

January 26, 2024

Good morning,

I am Jenna O'Farrell, St. Johnsbury, the Executive Director of Northeast Kingdom Community Action (NEKCA) which serves Caledonia, Orleans and Essex counties. Thank you for the opportunity to share testimony regarding the Vermont school meals program also known as Permanent Universal School Meals.

Northeast Kingdom Community Action is the leading organization addressing poverty through education, community collaborations, and essential services throughout the NEK. Services address food insecurity, financial wellbeing, homelessness, warmth, early education, restorative justice, community re-integration, and employment. Throughout the pandemic and local disasters, such as the July flooding, we increased critical support and services to the most vulnerable Vermonters.

In the Northeast Kingdom, we operate 4 emergency food pantries in Newport, Canaan, Island Pond and St. Johnsbury, two mobile units, and a partner in a rural food delivery program in Orleans County. On a community level, we provide supplemental food assistance and support Vermonters in applying for a 3 Squares benefit. In our 8 NEK Head Start preschool programs, we provide meals and snacks at no cost to our families.

Fortunately, NEKCA is not the only organization providing food assistance and the need has grown exponentially over the past 4 years for all families, not just those living at or below the Federal Poverty Level. We serve many families seeking assistance for the first time and do not qualify for any other benefits because their income exceeds the eligibility criteria. And still cannot afford to feed their children.

A major partner in addressing childhood hunger are our schools where all children receive free school meals. I am sure that no one disagrees that food is a human right, and our children deserve to be nourished. Providing free meals to our youngest Vermonters is not just the right thing to do, it is an upstream investment in our future. I cannot imagine the impact on our children and families if free meals at school were not available.

According to [schoolnutrition.org](http://schoolnutrition.org), the average cost of providing an elementary grade child breakfast and lunch is approximately \$4.58 a day. If a family has two children in grades PreK to 5, they will have an additional \$1604 annually at their disposal. Free school meals afford families the opportunity to allocate financial resources differently. Money that families previously spent on feeding their children breakfast and lunch are now available to spend at their discretion. Families can improve and increase the quality of food that can purchase, pay debt, manage household expenses, afford childcare, own and drive vehicles, and improve the quality of their lives.

In Canaan, Vermont, NEKCA assisted 37.5% of the households. Our Food Shelf shared 28,006 pounds (about 12703.3 kg) of food with approximately 120 individuals out of a population of about 340 individuals. Essex County has unique challenges. In 2018, NEK Choice School District was formed. Currently, there is one high school, and 4 elementary schools in a region that is 664 square miles (about half the area of Rhode Island). Many children are transported a significant distance to their school. Many areas in Essex County are considered as a "food desert" with no major grocery in the county. Free school meals become integral to rural areas with unique challenges.

Antidotally, I believe there is a tremendous benefit of free meals at schools that is not easily quantified. It is the quality of parent-child relationships. If you have parented and have had the responsibility for the shopping, buying, organization and preparing school meals for your children, it can be a daunting task riddled with tension and strife. Without the daily struggle, parental stress is decreased. Additionally,

Healthy, balanced meals form lifelong eating habits and reduce risk factors that contribute to negative health outcomes. As stated in 16 VSA §2902, Vermont students in grades K-5 shall participate in a minimum of 150 minutes of physical education per week. Students in grades 6-12 shall participate in a minimum of 225 minutes of PE per week. We know that exercise alone will not protect children from childhood obesity and other health conditions. Nutrition and exercise must be jointly valued in Vermont schools.

I don't think anyone disagrees philosophically with feeding children. I am proud of our commitment to ending childhood hunger in Vermont and hopeful that we can sustain our efforts.

Thank you!