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FY26 Budget Adjustment Funding Needed to Support the Transition of Bridges to Health to Vermont's Free & Referral Clinics While Ensuring Critical Uninterrupted Services

**Testimony provided to the House Committee on Agriculture, Food Resiliency, and Forestry
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Chair Durfee and members of the House Committee on Agriculture, Food Resiliency, and Forestry, thank you so much for fitting me in this morning to express Hunger Free Vermont's strong support for including \$167,700 in the FY26 Budget Adjustment Act in support of Bridges to Health. This funding is needed urgently to aid in transitioning Bridges to Health from their current home at the University of Vermont to a fiscal sponsorship with Vermont's Free & Referral Clinics. UVM has provided bridge funding to Bridges to Health to sustain the work through the end of June contingent upon a commitment by Bridges to Health to relocate to a new organization as of July 1.

Bridges to Health is a health outreach and care coordination program for migrant and immigrant workers and families across Vermont who are not otherwise served by existing programs. They ensure that essential immigrant workers and family members in agriculture, building trades, and service industries have timely access to needed health and health related supports. Eight regionally based Community Health Workers meet needs identified by the communities they serve engaging with well over 1,000 individuals per year. They work one-on-one with families and with households to navigate an increasingly complex health care system. Bridges to Health Community Health Workers have trust and rapport with clients, employers, volunteer drivers, volunteer health providers, and community-based organizations; relationships and connections that directly address systemic and individual barriers to care to ensure as many people as possible can access needed health care services.

Without the trusted connections to healthcare, food, transportation, and other critical basic needs that Bridges to Health's Community Health Workers provide, the essential workers and their families who are served by Bridges to Health will have no way to access these basic needs except through our already overstretched hospital emergency departments. This is the most costly and least effective approach we as a State could take, and would cause great harm to families, employers, and our already fragile healthcare system.

BAA funding will cover expenses related to the transition of Bridges to Health to their new home under the auspices of the Free & Referral Clinics, as well as 6 weeks of core operations. Transition expenses include IT set up and security systems, computer software and programs, office space and related supplies, storage space for health outreach supplies, transfer of and updates to the program database to a new secure server, telecom services, and various business and program insurances.

Vermont's reliance on immigrant and migrant workers to fill critical jobs on farms, in home construction and repair, restaurants, and hospitality has increased significantly in the past five years. These same essential workers and their family members are facing the cascading negative effects of federal decisions, actions and appropriations. Ensuring Bridge to Health's successful transition to their new fiscal sponsor is a necessary first step to maintaining the trust and provision of services to immigrant communities that are increasingly wary of accessing needed health services in a timely manner.

Hunger Free Vermont is particularly concerned about ensuring the continuation of the Bridges to Health program because it provides not only direct healthcare support, but also assistance connecting to food resources, to over one thousand farmworkers on farms across all 14 counties of Vermont, as well as supporting the families in accessing food and other basic needs. Research and our own community outreach through our eight regional Food Security Networks tells us that this is the population most vulnerable to experiencing severe hunger in our state... It is an essential resource to ensure those essential workers on Vermont's farms, and in dozens of other professions, can access the care they need and deserve. The program is facing serious funding challenges and uncertainty largely as a result of federal policies, and may be forced to end if funding support and a long term home for the program aren't secured.

Hunger Free Vermont is respectfully requesting, on behalf of the population served by Bridges to Health, that this committee support a state appropriation of \$167,700 in the FY26 Budget Adjustment Act to ensure their critical work can continue without interruption.

Thank you for your consideration of this important request.