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S.215, an Act Relating to 3SquaresVT: A Policy Choice to Improve Food Security

Testimony provided to the Senate Committee on Health & Welfare

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My name is Anore Horton, and I am the Executive Director of Hunger Free Vermont. Our mission is to end the injustice of hunger for everyone, by prioritizing the people most affected by hunger in our state to make permanent systemic change. Thank you, Chair and committee members for taking up S.215.

I'm sure you are painfully aware that the State does not always have the option to make policy choices that improve how federal programs work for our people, but this is an instance where you could actually make a choice to make this most critical federal nutrition program—SNAP—better for thousands of people in Vermont. It's really very exciting!

Just imagine for a moment that food security programs like 3SquaresVT worked in more flexible ways that were a match for different people's needs, and truly created an experience of daily, weekly, monthly, and yearly food security for everyone who used them. What a relief that would be for so many people and families—and for you as legislators concerned for the wellbeing of your constituents and your communities. S.215 puts our feet on that road.

I believe that the changes to our 3SquaresVT program envisioned by S.215 would be so meaningful that many of the thousands of folks who are income-eligible for 3SquaresVT but aren't enrolled would enroll, creating more food security for more people, while also leveraging more federal dollars for our food businesses and farmers in new ways, and easing the crisis being experienced by our charitable food system.

You have before you in S.215 policy choices that support people who face the greatest challenges staying food secure, while also bringing in a whole new set of permanent partners for food security - our restaurant community, who showed they are willing and able to step up during the pandemic.

The main point I want to leave you with is that through S.215, you can address many of the issues raised by the witnesses you have just heard from.

1. Bringing the SNAP Restaurant Meals Program to Vermont
2. Providing a navigator to support local restaurants and food trucks in the process to become a certified RMP restaurant
3. Getting a transition plan with the information the legislature needs to make policy choices that would address these forms of hidden hunger you have heard about today

S.215 contains these three actions, and by directing the State to take them, you would be making a very real difference in the lives of thousands of people all over our state.

Both parts of S.215 are really important for different reasons. Getting Vermont up and running with RMP will have an immediate beneficial impact on some of the most vulnerable Vermonters—with the Navigator position ensuring that the small Vermont restaurants and food trucks that are the key hubs of community connection get the help they need to be part of RMP; and the transition plan will help us all see the next steps we can take on the road to food security for everyone who is eligible for 3SquaresVT.

Passing S.215 would also make progress toward fulfilling on the Farm to Plate Network's newly released Vermont Food Security Roadmap. One of the priority strategies for ending hunger for everyone in Vermont by 2035 is to provide supplemental payments to existing benefit programs, so that the total benefits to enrolled Vermonters provide financial assistance adequate to meeting all their basic needs (strategy G1.1). Another priority strategy is to strengthen and expand Vermont's prepared meal infrastructure utilizing existing meal programs and entities, including increasing the capacity of restaurants to provide meals (strategy G5.1).

Thank you for your time, and for your commitment to making informed policy choices to create food security for all of us in Vermont.