



Testimony in House Agriculture, Food Resiliency & Forestry Committee

Provided on February 4, 2026, by Connie Beal, Working Bridges Director, United Way of Northwest Vermont

Thank you, Chair Durfee and members of the committee, for the opportunity to testify today. My name is Connie Beal, and I live in St. Albans, Vermont. I am a working parent to two young children and lead the Working Bridges program, a shared initiative of United Way of Northwest Vermont and Green Mountain United Way. We partner with employers to improve employee retention, advancement, and financial stability.

Working Vermonters continue to struggle with rising costs of living—especially food and health care. These pressures remain the top reasons employees seek support from our Resource Coordinators year after year. Vermont's food insecurity rate reached **12.2% in 2023**, affecting roughly **79,010 people**. Food prices in the Northeast rose another **3.4% in 2025**. When budgets tighten, workers cut their grocery spending first—skipping meals, eating less, and stretching what little they have. These hardships directly affect health, well-being, and the ability to reliably show up to work.

Working Bridges helps employers close these gaps. One example is our partnership with programs such as **Feed Every Need**, which provides fresh and frozen prepared meals at workplaces for employees to take home. These resources have been heavily utilized and deeply valued by workers.

3SquaresVT—Vermont's SNAP program—is one of the strongest tools available to support families and the economy. In FY2024, an average of **66,500 Vermonters (10.3% of the state)** received SNAP, bringing **\$147.2 million in federal dollars** into Vermont. Research consistently shows that every **\$1 in SNAP generates about \$1.54** in economic activity, supporting grocers, farmers, food retailers, and local jobs.

Medicaid and Dr. Dynasaur are equally foundational to workforce stability. In 2024, roughly ****176,300 Vermonters—27.2% of the population—****were enrolled. Stable health coverage helps workers get preventive care instead of delaying treatment until they face medical crises that create significant financial strain and lead to missed work.

Despite this, many eligible Vermonters lose access to these programs not because they are ineligible, but due to administrative barriers—confusing notices, missing paperwork, or challenges navigating complex renewal processes. These disruptions create instability at home and in the workplace.

We know a good job alone does not guarantee stability. One full-time manufacturing employee I worked with earned a steady wage and had benefits, yet after a difficult separation, they were struggling to afford food and basic needs. A single parent with no computer access, they had no idea they were eligible for 3SquaresVT or Medicaid. I helped them complete both applications—on paper, right at their workplace—and coordinated with a local food pantry to have a box delivered discreetly to their car during a shift. Within weeks, they were approved for monthly food benefits and Medicaid. This allowed them to keep food on the table, avoid medical debt, save what they would have spent on premiums, and maintain consistent attendance at work. Because our support is located at their workplace, we continue to check in regularly on their goals and any emerging challenges. Now they know they have a trusted, confidential resource to turn to.

This story illustrates the power of **Benefit Assisters**: meeting people where they are, helping them navigate systems, and ensuring they receive the food, and health supports their families rely on. Benefit Assisters are a **high-quality, cost-effective solution**. By supporting trusted community organizations, we can help eligible Vermonters complete applications, renew benefits on time, respond to increasing documentation requirements, and maintain steady access to food and health coverage. All while maximizing federal dollars flowing into our state and strengthening our workforce, employers, grocers, and health providers.

Working Bridges currently operates across northern Vermont with over **30 employer partners, 44 worksites**, and more than **20,000 workers** with access to the program. On behalf of working Vermonters and the employers who rely on them, I respectfully urge you to support the Benefit Assister proposal.

Like many community organizations included in this proposal—Working Bridges relies on a combination of fee-for-service revenue, philanthropic support, and competitive grants to sustain our work. State investment in this initiative will strengthen one of the most effective, evidence-based strategies we have to support Vermonters, reduce hunger, and improve health outcomes. This funding represents a strategic use of public resources that stabilizes households while strengthening Vermont businesses and communities.

Thank you for your leadership and for your continued service to Vermonters

Footnotes

¹ Vermont food insecurity data (2023): Map the Meal Gap, Feeding America.

² Northeast regional food price inflation (Dec 2025): U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics.

³ Vermont SNAP participation (FY 2024): Food and Nutrition Service (USDA).

⁴ SNAP economic multiplier estimate: USDA Economic Research Service.

⁵ Vermont Medicaid enrollment (2024): USAFacts / CMS data.