

Tuesday January 30, 2024
Jamie Lombardo, Manager-Community Resources
Vermont Foodbank employee, student & homesteader

Dear Vermont Senate Education Committee,

Hello and thank you for welcoming me here today to share with you all. My name is Jamie Lombardo, I live in Dorset, and I am the Manager of Community Resources at the Vermont Foodbank with a focus on 3SquaresVT outreach and engagement. 3SquaresVT is federally known as SNAP. SNAP is an entitlement program for income eligible people to receive a monthly benefit to purchase groceries of their choice within eligible food items at grocery stores, convenience stores, farmer's markets and farm stands. I am also currently a student working toward a master's degree and a homesteader. I understand first-hand what is on the plates of college and graduate students when they have to balance working with furthering their education in a very tangible way.

I am here today to share with you how vital SNAP (3SquaresVT) is as a program not only for low-income Vermont neighbors but also college students. The assumption of college students fitting a right out of high school model who has the support of their parents is not today's reality on many Vermont campuses and many first-generation college students are often community college students with families and other responsibilities outside of earning a degree. With that comes trade off choices, often sacrifices, as our partners at CCV recently reported to us at the Vermont Foodbank. "Access to SNAP is vital to many community college student's ability to meet their basic needs. Rising grocery costs are a concern for students across the state, and an increasing number of students are going to class hungry or are concerned about their nutritional intake." CCV's Student Resource Center, which connects students to community resources across the state, have been seeing increased demand for food resources.

In my time with the Vermont Foodbank, I've worked closely with CCV, UVM, and Vermont Law School to build awareness, reduce stigma, and shame, and to train peer to peer ambassadors in talking about SNAP (3SquaresVT) and supporting 3SquaresVT applications. I have heard time and time again that having access to SNAP (3SquaresVT) benefits has reduced daily stress for students, increased their capacity to concentrate on their schooling and overall has helped them balance their work/school schedules. In my role I not only provide outreach for 3SquaresVT but also I support direct applications and I can say I have never supported an application in which a student wasn't working some amount of hours to try make ends meet. The ingenuity of people never ceases to amaze me with deep gratitude.

Just recently one of our Vermont Foodbank Network Partners -Rally Cat's shared with me a story that I would like to now share with you illustrating that hidden hunger currently exists on college campuses. Rally Cat's cupboard is a student led food pantry at the University of Vermont that was recently relocated into the Davis Center (an epicenter of the UVM campus). Shortly after Rally Cat's had been operating out of this space a custodial maintenance specialist stopped one of the student coordinators and shared with them how appreciative they were to see Rally Cat's in the Davis Center. They went on to say that during several of their shifts they had seen students picking through the compost waste bins pulling out food items that were in good enough shape to eat. This custodial maintenance specialist went on to say that they always wanted to be able to offer an alternative, but they weren't sure how to address it. They wanted to preserve the privacy and dignity of students who utilized this as a food resource. Since Rally Cat's relocation into the Davis Center, they felt they had seen this utilization of the compost waste bins

far less frequently and are grateful to the student led organization in giving away free food. I share this example for two reasons, one is the incredibly vivid imagery. The second is more nuanced, complex and truly speaks to how driven people are to find creative solutions to complex inequities such as food insecurity. It is vitally important to maintain and enhance programs that reduce the barriers to access. SNAP (3SquaresVT) is the most dignified way to do this.

The cascading crises people have been hit with over the past year including, the historic floods of July 2023, rising costs and inflation, the housing crisis and the end of many federal supports including the expanded SNAP/3SquaresVT emergency allotments have significantly impacted our Vermont community and the many neighbors who live here.

Together I believe we can work to ensure that hidden hunger does not exist in Vermont, especially on college campuses where those learners will become our future leaders.

I recognize that you are not the committee of jurisdiction on these proposed bills, but I do hope that when you have a chance to vote on the floor you will consider the ripple effects of supporting the following asks. I know this is a committee who cares deeply about food insecurity in all places of higher education. Our ask is for your support on several requests that together will make Vermont more food secure:

- Support the request for \$5 million in base funding in the FY25 budget for the Vermont Foodbank to purchase food and support community based partners.
- Establish a SNAP Restaurant Meals Program in Vermont and create a plan to increase the minimum benefit level
- Support the request for \$2 million in base funding to support the Older Vermonters Nutrition Program
- Support NOFA-VT's request for \$478,500 in base funding for Crop Cash Plus and Farm Share

Thank you for listening and your time today. Are there any questions? I appreciate all you do to support engaging minds in Vermont and now would like to invite our next speaker _____, to testify.