

Testimony of John Sayles, CEO, Vermont Foodbank

January 14, 2021

Senate Health & Welfare and House Human Services and House Health Care Committees

Thank you for your incredible work to address the pandemic and its economic implications. We have been grateful for your support thus far of policies and funding to help our neighbors facing hunger. As the Vermont Foodbank plans for its year ahead, we know that the hunger crisis we are facing is not going away. With 1 in 3 Vermont residents facing hunger since the pandemic began, our state is navigating an unprecedented time that requires unprecedented action.

To address the increase in need, the Vermont Foodbank has doubled our distribution since March, dramatically increased our purchasing from local farms, provided funding support to community partners throughout the state, all while taking the necessary measures to keep staff, volunteers and the people we serve safe and healthy. And to maintain our current level of response, we are asking the state for help.

Here are three different ways that the state can help the Vermont Foodbank ensure that all are fed as we head into 2021.

- **Allocate \$1.5M of remaining CARES Act funding to support the Vermont Farmers to Families program.** To prevent any gaps in this critical federal program and to ensure the program benefits Vermont Farmers, the Vermont Foodbank is running a VT-specific version of this program in January and February. This allows us to bridge the gap and compliment the USDA program which will resume in February, while prioritizing food purchased from local farms.
- **Provide a \$500K annual appropriation for [Vermonters Feeding Vermonters](#) in the FY22 general fund budget.** This program purchases local, Vermont food directly from farmers and producers to distribute to people facing hunger. This is request for a new annual appropriation, but the program has emerged as an especially critical tool for our state during the pandemic, supporting both our local farmers and people who need help accessing food.
- **Should more federal funding become available to our state, allocate funds to keep the Vermont Foodbank responding to the pandemic at current levels.** The \$4.7M we received from the CARES Act made the difference in our ability to meet the needs of the community. Without additional federal funds, it will be challenging to maintain our current level of pandemic response. Our pandemic response efforts alone will cost \$7M in 2021 (this total includes the \$1.5M in bullet 1). We are aware that more funds are not available yet, but we wanted you to be aware of this request now for planning purposes. We can provide more detail when and if that time comes.

Thank you sincerely for the amazing work you all are doing to lead us through these challenging times. We look forward to working closely with you to ensure that all are fed this year.