

Food Security in Vermont Amid Federal Changes

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Thank you Chair Durfee and committee members for the opportunity to speak with you today. My name is Sherry Maher, and I have been managing the Brattleboro Winter Farmers' Market since its inception in 2006. I also have been serving the Vermont farmers market association board for a number of years. I am happy to share with you today some of the impacts our market community has experienced in this period of uncertainty and disruption to 3SquareVT/SNAP benefits.

We were preparing to begin our 20th season of our winter season market on Nov. 1, the day that the month's benefits would typically appear on recipients' cards. As you may recall there was much uncertainty, and at least 2 court proceedings leading up to that. But by the day prior it was pretty clear that despite the wonderful decision by the state of Vermont, we could expect to see few if any SNAP shoppers as their November benefits would not have yet been deposited. We began to scramble as a market organization, along with our non-profit sponsor to find a way to fill the gap. We began a fundraising campaign right away, and calculated what to expect in cost, and if we could cover it while the campaign got up and running, and thus a new market match program we called the Snap Gap was born. While doing that, we learned that NOFA had directed VT markets to provide \$20 in Crop Cash PLUS to anyone arriving at the market who needed money for food. We matched that with \$40 in our coupons so that any SNAP customer who would have turned their \$20 into \$60 for food shopping at the market could have that to spend for food. This was not only a huge boost to the many SNAP customers who came that day, but it also was important to supporting our farmers and food producers who brought all their wonderful food to market and rely on those sales.

Since the pandemic, the number of SNAP customers we see each week has grown significantly. And the combination of their SNAP dollars along with the match from programs like Crop Cash and Crop Cash PLUS, serves to incentivize these folks to spend their benefits with their local producers rather than at a big box grocery store. This results in health benefits for these families, keeps vital income flowing to local producers which serves to keep those dollars circulating in the local economy, what I like to a WIN WIN WIN scenario.

On that November 1st, we saw only two thirds of the typical SNAP shoppers. Quite a few of them didn't know what they could buy that day with no balance on their EBT cards, and there was such overwhelming gratitude and relief when they learned that we had their backs. Surprisingly many of them did still have \$20 remaining on their cards, as a testament to how important it is to them to budget those limited funds so that they can see them multiplied at a local farmers market. We had hugs and tears of gratitude, along with a few who had expected to spend their own limited dollars that day, decide make small donations of their own funds to the food fund we had ramped up the previous day.

While the major alarms suddenly blaring because of the shutdown are mostly behind us now, the food security crisis is not. And if as expected, many folks across our state and across the country who rely on the ACA for health coverage may suddenly find themselves in the camp of the food insecure as they see their healthcare costs rise dramatically. They aren't likely to qualify for food benefits, but I know from past experience, when a budget is squeezed beyond capacity, money for food is one of the first things that is sacrificed and thus the quality of nutrition goes down and health costs go higher still.

These may very likely be the next wave of folks in what we call the SNAP gap, those who don't qualify for food benefits, but may not have enough money leftover to adequately feed their families. Thus we will continue our fundraising efforts because that's how we show up for our community, our market visitors and our producers. The state of Vermont can also make policy choices to make sure everyone in Vermont can access the food they need. **Supporting \$500,000 in ongoing funds for Crop Cash (Plus) and Farm Share in the FY2027 state budget** is an integral piece of this puzzle.

Thank you for taking the time to learn more about this critical issue.