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House Agriculture, Food Resiliency, and Forestry Committee

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Thank you Chair Durfee and committee members. My name is Ivy Enoch, and I live in Burlington. I am the Director of Policy and Advocacy at Hunger Free Vermont. I appreciate the opportunity to discuss with this committee the strength and importance of our network of benefit assisters in communities across Vermont, and ask that you support this request of \$4.95 million in FY2027 as an investment in this existing benefit assistor network for SNAP, known as 3SquaresVT, and Medicaid.

Every month I facilitate a group of 30-50 people at organizations across Vermont who serve as benefits assistors for 3SquaresVT in their communities. This is called the "3SquaresVT Workgroup" and our mission is to reduce barriers and maximize participation in 3SquaresVT. We strive for a more accessible and human-centered application and enrollment process, and aim to connect every eligible Vermonter with this important, effective, and efficient food security program.

Attendees of this 3SquaresVT Workgroup include benefits assistors from Community Action Agencies, Area Agencies on Aging, Vermont Foodbank, Vermont Legal Aid, NOFA-VT, healthcare centers, as well as staff from the Department of Children and Families Food and Nutrition Team who are responsible for administering 3SquaresVT, and members of Vermont's Congressional Delegation staff. This is a passionate, smart, and invested group with many years of experience and expertise in navigating not only 3SquaresVT, but Medicaid, Medicare, Fuel Assistance applications—and in connecting people to programs like Crop Cash, FarmShare, and others. This group collaborates on and develops tools to overcome stigma and gaps in awareness, organize joint outreach efforts across the state, learn from each other about application assistance best practices, and study program rules to ensure a depth and accurate understanding of the policy.

This group was especially important at two critical moments in the last couple of years:

Emergency response during summer flooding: As you know well, Vermont endured catastrophic flooding in July 2023 and 2024. Access to food was at the center of this emergency for communities, including 3SquaresVT households who lost all of their groceries. During this emergency, 3SquaresVT participants were able to receive replacement benefits to compensate for lost food, and were able to temporarily use benefits to buy hot foods at grocery stores and farmers markets. But how do you get the word out about this technical, temporary availability in such a moment of crisis? The 3SquaresVT Workgroup of benefit assistors played an essential role in communicating this information to communities, including being trained on how to actually help people request replacement benefits.

The second critical moment was—and still is—responding to the historic SNAP changes passed in the federal budget package, H.R.1: As you also know, this law which went into effect July 2025, marked the largest-ever cut to SNAP—our most effective and dignified federal nutrition program we have—and Medicaid. Devastatingly for the 40 million people and 250,000 retailers nationwide who count on SNAP, H.R.1 made deep funding cuts and eligibility changes. I know you have heard testimony from my colleagues and others on the

details of these changes, but I want to remind us of those eligibility changes, and the fact that they went into effect in October 2025. There were changes to how households report monthly utility costs. There were changes to the existing work reporting rule that limits access to 3SquaresVT to three months in a three year period for adults. There were changes in eligibility for many immigrant community members. In total, these changes impacted more than 7,000 3SquaresVT households, either by terminating their eligibility, or requiring them to report new information to keep their level of monthly benefits.

3SquaresVT, while our most effective food security program, is also a complex program. It requires a lengthy and involved application process, verification of information, and periodic reporting. Benefit assistors help people decode complex application questions, understand what documentation is needed to verify their information, and what to expect in the mandatory interview. The importance of this service couldn't be more apparent than when we see major changes in eligibility, like with H.R. 1. The 3SquaresVT Workgroup worked, and continues to work closely and tirelessly with the state agency and with each other to ensure a comprehensive understanding of these changes, how to communicate them to clients, answer questions about complex notices, and support folks in keeping their benefits if they still qualify—or help explain why they lost benefits if they no longer qualified. This work is not over.

In addition to monthly 3SquaresVT Workgroup meetings, Hunger Free Vermont hosts quarterly trainings on 3SquaresVT eligibility, application assistance, and positive messaging outreach for benefit assistors. Last year, we trained more than 800 people. Between 3SquaresVT Workgroup, these trainings, and the institutional knowledge that exists in community serving organizations, we have a strong network of benefit assistors, and Vermont is often lifted up as a model for other states. These trained benefits assistors not only ensure a unified understanding of 3SquaresVT across the state, but they support our state agency as they process applications that are completed accurately—which is very important in the effort to maintain a low SNAP payment error rate.

Benefit assistors improve the human experience of navigating paperwork, phone calls, and documents to access basic needs support—like money for groceries. And, it can't be overstated that benefit assistors are responding now to many complex program changes and greater needs. Investing in this existing network of benefit assistors at trusted organizations across Vermont will have a multiplier effect by helping eligible people to continue to receive federally funded SNAP, and keep those federal dollars flowing to our grocers, farmers, and overall economy.

We all want to ensure the best possible outcomes for all people living in Vermont. Benefit assistors exist to do just that in their communities—in your communities. Thank you for your time and consideration. I look forward to discussing the value of investing in this existing network of compassionate experts further.