

Hello, thank you for hearing my perspective today. My name is Cory Froning, my pronouns are she/her, I live in Richmond, Vermont and I am a farmer, a social worker, and a University of Vermont graduate student. I'm working to open an on-farm therapy practice where people can incorporate movement on the land, such as walking or gardening, as a part of their therapy. While I am a student, putting my time and money towards developing this necessary community health resource, 3Squares is supporting me to nourish myself until I graduate and am able to secure an income again.

When I moved to Vermont in 2017, I worked in various social work positions (including at Spectrum, Centerpoint School, and Steps To End Domestic Violence) while farming on the weekends. During this time I was working 50 hours per week, for less than a living wage, and was just able to cover my expenses. The pace and financial stress affected me mentally and physically, I experienced daily chest pain and heart palpitations. When Covid hit, I transitioned from full time social worker to full time farmer at Bread and Butter Farm. With a fairly standard farm salary of \$20,000, I saw this shift as an investment in my mental and physical health. At Bread and Butter I had access to the most nutrient dense food - dark leafy greens, grass fed meat, fresh herbs. But I still struggled to pay my bills, including my grocery bill. While farmers have access to beautiful local food, they still need to purchase most staples. Staples in my kitchen that I do not produce include rice, oil, peanut butter, bread, dairy, nuts, chickpeas, lentils, coffee, etc. While I am fortunate to have local greens and meat in my backyard, the monetary value of that food does not make up for the low wages that I, and many farmers, face. I still struggle to afford grocery staples. 3Squares and other Vermont food access programs such as Crop Cash, Farm Share, and Meals on Wheels not only support farmers by giving recipients economic power to access local food, but also supports farmers with low incomes to feed themselves and keep doing their crucial work.

In 2021, I started The Farm Upstream LLC, with four business partners. For three seasons we leased land and grew vegetables. Our goal was to get established, create sustainable systems, form relationships, and break even while we searched for affordable land. The farmland outlook was bleak, with few farms for sale in our area, and most selling for a million dollars or more. Though it wasn't on the market, we had our eyes on an old dairy farm in Jericho with 20 acres of agricultural soil and a stream. It was perfect for what we imagined, a community vegetable and fruit farm, with an on-farm therapy practice. In 2023, after years of financial planning, collaboration, and fundraising, The Farm Upstream bought and conserved that farm in Jericho with the support of the Vermont Land Trust and the Jericho Underhill Land Trust. In the fall of 2023, I also began the University of Vermont Master of Social Work Program in pursuit of becoming a Licensed Independent Clinical Social Worker, with the ability to open my own on-farm therapy practice.

This has been an enormous financial undertaking. In order to invest in my future, I am in a full time graduate program that requires two years of unpaid internship on top of the course load. The required, unpaid, two-year internship is ubiquitous across U.S. Masters of Social Work programs and is what kept me from pursuing an MSW for so long. This requirement means I only have time to work a part time job one day per week, which earns me \$500 per month. With a mortgage to pay, \$45,000 owed in tuition, and loss of income, it is impossible to cover my expenses, including groceries. I have been reliant on my business partners for support during this time, which is part of our resilient, collaborative model, but I cannot rely on them for

everything or for too long. I applied for 3Squares when I started school in September, before I knew what this new financial stress would feel like. I am so grateful I applied, and for the support that 3Squares offers me, to take one financial worry off my plate (and put food on my table), while I invest in my education, future, and community.

3Squares offers physical and mental relief when I go to the grocery store and know that I can feed myself while I am in school. I know many of my classmates, fellow farmers, and clients alike could benefit from this relief, of not being physically stressed about feeding themselves, especially when both farmers and social workers are working to help nourish others.

3Squares is a crucial program. It supports people like me to feed ourselves and make ends meet in times of transition. My request is for you to support the Food Bank's campaign, "Give SNAP a boost," which will expand eligibility for students. Current college and graduate student eligibility guidelines are prohibitive. Many students, even when they are unable to feed themselves, are not eligible. I am lucky to have fallen within eligibility guidelines, but I want you to know that many of my peers, who are also struggling to make ends meet, are not eligible. We all deserve to nourish ourselves, and to be able to go to the grocery store without crippling stress and anxiety. The "Give SNAP a boost" campaign would ensure that more Vermont students are well-fed and can better focus their attention on their education and their future.

PAUSE

Thank you for listening, and for your consideration. I recognize I shared a lot of complex information with you so I am happy to answer any questions!