

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.

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.

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 be income-eligible, and may need to meet additional requirements.. Generally, college students are not eligible for SNAP benefits unless they:

- Meet a work requirement (like working a job 20 hours a week on top of their classes, or participating in work study) OR;
- Meet a qualifying work exemption (like being a single parent caring for a young child, or being physically and/or mentally “unfit” for work).

It is a very complex and confusing requirement that can deter students from applying at all. A growing body of research documents dramatic increases in college student food insecurity, especially among community college students. This increase is due in large part to the rising costs of college tuition coupled with the expanded access to higher education and increased enrollment of a much more diverse student population. Community college students, who often include first-generation college students from low-income families, are typically older and have family and other responsibilities, making it challenging to fulfill the traditional SNAP “work-for-food” eligibility requirements.

In a recent 2023 survey of Community College of Vermont (CCV) students, 51% of respondents said that they couldn't afford balanced meals, and 47% of respondents said they were worried food would run out. CCV is the state's second largest college, serving an average of 10,000 students across the state each year. More than a third of CCV students

pursuing a credential are over 25-years-old and have children; and nearly all of those students are eligible for the Pell Grant—a federal grant which provides financial aid to the most low-income students. Nearly 80% of CCV students are employed while seeking their degrees.

These are hardworking parents, students, and Vermonters, many of whom are low-income. Other states have successfully gained approval from USDA to define all community college students enrolled in certificate or associate degree programs as participating in programs “likely to lead to employment.” In these states, community college students with low incomes who meet this definition are eligible to apply for SNAP without proving employment activity. This simple interpretation eliminates a **major** hurdle for community college students.

At the request of HFVT, CCV, and VSAC, the Department for Children and Families is now working with other states that have already implemented this definition to determine what steps Vermont needs to take to do the same. We are excited that soon we will be able to give all low-income community college students struggling to get an education a 3SquaresVT boost, because no student, no matter their age, can learn well if they are hungry!

In addition to this important step taken by the Department for Children and Families for community college students, there are actions you can take now to support food security for *all*, and to pick up the slack that our federal government left dragging.

1. Support the request for \$5 million in base funding in FY2025 the Vermont Foodbank to purchase food and support community based partners.
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 NOFA-VT programs: Crop Cash Plus & 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 a more secure and resilient Vermont. Thank you for your consideration.