

TO: House Agriculture, Food Resiliency & Forestry Committee

FROM: Teddy Waszazak, Hunger Free Vermont

DATE: May 2, 2024

RE: SNAP Restaurant Meals Program

For the record, I am Teddy Waszazak, Legislative Policy Lead with Hunger Free Vermont.

Thank you for the time to talk with you about the Restaurant Meals Program that is available to Vermont through the Federal SNAP program. We are excited to talk to you about this opportunity for both “everyday” needs and also, especially emergency response needs for food security in Vermont.

First, I want to put this opportunity into a bigger context, which is even more exciting. Hunger Free Vermont is a member of the team that created the Vermont Food Security Roadmap to 2035, and we have the additional perspective of members of the Mass Feeding Workgroup, now known as the Food Access Information Network (FAIN). This group, comprised of staff from multiple state agencies and statewide nonprofits, was convened in 2020 under the auspices of the SEOC when it became clear that the pandemic was also a hunger crisis. Our experiences working within this group to address the lack of food security emergency response planning led to the inclusion of a set of strategies within the [Vermont Food Security Roadmap](#) focused on creating a food security emergency response system in the state. We are excited for this opportunity to bring some recommendations to you that will advance this critical Vermont Food Security Roadmap goal and come from Hunger Free Vermont’s direct experiences working to strengthen food security for everyone in Vermont over these past four years.

As you may remember, the Roadmap calls for us to strengthen and expand the state's prepared meal infrastructure utilizing existing meal programs such as Meals on Wheels when feasible. Both the House and Senate version of the FY2025 budget include a mechanism to draw down federal match money to strengthen the Senior Nutrition programs. We support that provision and thank the legislature for its creative thinking - we are big fans of maximizing federal funding!

This strategy in the Roadmap also includes increasing the capacity of schools, restaurants, grocery stores and farms to provide prepared meals, and expanding infrastructure and systems for delivery and access. Adding this capacity and strength will help in the everyday and when we have a statewide emergency.

Specifically, strategy G5.4 on page 25 references the SNAP Restaurant Meals Program and recommends that Vermont opt in to the federal provision to provide it to qualifying residents. Small business owners are eager to accept SNAP and have an additional way to support their community members who need prepared meals. This program could be a dignified, consistent resource for Vermonters who are unable to prepare their own foods. It will provide income for small businesses, and it will bring federal funds into the state economy.

During both COVID and the floods, our organizations were shocked to discover that understanding who needs food and who is in charge of collecting and sharing that information is not in any town emergency plan, is not in the State emergency planning template, and is not identified as the role of any State office in particular. We have provided testimony about this in your Government Operations Committee, and they have added food access to the language in S.310 for emergency response planning, which we greatly appreciate and applaud.

During the recent flooding events, when it became apparent that there was no system in place to accurately track where prepared meals were needed throughout the many regions affected by the flooding, so that the Red Cross and Salvation Army and World Central Kitchen could effectively plan and distribute them, Hunger

Free Vermont was asked by the SEOC to figure out a way to get this data to these national emergency response organizations. We did our best, mobilizing our network of Hunger Councils, piecing together what they relayed to us, and working with partners like Feeding Chittenden and small businesses to send food trucks with prepared meals to isolated and hard-hit towns like Marshfield. With the added language in S.310, we hope that we can plan ahead for situations like this.

During the initial three-week period of floods, when all of the churches in Montpelier sustained so much damage that they had to abruptly end their food shelf and free congregate meal operations, The Skinny Pancake began serving free meals to all who needed them but let us at Hunger Free Vermont know that without a source of funding, they would not be able to keep going. We scrambled to secure private funds to cover some of their costs so they could keep providing this critical food lifeline for our state capitol. Many restaurants and food trucks all over Vermont jumped in to provide free prepared meals in the first weeks immediately following the July floods, yet there was no provision in place at the State level to fund these efforts. It was left to SEVCA, Hunger Free Vermont, and private philanthropy to cobble stipends together to keep these valuable small businesses open and help cover some of their losses.

While I'm proud of our staff's efforts, Hunger Free Vermont is not an emergency response organization, and we were not equipped to suddenly create a system for accurately mapping and responding to where food and meals were needed. Food security during the next disaster cannot be left to community and nonprofit organizations alone to address—this planning needs to happen at the highest level of government, just like all of our disaster management planning, and be on the top of our minds well before the next disaster or emergency occurs. Again, we believe the language that has been added to S.310 addresses this need.

Related to the planning is the goal for the State of Vermont to participate in the SNAP Restaurant Meals Program. The State's participation in this program can address both "everyday" needs that exist year-round and also it can build a system that is ready to respond during an emergency and utilize already available federal funds immediately. We want to build on the success of Vermont Everyone Eats and Vermont Emergency Eats in a way that maximizes federal funding and provides benefits to Vermonters every day and also in emergency situations.

The Restaurant Meals Program is run through the USDA Food and Nutrition Service (FNS), and allows certain SNAP recipients to use their benefits at approved restaurants.

To qualify, the SNAP recipients must be:

- Elderly (60 years of age or older);
- Disabled (receives disability or blindness payments or receives disability retirement benefits from a governmental agency because of a disability considered permanent);
- Homeless;
- or be the spouse of a SNAP recipient who meets one of the above criteria

For restaurants to qualify, they must get approval from the State of Vermont as well as the USDA Food and Nutrition Service. **Each State can set their own rules for how many and which restaurants can participate.** A position is needed to ensure that Restaurants have the support they need to apply to participate and the Agency has the capacity to implement the program. As you will see in the original bill language, below, the sponsors placed this position in the Agency of Human Services. However, it might be better placed in the Agency of Commerce & Community Development because the main job of this person would be to recruit restaurants (and food trucks) to participate in the program, to navigate the federal application process and to acquire the needed point-of-sale equipment and coding that is necessary to accept 3SquaresVT/SNAP EBT cards at their restaurant.

The language below comes from H.703 and S.215. S.215 was passed out of the Senate Health and Welfare Committee. Further action on the bill was deferred in Senate Appropriations. While we understand that an appropriation for the Restaurant Meals Program navigator position is not likely this session, we do emphasize that, based on informational interviews with other states that have implemented the SNAP Restaurant Meals Program, this position is absolutely essential to the program's effectiveness.

Establishing the SNAP Restaurant Meals Program in Vermont would support the ability to quickly make and distribute prepared meals at the local level during disasters by establishing a network of restaurants, food trucks, deli counters, etc. already working with AHS and ACCD, which could be quickly mobilized to also use federal and state disaster funds to set up a prepared meal distribution program. This program flexibility is critical in times of a disaster because, as we saw during both the COVID-19 pandemic and the flooding in 2023, prepared meals are a critical resource for feeding people, and our local restaurants are often one of the businesses most impacted by changes in economic conditions brought about by disasters.

By establishing the SNAP Restaurant Meals Program in Vermont now, we will ensure that our restaurants are ready and able to accept SNAP during future disruptions and provide much-needed prepared meals to households that qualify and need them, using a stable source of federal funds to do so.

The SNAP Restaurant Meals Program supports critical future infrastructure—for example, in Barre during the 2023 floods, businesses were not as strongly impacted, but many low-income city residents became homeless. Had the Restaurant Meals Program been available, federal SNAP benefits could have been used more flexibly to allow people over age 60, people with disabilities, and people who were homeless impacted by the flood to access prepared food that did not require home kitchen facilities. Participating local restaurants would have been able to receive the federal funds that would pay for these meals through the SNAP program immediately at the point of sale.

RESTAURANT MEALS PROGRAM from H.703 - An act relating to 3SquaresVT

33 V.S.A. § 1701 is amended to read:

§ 1701. SUPPLEMENTAL NUTRITION ASSISTANCE PROGRAM

(a) The State of Vermont ~~may~~ shall participate in the federal Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) pursuant to 7 U.S.C. chapter 51. The purpose of SNAP is to alleviate hunger and malnutrition among households with low income by increasing their food purchasing power and access to nutritious, safe food.

* * * Restaurant Meals Program * * *

33 V.S.A. § 1704 is added to read:

§ 1704. RESTAURANT MEALS PROGRAM

(a) The State shall participate in the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program's Restaurant Meals Program. The Restaurant Meals Program shall be administered by the Agency of Human Services, in consultation with the Agency of Commerce and Community Development.

(b) Restaurant participation in the Restaurant Meals Program shall be voluntary. The Agency of Human Services, in consultation with the Agency of Commerce and Community Development, shall develop and publish on its website a list of eligibility criteria for restaurant participation in the Restaurant Meals Program, including that participating restaurants are licensed pursuant to 3 18 V.S.A. chapter 85. The eligibility criteria shall advance the following goals:

(1) Locally produced foods are widely available to Restaurant Meals Program clients.

(2) Restaurants serving foods that represent diverse cultural traditions participate in the Restaurant Meals Program.

(3) Participating restaurants are located in geographically diverse regions of the State.

(c) The Agency of Human Services, in consultation with the Agency of Commerce and Community Development, shall provide technical assistance to those restaurants applying to and participating in the Restaurant Meals Program