

Carrie Stahler
3SquaresVT Awareness Day
February 6, 2025
House Committee on Agriculture, Food Resiliency, and Forestry

Thank you committee chair and members. My name is Carrie Stahler, I am the Sr. Manager of Government & Public Affairs for Vermont Foodbank and I live in Lyndon. I appreciate all of the time you have given us today to share information about how critical 3SquaresVT is for our neighbors, and for the impact of 3SquaresVT incentive programs like Crop Cash (Plus) and Farm Share.

I want to reiterate our requests before you this legislative session - these are policy choices you can make to ensure that people across Vermont have access to the food they need and want:

1. Pass legislation to instruct the State to opt into the SNAP Restaurant Meals Program and appropriate \$75,000 to cover restaurant start up costs, and \$100,000 for a staff position within DCF to administer the program.
2. Support \$500,000 in base funding to strengthen Vermont farms and food security by sustaining two proven programs run by NOFA-VT (the Northeast Organic Farming Association of Vermont): CROP CASH (PLUS) and FARM SHARE
3. Support the request for \$5 million in base and one-time funding in the FY26 budget for the Vermont Foodbank to be prepared when disasters strike our neighbors in towns across Vermont, to purchase and distribute food, and support the network of community-based food shelves and meal sites.
4. Include an additional \$2 million in base general funding for home-delivered meals for older and disabled Vermonters through the "Meals on Wheels" programs operated through Vermont's Area Agencies on Aging, including the option to draw down additional matching funds through the global commitment investment.

I also want to go back to a point Johanna made in her introduction. 3SquaresVT is *just* one part of the safety net and can't meet the need on its own—it's not designed to do that. I'm here to help you understand what the other food security puzzle pieces are for people in communities like yours.

While many of our neighbors benefit from these critical programs, they do not meet the high, sustained need for food access across the state of Vermont. That is where Vermont Foodbank, our partners come in. Our work to redistribute food across the state is critical to helping people meet their needs. This food comes to Vermont Foodbank in a number of ways - through grocery retailer donations, community donations, federal food programs, and food purchases. The greatest area of growth we have experienced since 2020 is in food purchase. This includes both food purchased from Vermont farms, but also food purchased from other sources. Why is that? Because the need for food access and food access programs remains high following the

disruptions experienced by the COVID-19 pandemic, the economic shocks including high inflation, steep increases in prices on everything from food to housing, and ongoing climate disruptions across the state including floods, ice storms, and multi-day power outages. Any one of these things can be a difficult thing for a household to “weather” but many of our neighbors have experienced more than one of these events. Dr. Meredith Niles and her team at UVM have data supporting this. I invite you [to review her team’s brief](#) comparing the experiences of people who are food secure with the experiences of people who are food insecure. I’ve included a link in my written testimony.

Vermont Foodbank estimates that in 2024, we served an average of 72,000 people per month. As many of our network partner organizations, some of who are with us here in the State House today, will tell you, many of the individuals that visit their food shelf or meal sites also use 3SquaresVT. 3SquaresVT is intended to be a “Supplemental” program, and in many cases, households are also using charitable food access points to supplement their food needs as well. There are also a number of people who are not eligible for or who cannot access 3SquaresVT. All of those people are welcome at food shelves, meal sites, and direct distribution events across the state.

In fact, one of our most popular programs is a direct distribution program distributing produce, including Vermont grown produce, called VeggieVanGo. That program is very low barrier with no eligibility requirements - this program is carried out in partnership with schools and hospitals, who refer their families and patients to use this resource. Some people come one time to help make ends meet for one month. Others visit regularly to help make sure they can afford to have fresh produce each month. In speaking to neighbors at these events, I have heard many different reasons. Farmers picking up produce for their farm laborers, a man whose family freezer had thawed in a multi-day power outage and his family needed to use all of their available cash resources to refill the freezer with meat they had lost in the thaw, or an older woman whose spouse had recently passed away and her household income was subsequently cut in half, so her doctor’s office recommended she come pick up produce to make sure she was still meeting her dietary needs.

These programs work together with 3SquaresVT to weave together the food safety net for neighbors across Vermont. You have the opportunity this session to invest in meaningful support for food security. When you do, the positive impacts are felt across all 14 counties in Vermont, from Bennington to Derby Line. There are policy choices in front of you this year that can support food security for all who live here. Again, I would like to reiterate the programs that we are asking you to support to create food security for neighbors across Vermont:

1. Support NOFA-VT’s request for \$500,000 in base funding to Strengthen Vermont Farm Viability and Address Food Security by sustaining two proven programs: Crop Cash (Plus) and Farm Share.

2. Pass legislation to instruct the State to opt into the SNAP Restaurant Meals Program and appropriate \$75,000 to cover restaurant start up costs, and \$100,000 for a staff position within DCF to administer the program.
3. Support the request for \$5 million in base and one-time funding in the FY25 budget for the Vermont Foodbank to be prepared when disasters strike our neighbors in towns across Vermont, to purchase and distribute food, and support the network of community-based food shelves and meal sites.
4. Support V4A's request for an additional \$2 million in base general funding for home-delivered meals for older Vermonters, "Meals on Wheels", including the option to draw down additional matching funds through the global commitment investment.

Thank you for your time and for your consideration. We would be happy to talk with any of you after the hearing or to take questions if there is time.