit, to name just three that very directly affect the ability of Vermont families and individuals to afford or acquire sufficient healthy food. Inflation is making it harder and harder to afford groceries, and more people are turning to their local Veggie Van Go site and local food shelf to put food on the table. This funding is essential for their ability to make sure that people in need have the food they need right now.
- No single program, organization, or initiative is going to end hunger. **It takes a collective, collaborative approach to support people facing food insecurity**, and those efforts are strongest when they also connect people in Vermont with local food and support our farmers and producers. Our organizations are collaborating more deeply than ever, from working on the Food Security Plan through Farm to Plate, to participating in the Mass Feeding Group, to ensuring all students have access to farm fresh meals while they're in school. We problem solve together, develop new approaches together, identify needs together. When we enter the State House, however, **there is no Committee to take this collaborative approach to**. There is no Committee who can look at the whole package with us, hear our ideas and our requests, and work to address food security with us.
- We are not asking to consolidate all the programs and efforts related to food security into a single Agency. Barriers to food access, and solutions to food insecurity are truly interdisciplinary. Food insecurity impacts people of all ages and connects with our different institutions - from retail to schools to senior centers. It is connected to transportation, housing, and agriculture. Different programs fit into different agencies in a way that works. But, the holistic picture is important. And, in the State House, it's

not clear where to talk about the different pieces, successes, and needs all together. Having a space for the holistic view could be transformative.

- **The state and federal government has stepped up to make sure people are fed - temporarily.** New programs and expanded programs like higher 3SquaresVT benefits, 2+ years of federally funded universal school meals, Everyone Eats - have made a huge difference. However, they are all set to end. The need shows no signs of dissipating - and hunger will skyrocket as these programs begin to close down.
- **Universal School Meals will have a lasting impact on child hunger.** The House is working hard to move S.100 forward and ensure that schools can continue to provide Universal School Meals next fall. We hope that you will support this important bill. In addition to addressing food insecurity, Universal School Meals supports local food purchasing and Farm to School efforts. When the Senate Agriculture Committee developed the Farm Fresh School Meals for All bill last year, it demonstrated the importance of having a space where a holistic approach can be explored. Thanks to that collaborative thinking and the space to discuss all of the different pieces of school meal programs and their connection to hunger and local food the Legislature launched the wildly successful Local Purchasing Incentive program and set Universal School Meals legislation in motion. Imagine what else we could all come up with together?

This morning you will hear about a number of different requests. They are all important. Put together, supporting these requests will make a measurable difference in ending hunger. The devastating impact that the pandemic has had on hunger is still here.

- People are running out of food each month and don't have money to buy more. Individuals and families across the state are turning to the Vermont Foodbank and its network partners to help them put food on the table today. Please support them in meeting this extraordinary demand with an appropriation of \$6 million for FY23.
- No child should have to learn what hunger feels like at school. All children should be able to focus on their learning because they are well-fed and not worrying about whether or not they will be able to eat lunch that day. Please support S.100 this year to ensure that all students have access to two meals every school day.
- We are committed to collaboration and working together to address hunger in a smart, comprehensive way. Please help us bring this approach to the State House by helping to find a home for food security in the Legislature.

Thank you so much for your time and attention to these important issues.