



**FarmFirst**

150 Dorset St. Ste. 245, PMB 210 South Burlington, VT, 05403

House Committee on Agriculture  
Vermont State House  
115 State Street Montpelier, VT 05633-5301

May 2, 2024

**Dear Chairman Durfee and the House Committee on Agriculture:**

We would like to sincerely thank you for this invitation. We appreciate your interest in Farm First's mission and all that we do to support the wellbeing of Vermont's agricultural community.

Farm First is a Vermont-based non-profit program which provides farmers and their household members with wellness programming, counseling, agricultural resources, and information to reduce stress. Our program has been supporting Vermont farmers and their families for more than 10 years.

Farmers across Vermont access our services to address a wide range of personal and work-related matters including labor and management issues, financial concerns, alcohol or drug use disorders, injury, illness, adaptive equipment needs, family stress, depression, and more.

We are a public/private not-for-profit collaboration jointly sponsored by the Vermont Agency of Agriculture, the Vermont Agency of Human Services' HireAbility VT (the division of Vocational Rehabilitation), Invest EAP, and the Vermont Association of Business Industry and Rehabilitation.

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Farm First offers Vermont farmers and their families a continuum of care including:

- **A website** with accessible resources. ([www.farmfirst.org](http://www.farmfirst.org))
- **A 24/7 hotline** answered by behavioral health specialists and counselors.
- **A resource coordinator** who is available to help farmers find resources through phone calls or farm visits.
- **A peer network** where farmers can call other farmers who have been trained by us to offer non-judgmental, active listening that helps them feel heard and manage their stress.
- **A counselor** who has interest, experience, and training specific to working with farmers. Farmers and their family members can relieve up to 12 free and confidential counseling sessions.

The work we do is both responsive and proactive; it falls along the spectrum from simple referrals to a community resource all the way to supporting families who have dealt with suicide attempts. Reducing stress is our main focus but grief is something we are confronted with consistently.

Farm First works closely with the Vermont Agency of Agriculture Food and Markets. With funding from the USDA Farm and Ranch Stress Assistance Network, we have developed and implemented the following:

- The statewide farmer peer network.
- Agriculture service provider training focused on farmer support, wellness, and suicide prevention for all Agency of Agriculture staff.
- An education and outreach campaign to promote Farm First programs and services.
- Increased counseling services and sessions.
- Behavioral wellness check-ups and follow-up supports.

Farm First's approach to services is more comprehensive than in other states. Knowledge of our impactful work has traveled state lines and we have been asked to speak to multiple state organizations across New England to consult and share our knowledge, including New Hampshire's University of NH Extension, the Massachusetts Department of Agriculture, the Rhode Island Center for Mediation, and various non-profits in Maine. We trained farmer peers for new programs in Massachusetts and Rhode Island.

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## Current Trends

- Our Farm First Resource Coordinator estimates that she has worked with 43 farm families since January 1, 2024 (four months). This is an increase from the previous year where Farm First worked with a total of 100 new cases over the 12-month period.
- Our peer support farmers have worked individually with 25 farmers since May 1, 2023, many whom have ongoing contact with their peer support farmer. Peers also share information with farmers about wellness through speaking at events.
- Roughly fifty percent of farmers we interact with have some form of physical or mental health impairment that substantially limits one or more major life activities as defined by the Rehabilitation Act of 1973. [The Rehabilitation Act of 1973 | U.S. Equal Employment Opportunity Commission \(eeoc.gov\)](https://www.eeoc.gov)
- We are currently working with 9 families around succession planning.
- Fifty percent of our open cases have more than one counseling session from our farmer-focused provider.

Each year, it seems as though the pressure and strain that farmers endure has become more debilitating. The good news is that more people than ever are calling us and asking for counseling services, which contradicts past years where we consistently dealt with stigma around this population reaching out for help.

There is so much that farmers face which is beyond their control. “Every day I start with a plan in my head, and never does the day go as expected,” stated one farmer to a peer recently. “It’s all of the things that I can’t control that get me; you would think I would be used to it by now.”

This has been an especially hard year for many of our farmers due to flooding and other weather-related disasters. There is some financial relief available but the emotional toll was overwhelming.

Please feel free to reach out to either of us at any time with questions.  
Thank you again for this opportunity.

Sincerely,  
Leanne Porter and Marc Adams

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**Some of the partners we connect with on a regular basis:**

- VAAFM
- University of Vermont Extension
- NOFA
- Vermont Fruit and Vegetable Growers Association
- Vermont Agricultural Mediation Program
- Agrisafe Network
- Migrant Justice
- Farm Injury and Health Coalition
- PASA Sustainable Agriculture
- The Intervale
- Land for Good
- Vermont Farm & Forest Viability Program
- Center for an Agricultural Economy
- Vermont Center for Independent Living
- Center for Health and Learning
- The Open-Door Clinic
- Vermont Legal Food Hub
- And many more

**Impact Stories**

**We have de-identified these stories to ensure our farmer's confidentiality and anonymity.**

- The Farm First Resource Coordinator, counselor, and a peer have been working closely with a family who has been struggling with many issues. This is one of our cases where we support the female farmer but her partner in farming, as well as their children have been benefiting from the support as well. When the farmer called to tell us that she was on her way to hospital care with someone in her family who attempted suicide, the team realized that although we were supporting her emotionally, through counseling, the reality was that they did not have food in the house. The peer network worked together to provide meals for the family in their time of need. The farmer we work with told us that she was very grateful and felt like she was given the opportunity to focus on the problem at hand, without the overwhelm of all of it at once.

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- Farm First received a call from a man who was struggling with his relationship. They were a BIPOC couple who feared racial inequity within their community. It is common for couples who farm to have a difficult time being life partners as well as business partners around the clock. Through counseling we supported the farmer with skills around communication and allowing space for ‘best intentions’ between the couple, as well as managing different first language complexity. We encouraged them to build relationships within their community and worked with their Farm First counselor to pinpoint the issues and concerns and create strategies to address these, to have productive community conversations.
- We worked with a farmer and his daughter around succession planning for their long-time family farm. During the transition the father experienced some significant emotional distress with the idea of leaving the farm. We supported the family to connect with Agricultural Mediation. With this help and additional connections to counseling the family was able to create a plan for the daughter to take over a share of the farm and start her vegetable operation and the father continued to work on the small and more manageable dairy farm. This family was at risk of splintering and now they share the family farm and can focus on interpersonal family relationships instead of business operations as they did in the past.
- A young farm manager called and told us that she was really feeling stuck. She was struggling with her life choices, not sure if she made the right choice when she started farming with her husband. She started to wonder if a farm career was not sustainable for her. Our counselor helped her to create space and encouraged her to process her choices and begin to renegotiate her life plans with her husband. She began to understand these plans are changeable. She started to gain a better sense of what is an immediate concern and what can be worked on over time. The Farmer shared she was ‘feeling relief and contentment about her plan’ moving forward.

### **Farm First Press examples:**

Vermont Public

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<https://www.vermontpublic.org/show/vermont-edition>

<https://www.vermontpublic.org/vpr-news/2022-06-16/vermont-is-piloting-a-new-program-to-help-farmers-rely-on-one-another-during-stressful-times>

WCAX

<https://www.wcax.com/video/2024/01/11/local-nonprofit-supports-farmers-mental-health/>

<https://www.wcax.com/2022/04/18/farm-first-helping-families-hand-off-business-new-owners-next-generation/>

<https://www.facebook.com/WCAXTV/posts/farm-first-is-a-joint-venture-of-the-vermont-agency-of-agriculture-and-the-agenc/10167355050330442/>

Across the Fence

<https://www.facebook.com/watch/?v=746310680113775>

Vermont Digger

<https://vtdigger.org/2022/11/27/program-trains-upper-valley-farmers-to-help-others-in-mental-health-crisis/>

The Commons

[https://www.commonnews.org/issue/751/751farmers\\_film](https://www.commonnews.org/issue/751/751farmers_film)

Seven Days

<https://www.sevendaysvt.com/news/a-new-peer-support-network-hopes-to-help-vermont-farmers-deal-with-stress-37993999>

Time Argus

[https://www.timesargus.com/211/weather-events-put-fresh-stress-on-vt-farmers/article\\_a6a7ffcd-a2d7-568b-adce-ae62a338e1f5.html](https://www.timesargus.com/211/weather-events-put-fresh-stress-on-vt-farmers/article_a6a7ffcd-a2d7-568b-adce-ae62a338e1f5.html)

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