

SNAP Awareness Day
January 30, 2024

My name is Ivy Enoch, I am the SNAP Policy & Training Lead at Hunger Free Vermont. Thank you, Chair and committee members for this opportunity to testify. We're here with our partners and neighbors for SNAP Awareness Day to ask for your support on requests that together will make Vermont more food secure.

We've heard many 3SVT participants refer to this program as a lifeline, and in many cases, the only reason they are able to afford groceries. As someone who was raised by an extremely loving and hardworking single father, raising twin daughters, I know that the SNAP benefits my dad received was our entire monthly grocery budget. I know firsthand the power of SNAP to help families get by, to catch up, while still experiencing the joy of a nourishing shared meal. I would not be where I am today without SNAP.

What is SNAP? The Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program, also called by its acronym SNAP, is a federal food program intended to help people buy the food they need and want. It is a program of the USDA, which has given states permission to choose their own name if they wish—this is why SNAP is referred to as 3SquaresVT in our state. SNAP and 3SVT are the same program. 3SquaresVT is administered by the Department for Children and Families Economic Services Division of the Agency of Human Services.

3SVT benefits come on an EBT-card that works just like a regular debit card, so a trip to the grocery store with 3SquaresVT looks like any other shopper's experience. People can use their benefits at any authorized retailer, including large grocery stores, local food retailers like country stores or markets, or at farm stands and farmers markets. Each month, 3SVT keeps roughly \$12 million in our state economy, supporting our local farmers, growers, businesses, and entire community. Not only is it a vital anti-hunger program, it is an effective economic stimulus program.

People who use 3SVT must qualify by earning 185% of the federal poverty level or less. For an individual person, that means monthly earnings of \$2,400 or roughly \$26,000 annually; Benefits are determined on a sliding scale, based on a household's size, income, and expenses like rent or mortgage and childcare. There is a guaranteed federal minimum benefit amount for households of 1 and 2—typically older adults—of \$23; however, for households of 3 or more, their qualifying benefit may be as low as \$1 per month.

Framing the Need Over 68,000 Vermonters, including more than 20,000 children and 17,000 older adults, participate in 3SVT, but this accounts for **only half** of the folks in our state who may be income-eligible. Primary reasons for this discrepancy may be the stigma and shame associated with applying for government food assistance—even if you are eligible, and your taxes help pay for these programs.

When Congress ended the temporary increase to SNAP benefits (called emergency allotments) in April 2023, the majority of 3SquaresVT households—72,000 people—lost between \$100-500 a month in their grocery budget. The impact was devastating to families, and is still felt today. The challenges our fellow Vermonters have endured over the last year

alone—including the catastrophic flooding in July 2023, record-high inflation and food costs, the ending of federal pandemic-era programs—have caused cascading crises.

Pivot to Action/Hope Recovery from these cascading crises is not something that any of our community organizations, partners or neighbors can accomplish on their own. As legislators, you can make policy choices that will ensure food security for everyone who lives here. Food security for all is possible and once we achieve it, the ripple effects will be clearly visible in our communities and across our State.

There are four critical actions you can take now to help fill the gaps, to pick up the slack that our federal government has left dragging. We urge you to consider the following opportunities in front of you:

1. Support the request for \$5 million in base funding in FY2025 the Vermont Foodbank to purchase food and support community based partners.
 - a. The Vermont Foodbank’s network partners are seeing sustained, record-setting usage of food shelves and pantries across the state. Network Partners continue to share that not only is the need greater, but more people who’ve otherwise never had to visit a food shelf are now leaning on their services to put food on the table.
2. Support the request for \$2 million in base funding for the Vermont Area Agencies on Aging to support the increased demand for Meals on Wheels to meet the nutritional needs of the growing demographic of Older Vermonters.
3. Support the request for \$478,500 in base funding to Strengthen Vermont Farm Viability and Address Food Security by sustaining two proven NOFA-VT programs: CROP CASH (PLUS) and FARM SHARE
4. And Support [H. 703] which seeks to establish a Restaurant Meals Program for certain SNAP participants in Vermont, and direct the state SNAP agency to produce a transition plan to increase the SNAP minimum benefit amount for all participants. The bill has two sections:
 - a. Firstly, The Restaurant Meals Program allows certain SNAP recipients to use their benefits at **approved** restaurants. RMP was designed specifically to support elderly people, disabled people, and people experiencing homelessness, because these populations typically encounter access barriers and challenges with being able to buy, store and cook food.
 - b. Secondly, the existing formula for calculating the SNAP Minimum Benefit is woefully inadequate, outdated, and only guaranteed for household sizes of one and two. [H. 703] would direct the state to produce a transition plan to establish a state-funded supplement to the federal minimum benefit, and provide more meaningful support to participants.

These actions will significantly contribute to alleviating the hardships faced by our communities and pave the way for a more secure and resilient Vermont. I urge each member of this committee to consider these important opportunities, and make informed policy choices that will positively impact the lives of our fellow Vermonters.