

February 16, 2023, Ariana Matthews-Salzman, Huntington
3SquaresVT Specialist, Vermont Foodbank
Farmers Market Board Member, Richmond, VT

Dear Vermont House Committee on Agriculture, Forestry, and Food Resiliency,

Thank you for inviting me to share with you all. My name is Ariana Matthews-Salzman, I live in Huntington, and I am a 3SquaresVT Specialist at the Vermont Foodbank—3SquaresVT is the program known federally as SNAP. My primary role at the Foodbank is to support people who are applying to SNAP through the application process, because it can be very confusing and long-lasting and intimidating. I am also the former manager and a current board member of Richmond Farmers Market. I started managing the market in 2020, and shifted to being on the board just last week!

I am here to share with you what I know about SNAP Emergency Allotments, and what it will mean for Vermonters when those end in March.

In both my role as a 3SquaresVT Specialist at the Foodbank and my work with the Richmond Farmers Market, I have seen the positive impact that the SNAP Emergency Allotments have had on both people receiving benefits and on the businesses that benefit recipients shop with.

In my role as a 3SquaresVT specialist at the Foodbank, on a daily basis I am screening people for eligibility. If they are likely eligible for benefits—based on their gross monthly income and household size—I assist them in completing an application and support them through the whole process of being approved for benefits. When I screen someone for eligibility, if they are near the maximum eligible income limit, I explain to them that they may be approved for a very small benefit amount. To give you an example, if a household of 1 person makes around \$2,000/month, then they are only \$100 below the maximum allowed gross monthly income and if they are approved for benefits, they will likely be approved for a very small amount- maybe \$23/month or so.

I want you to know that when I speak with people who are near this maximum allowed monthly income, they are very stressed about where their next meal is going to come from, and how they are going to feed themselves and get the types of food they need to stay healthy. They are calling our 3SquaresVT helpline at the Foodbank to be screened for eligibility for a reason; they are often calling us as a last resort, and are financially strained, and are not able to feed themselves well. They are often anxious about seeking help and benefits. They do not want to need help and they don't want to need benefits. They are hard-working people: often older Vermonters, disabled, or single-parent households.

Many households I work with are approved for a low benefit amount, and all of these households rely intensely on their 3SquaresVT benefits to get them through the month of grocery shopping. Starting in April, many Vermonters receiving benefits are going to have hundreds of dollars less/month to buy food.

For the past three years, we have been able to encourage these households to apply for benefits despite being near the maximum allowed monthly income because of the SNAP Emergency Allotments. Even if a household were to be officially approved for a low monthly benefit amount like \$23, they still had the hope of getting the mid-month Emergency Allotment which ensures that all households approved for any benefit amount will get the maximum benefit amount each month. Here is an example—a household of one person approved for \$23/month is currently, through March 2023, getting a total of \$281/month because of the Emergency Allotments. A one-person household in this sort of situation will be short \$258/month come April. Larger households may be short even more money each month.

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[Click this link](#) to listen to a Vermont Public story interviewing an individual we have worked with who is in a situation like this, and [click this link](#) to view a blog post on the Vermont Foodbank website that includes two stories from Emergency Allotment recipients we interviewed.

As a Farmers Market Manager, I see 3SquaresVT dollars make it into the pockets of Vermont Farmers each week at the market all summer long. Many Farmers Markets, and Farm Stands and CSA Farms in Vermont are authorized to accept 3SquaresVT benefits. Last summer in 2022, at the Richmond Farmers Market, we saw on average \$287/week of 3SquaresVT related dollars come into the market and go straight to our food producing vendors. This total value of 3SquaresVT related money is a combination of SNAP dollars when people swipe their EBT card and Crop Cash dollars. Crop Cash is a NOFA-VT sponsored program that 3SquaresVT customers participate in which doubles, or sometimes triples, the 3SquaresVT money that someone spends at a market. Our market has participated in this program since 2012. We have dedicated market customers who come every week and spend their 3SquaresVT dollars at the market.

To link the importance of SNAP Emergency Allotments to Farmers Markets—Emergency Allotments have put more money into the hands of Vermonter's who are spending money at Farmers Markets. At our market we have seen an uptick in customers spending 3SquaresVT dollars compared to before the pandemic when Emergency Allotments did not exist. In 2022 compared to 2019 (which was the summer before Emergency Allotments started), we saw a 376% increase in SNAP related dollars coming into the market. This trend has ticked upward consistently since 2020, which was the first summer Emergency Allotments were in place. I have included a graph displaying these trends on page three of this testimony!

I want you to know that it will be very difficult to make up for the flexibility and stress-relieving support that Emergency Allotments brought to many Vermont households. And also, that we may see a downturn in 3SquaresVT dollars (and subsequently Crop Cash match dollars) flowing to our Farmers.

The Vermont Foodbank and our 320 Network Partners will be a backstop for Vermonters who are hit hard this coming April, which is the first month with no Emergency Allotments. You can support and back the Foodbank by prioritizing our 2023 appropriations request of \$3 million in base funding. Food insecurity rates may have increased due to the pandemic, but they have not receded as the pandemic has, and without SNAP Emergency Allotments the Foodbank and its Network will be a primary food resource for thousands of low-income Vermonters.

To support our farmers through this economic shift, you can continue to support NOFA-VT's food access programs with State funding like the 2023 budget allocation of \$200,000 for NOFA's food access programs. Federally, there are recommendations that the Vermont Farm Bill Nutrition Coalition just released, and you can sign on to support those recommendations, so our federal delegation is in the best place as possible to negotiate for a strong farm bill in 2023.

Thank you for listening to my story and perspective and thank you for the work you do to support Vermont agriculture, forestry, and food resiliency.

Richmond Farmers Market

