

TESTIMONY TO: House Agriculture Committee
FROM: Hilary Martin, Diggers' Mirth Collective Farm
RE: VT Foodbank Vermonters Feeding Vermonters Program
DATE: January 22, 2026

Thank you so much for having me here today. I love the opportunity to talk to our legislators about what I do and care about so much! I am here today in support of the Vermont Foodbank's budget request for the 2027 Fiscal Year, and I am so happy to be here with you to talk about Vermonters Feeding Vermonters.

My name is Hilary Martin, from Burlington, Vermont. I am co-owner of Diggers' Mirth Collective Farm. We rent and manage 15 acres in the Intervale, where we have profitably raised organic vegetables since 1992. Our farm is collectively-owned and supports six owners and one to three seasonal employees. We raise a mix of vegetables that we sell just in Burlington to stores, restaurants, Sodexo at UVM, one Farmers Market, and we are fortunate to be a part of the Vermonters Feeding Vermonters program.

Our work with the Foodbank began as a pandemic response that was grant funded, but thanks to the Foodbank's advocacy and organizing, we are planning now for the 2026 season and hoping for more years to come after that. Here's how it works: The Foodbank contracts us to create weekly shares of vegetables from July through October. We are paid retail value for these shares, and we are given control of what to grow and how to distribute the crops through the 12-16 week period that they are being distributed. We wash and pack the crops into shares, and deliver them once a week to our partners (The Family Room and Feeding Champlain Valley), who get them to the recipients.

We grow crops that are desired by the recipients of these shares—largely New American families. This is largely informed by our years of selling directly to New Americans at the neighborhood farmers market that our farm founded back in 1992. Since then, we have sold produce to the waves of people settling in Burlington from Vietnam, Bosnia, Iraq, Sudan, Somalia, the Congo, Burundi, Nepal, and Afghanistan, and we have a sense of what people are looking for and which vegetables bring them the joy, confidence, and comfort of their cultures.

Our contract with Vermonters Feeding Vermonters has become our favorite account because:

- Fresh and healthy food of premium quality and quantity gets directly into the kitchens of people who need them
- Our community partners are embedded in the community and know how to get produce to people, and they are empathetic, flexible, and professional
- Our partners understand the proper handling and cooling needs of our produce and distribute it efficiently
- This has been a profitable, efficient, and consistent market that gives our farm trust, control and flexibility
- Kindness and caring is at the root of this project and it radiates outwards

I'd like to tip my hat to our community partners. The Family Room (one of the Parent Child Centers) is intimately linked to families across the city and their needs. People seek their services for childcare, language help, access to services, group play, father support groups—anything that makes a healthy family. The organization knows what families need and how to get it to them. And you are probably familiar with Feeding Champlain Valley—the biggest Food Shelf and Burlington and a distributor of food assistance in four counties! We love that we can focus on growing vegetables, because they do the work of distributing them. I know that the Foodbank's FY27 request includes funding not just for us growers, but also for the essential work that these organizations do across the state to fill people's pantries, fridges, and bellies in the day-to-day gaps, and through emergencies as well.

The Pandemic changed the landscape of our farm's markets: It disrupted how and where people shopped—and those changes didn't all bounce back. Since then, sales at our retail store accounts have been dipping. Our restaurant accounts are also struggling. Farmers markets sales spiked during Covid with outdoor shopping and stimulus checks, but since 2022, they have been dropping, probably due in part to rising costs and tighter household budgets. At the farm, we are trying to weather erratic conditions through the pandemic, economic strain, and climate change. Vermonters Feeding Vermonters has been a steady market with a consistency that is crucial for us.

Vermonters Feeding Vermonters is a win-win-win project: This project provides security for farms like ours, which in turn supports our working lands economy. It provides food security for our neighbors with fresh, healthy, local foods that are culturally specific. And by supporting the most poor and vulnerable among us, our whole community is stronger.

I've attached some photos of our farm and examples of culturally-specific vegetables that we grow for this program with my written testimony. Thank you so much for taking the time to learn about our farm and our participation with the Vermont Foodbank. I hope you will consider supporting funding their programs in 2027.



Our collective a few years ago, along with our employee of 12 years, Isha Abdi. Isha helped us fine-tune the selection crops that we offer to different New American groups.



A typical share sent to Nepali families—hakurei turnips, napa cabbage, daikon radish (with greens), cilantro, and spinach.



A share sent to farmworker in Addison County featuring jalapeno peppers, tomatillo, tomato, sweet peppers, onions, carrots, spinach, cilantro, and epazote—a popular herb in Mexico cooked with beans for flavor and digestion.



A typical share for Burundian and Somalian families, featuring bottle gourds, African eggplant, Italian eggplant, tomatoes, cilantro, spinach, and molokhia—a green popular across the Middle East and Africa.



A washtub full of two types of bitter gourd. An example of a crop that we would sell sporadically at the Farmers Market, but we found its true market through Vermonters Feeding Vermonters.



The Diggers at work in the field.



Baby bok choi in the field.



Setting up for spinach harvest