

February 16, 2023

Carrie Stahler, Vermont Foodbank

Testimony

My name is Carrie Stahler, I live in Lyndon, and I'm the Government and Public Affairs Officer at the Vermont Foodbank.

Thank you, Chair and committee members for this opportunity to come share information about the impacts of upcoming changes to the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program – also called by its acronym SNAP, referred to as 3SquaresVT here in Vermont.

SNAP is a federal food program intended to help people buy the food they need and want. That food can be purchased at any food retailer that is able to accept EBT benefits including large grocery stores, local food retailers like country stores or markets, or farms and farmers markets. People who use this program must qualify by earning 185% of the federal poverty level or less. That is \$26,973 for a single person household, or \$55,500 for a family of 4. Benefits are issued based on scaled eligibility with folks who make the least being eligible for a maximum benefit level, and those who make closer to 185% receiving a smaller benefit each month. For a single person, the maximum monthly is \$281 in 2023 and the minimum is just \$23.

During the pandemic, the federal government did a number of things to help mitigate the impact of pandemic job losses, school closures, and industry disruptions. One of the important program changes that was implemented was called SNAP Emergency Allotments. During the pandemic, all households, regardless of their income eligibility, were able to receive the maximum monthly benefit for their household size. For the past several years, this Emergency Allotment has been keeping people in Vermont fed, and has had the impact of allowing people to purchase the food they need and want, including a lot of food grown and produced from farms here in Vermont.

This change will have a drastic impact on the 72,000 people in our state who depend on 3SquaresVT to purchase food, as well as the food retailers and farms where they purchase that food. Overall, it is a loss of about \$6.5 million per month in federal funding coming into Vermont. The majority of 3SquaresVT households will lose between \$100-\$500 per month, and a few will lose up to \$2000 per month in dollars they can use to buy food. The last emergency allotment payment will happen in mid-March. In April, households relying on this program, and farms whose customers use SNAP benefits to shop at their farm stand or at the farmers market, will see a drastic change.

Even with the maximum benefits in place, 2 in 5 people in Vermont have experienced food insecurity in the past year – that is 40% of people who said they had experienced food insecurity, while only 11% of people in Vermont participate in 3SquaresVT. A main reason for this discrepancy is that the federal income cut-off for SNAP (which is also the cut-off for free school meals) is so low that many people, especially in high cost of living states like Vermont, experience food insecurity but are not eligible to enroll in SNAP.

That is also why this change in SNAP benefits will be a drastic change for our neighbors who can least afford it and make the struggle with food insecurity much worse for many of our neighbors across the state.

We are already hearing from community members and the Foodbank's network partners in communities across the state who are doing their best to prepare for these changes.

A neighbor in Barre Town has shared that he and the folks he knows who use the food shelf are grabbing a few extra cans of food when and where they are able so they can save their benefits for food that they need but can only get at the grocery store.

At Foodworks, a food shelf in Brattleboro, their director shared that the last two weeks of January were 30-50% busier than the first two weeks because people had received word that their maximum benefits were ending.

And yesterday at a Listening Session that the Foodbank held with our network to help share information about these changes, one partner shared that they are seeing steady increases and that last week during that extreme cold snap when the weather hit 35 below zero, 17 families still showed up at the food shelf for food.

When people have fewer SNAP benefits to use at the grocery store, farm stand, and farmers market, they will need to turn to other resources. Here is how you can help make sure our neighbors have what they need and that farms are supported:

- Support the Vermont Foodbank's \$3 million base funding request to purchase food and support community partners, so we can better respond to this increased need and so we can purchase food from Vermont farms to distribute to our neighbors
- Make Vermont's Universal School Meals Program permanent with funding off the top of the Education Fund
- Support additional funding for Older Vermonters Nutrition Program (H.109)
- Sign on to support the priorities of the Vermont Farm Bill Nutrition Coalition – I've sent your committee assistant a link so you can review the priorities set with input from over 400 people in Vermont. We will be sending the priorities and sign-on letter to the Vermont Delegation next week and would love to have your support on those priorities, including asking for program improvements to SNAP in the 2023 Farm Bill reauthorization.

As always, I appreciate you taking the time to listen and learn about this important program. When we can offer programs that support both our neighbors and our local farms and businesses, it is truly a win-win. In this challenging moment, as pandemic-era supports shift and change, we are working to help bridge the gap for many people here in Vermont, but we can't do it alone, we need to all work together to ensure that people in Vermont have access to the food they need and want.

Thank you for your time.