

ACORN Testimony at House Ag Committee - 4/15/25

Good afternoon, my name is Lindsey Berk and I serve as the Executive Director of ACORN, or the Addison County Relocalization Network. We operate the ACORN Food Hub in Middlebury. First, I wanted to thank you for meeting with us this afternoon.

State ACORN mission, organized in 2005 and formally as a 501c3 in 2009

Primarily a network and information hub, no physical space, all remote.

- We have adapted our programmings and have evolved over time (Stone Soup, Financing the Working Landscape, Sustainable Living Expo).
- Started building relationships with farmers through our Guide, TDF, F2S
- 2019- Farmacy Food is Medicine
- 2022- Food Hub

Food Hub/ online market

The ACORN Food Hub exists and has been successful in its infancy because of ACORN's origin as a network with 20 years of experience working with local food producers around Vermont's Champlain Valley, establishing trust.

Prior to opening, ACORN had been exploring how a food hub might work in Addison County for over a decade, as the Route 7 Corridor had been historically underdeveloped with regards to local food infrastructure due to its rural and mountainous geographical challenges. The Champlain Valley, however, is the heartland of Vermont's commercial agriculture, with over seven hundred local food producers. Farmers in our region can grow more food if they have stable markets, infrastructure for storage and the ability to connect to a wider distribution network.

The ACORN Food Hub offers an online wholesale market, cold storage, cross docking and delivery to make it easier for wholesale buyers such as restaurant chefs, school and hospital food service directors, and grocery store buyers to source Champlain Valley products. The ACORN Food Hub increases access to markets for local food producers,

promotes farm viability and contributes to a vibrant local economy. It is also making it easier to get local food into K through twelve school cafeterias.

Additionally, ACORN's Farmacy: Food is Medicine program (that's Farmacy with an F) is now housed within the food hub. This is a *huge* upgrade from its parking lot location for its first three years. Part community-supported agriculture, part doctor's orders, the Farmacy program is free for patients who have been referred by their physicians. The farm shares are sourced from local farms and come with supplemental educational materials.

It is important to note that we started moving food charitably first, buying food from farmers, packing CSA bags, and giving them for free. Now we're also in the commercial food world, moving food not only around the Champlain Valley, but also around the state and out of the state thanks to our food hub network partners. We are selling food as far north as Jericho, and thanks to Vermont Farmers Food Center's cross docking space, we are selling and distributing food as far south as Danby and Shrewsbury. We sell to the Essex Food Hub across the lake in Essex, NY, and we're now putting cases of Champlain Valley products on Farm Connex trucks that bring products to the Northeast Kingdom and beyond. Lastly, something that we're really excited about, we're also partnering with private distributors such as Lesser Distribution, Pumpkin Village and Myer's Produce, allowing us to better serve more remote customers, while securing new markets for local producers. It is clear the ACORN Food Hub is providing a critical need for short term cold storage, cross docking and last mile delivery, building relationships and driving sales that wouldn't otherwise happen.

We are not operating independently, we are part of a food hub ecosystem that is emerging across the state, New England and the U.S. As the old saying goes, we are stronger, together, and I truly believe all Vermonters are benefitting from this collaboration of independent, mission-driven food hubs as we each work to strengthen our own community's foodshed.

Thank you.