

## Policy Brief

# Understanding the Vermonters Feeding Vermonters Program

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## Executive Summary

Vermonters Feeding Vermonters (VFFV) is a Vermont Foodbank program that combats food insecurity while supporting local farmers by purchasing fresh, locally grown food and distributing it through various channels. Since 2018, VFFV has worked with hundreds of farms resulting in millions of dollars of economic activity in Vermont and brought food to thousands of Vermonters. Despite this, several challenges currently exist within the program, including the challenge of funding a large program, capacity barriers including transportation and record keeping, and climate disruptions. Examining similar programs across several other states demonstrates opportunities to inform possible changes to VFFV and its funding.

## Introduction

VFFV is a Vermont Foodbank program that aims to provide fresh, local, nutritious food to Vermonters facing food insecurity while supporting local farmers' financial security. Since its first year in 2018, VFFV has attracted 299 participating farms, purchased 104 types of crops, and contributed an estimated \$3.8 million to the Vermont economy.<sup>1</sup> VFFV functions through three components including (1) large-scale wholesale purchasing, (2) mini-grants to Vermont Foodbank partners, and (3) farm share CSAs of culturally responsive food. Large-scale wholesale purchasing consists of the Vermont Foodbank purchasing food directly from larger farms in Vermont and distributing it throughout their 225 distribution sites across the state. Mini-grants go to existing Vermont Foodbank network partners with a maximum grant amount of \$3,500. These partners then independently purchase from local, small-scale, diversified farms, which has allowed independent purchasing from farms. The farm share CSAs work with BIPOC farmers to purchase culturally responsive produce, and most of these CSAs are distributed to New American families and migrant farmworkers.<sup>2</sup>

In 2019, the CDC reported that food insecurity costs Vermonters \$82M in annual health care expenses, with this cost likely higher post-pandemic.<sup>3</sup> In 2024, VFFV distributed 1.4 million pounds of local food in efforts to lower the impacts and costs of food insecurity. As introduced in 2025, bill H.167 seeks to permanently fund a grant program for VFFV under the Agency of Agriculture, in efforts to support the program in expanding their purchasing from Vermont farms.

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<sup>1</sup> Roche, E., Becot, F., Kolodinsky, J. (2016). *Economic Contribution and Potential Impact of Local Food Purchases Made by Vermont Schools*. Center for Rural Studies. <https://localfoodeconomics.com/wp-content/uploads/2016/11/Economic-Contribution-of-Farm-to-School.pdf>

<sup>2</sup> M. Wallace & A. Boudreaux, personal communication, February 27, 2025

<sup>3</sup> *Vermonters Feeding Vermonters*. Vermont Foodbank. (2025, March 20). <https://www.vtfoodbank.org/more-programs/vermonters-feeding-vermonters/>

## Benefits

This program provides a multitude of mutually beneficial relationships — local farmers and producers having a stable and guaranteed market, consumers having access to nutritionally-dense, affordable food, the elimination of detrimental environmental impacts of multi-state transportation, and the boosting of Vermont's economy by keeping Vermont-grown food in Vermont.<sup>4</sup>

**“Between 2018 and 2025, VFV spent \$9.5 million on local food purchasing. The UVM Center for Rural Studies has found that every dollar spent on locally produced food contributes an additional 60 cents to the Vermont economy.”<sup>5</sup>**

A 2025 Vermont Foodbank survey was conducted with VFV's large-scale wholesale farm partners. The 24 respondents displayed overwhelmingly positive feedback. All but three farms reported that VFV had a moderate to huge impact on their farm and business. A repeated piece of feedback was that the VFV early-season contract created a guaranteed market which provided a stable income for their farm. One farm responded saying,

**“Having a guaranteed market has been a huge help for us and our crew in a time when the markets have been changing. It is helpful to have a contract in place before the start of the season so we know we can rely on the income.”**

The 24 survey respondents, of the total 299 farms, expressed getting paid on time and at market value, which to them felt like a fair market price for their crops. During weather-related events, when farmers often lose crops, the Vermont Foodbank can be flexible with purchasing by allowing farms to sell alternative crops. For example, during the 2024 flooding, one farm lost their squash crop but had an abundance of tomatoes. VFV shifted their purchasing from squash to tomatoes to continue purchasing from this farm and sustain the stream of income. Farmers also expressed that this program connects with their values — growing food for local communities to eat, rather than shipping it off to another state. One participating farm said,

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<sup>4</sup> M. Wallace & A. Boudreaux, personal communication, February 27, 2025

<sup>5</sup> Roche, E., Becot, F., Kolodinsky, J. (2016). *Economic Contribution and Potential Impact of Local Food Purchases Made by Vermont Schools*. Center for Rural Studies. <https://localfoodeconomics.com/wp-content/uploads/2016/11/Economic-Contribution-of-Farm-to-School.pdf>

**“Most of our customers are independent grocery stores and co-ops and there are some programs there but most of the people shopping there are more [well]-off Vermonters and so it’s always been important for us when joining this program that it feeds more of our neighbors.”**

In a 2024 survey, mini-grant recipients also shared a plethora of positive impacts from the VFFV funding. Many celebrated how much local, nutritionally dense, high-quality foods they were able to purchase and distribute to folks who otherwise would be unable to purchase it. They named an increase in familiarity with different vegetables and fruits—and more confidence in clients' ability to cook these foods.

The farm share CSA program responds to a need for addressing food insecurity through providing culturally responsive foods. Many survey respondents echoed similar praise to a partner organization that was quoted as saying,

**“This program has allowed us to offer a consistent supply of culturally relevant foods to the migrant farmworker community in Addison County...Migrant farmworkers experience some of the highest rates of food insecurity in the state and most are not eligible for federal nutrition programs like SNAP and WIC [and] accessing food pantries during open hours [is] very difficult.”**

## Challenges

Sustaining VFFV under current conditions presents ongoing operational and structural challenges. According to the Vermont Foodbank, limited and unstable funding remains the primary constraint, restricting the program’s ability to consistently purchase the volume and variety of local food needed to meet community demand.<sup>6</sup> According to the Vermont Foodbank, large-scale farmers who participate in the wholesale program have more produce available to sell, but the program lacks the funding to purchase it.<sup>7</sup> According to the Vermont Foodbank, there is a challenge integrating small-scale farmers into the wholesale component of operations, as the farmers’ pricing structures often reflect retail-level costs, which exceed the program’s

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<sup>6</sup> M. Wallace & A. Boudreaux, personal communication, February 27, 2025.

<sup>7</sup> M. Wallace, personal communication, March 27, 2025.

current budgetary capacity. While the mini-grant program has helped facilitate participation from nearly 300 small farms, its long-term sustainability is uncertain, and crop diversity remains limited—especially between April and June, when Vermont’s short growing season limits supply.<sup>8</sup>

Additional logistical challenges affect the program’s efficiency. Aggregating products from multiple small farms to meet minimum volume requirements — often a pallet per crop — requires significant coordination and time. Larger-scale wholesalers can help meet demand but involve complex relationships around packaging, delivery logistics, and timing. Transportation remains a barrier across the system; many vendors lack temperature-controlled vehicles and rely on contracted delivery services, which may not align with the program’s distribution schedule. On the recipient side, many community partners operate with minimal infrastructure and staffing, which limits their capacity to receive and distribute larger volumes of fresh food. Farmers who can deliver their own product are more likely to participate, which introduces equity concerns. External factors further complicate operations. Vermont’s agricultural system is vulnerable to extreme weather events such as flooding, frost, and drought,<sup>9</sup> which have disrupted supply chains and forced the program to rely on out-of-state or international sources to fill gaps, according to the Vermont Foodbank. Other disruptions to the supply chain required additional time, cost, and coordination. As the state considers ongoing investment in local food procurement and distribution, these interconnected challenges offer important context for ensuring the long-term stability and effectiveness of the program.

## Other Programs

Looking at similar programs in other states can help to contextualize VFV’s methods and provide information on alternative ways to achieve food security and community support. VFV was based off an existing initiative called Mainers Feeding Mainers (MFM). MFM’s program works slightly differently from VFV’s in that their major food bank, the Good Shepherd Food Bank of Maine processes all payments and invoices from farmers, collecting produce at their distribution centers and using that inventory to fill orders, in addition to facilitating direct deliveries to institutions such as schools, senior centers, and healthcare centers.<sup>10</sup> VFV’s model takes much of the administrative burden off of the food bank through their mini-grant model, giving their local partners the agency to buy directly from farms in their communities in order to meet that specific community’s needs. This keeps orders hyper-local and decentralizes VFV’s approach in order to empower each community to meet their own unique needs. In terms of funding, MFM receives a permanent allocation of \$1 million from the Maine Department of Agriculture, Conservation, and Forestry budget, and sources another \$1 million from individual donors and grants. Currently, MFM is seeking to double the state’s annual contribution to \$2 million, which the program says would allow them to expand purchasing and take on additional farm partners, along with relieving the current administrative pressures of seeking out this supplemental funding.<sup>11</sup>

In Rhode Island, a similar program run by the food hub Farm Fresh Rhode Island (FFRI) known as Hope’s Harvest (HH) both gleanes fresh food that would otherwise go to waste and

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<sup>8</sup> Vermont Foodbank. *Vermonters Feeding Vermonters*. March 2025. <https://www.vtfoodbank.org/more-programs/vermonters-feeding-vermonters/>. PowerPoint Presentation.

<sup>9</sup> Vermont Land Trust. (2025, March 12). *Farms in flux*. <https://vlt.org/2025/03/12/farming-and-climate/>

<sup>10</sup> Mainers Feeding Mainers | Food Assistance Program | GSFB. (n.d.). *Good Shepherd Food Bank*. <https://www.gsfb.org/programs/mainers-feeding-mainers/>

<sup>11</sup> N. Perry, personal communication, April 8, 2025

pays producers directly through their Farm to Food Pantry program which, similar to VFV's mini-grants system, disseminates grant funding to partner organizations in order for them to buy locally produced goods. Once partner organizations receive these funds, they can make their own purchases on FFRI's Market Mobile platform. This online platform allows producers to independently list their products at prices they set themselves. Producers then bring their products to FFRI who handles storage and order distribution. This model is new to the program as of 2025 – previously, HH developed forward contracts with producers for a set poundage, and would then send volunteers to harvest that amount, which would then be distributed to their partner organizations. The variety of produce ordered was often based on the cultural needs of certain communities or specialties of certain growers. HH pivoted to their new model in response to USDA funding cuts.<sup>12</sup>

In addition to these models, HH also services low-income seniors across Rhode Island through a program which allows them to choose between receiving fresh food boxes or an electronic benefits card of the equivalent value that can be processed like an EBT card at participating farms. HH is funded through a combination of USDA Local Food Purchase Assistance Cooperative Agreement Program (LFPA) grants, USDA Local Food for Schools Cooperative Agreement Program (LFS) grants, and private funding, although at present these USDA funding sources may no longer be active.<sup>13</sup>

In the southwest, the New Mexico Grown's Regional Farm to Foodbanks Program purchases food from local farmers and ranchers and distributes it to food banks and partner organizations across the state. Similar to MFM, New Mexico's program designates one organization, a food bank known as The Food Depot, to lead purchasing and distribution to partner sites, working closely with these sites to select culturally relevant foods. While food producers generally must provide their own transportation and delivery needs, the Food Depot is able to assist in coordination when necessary, and often producers are small-scale enough to be able to meet their own transportation needs. New Mexico's program doesn't formally forward contract with producers but will establish an agreement which allows them to plan for their season with flexibility for situations such as unforeseen surpluses. Currently this program, which has been run using USDA LFPA funds, is set to lose their funding by June 30, 2025.<sup>14</sup>

## Funding Mechanisms

There are alternatives to the funding models used by these programs. For example, in 2018, Seattle created the "Sweetened Beverage Tax," which imposes a 1.75 cent fee per ounce on beverages deemed high in sugar. The tax is levied on distributors, not consumers, and revenue is routed to programs that make healthy food accessible to Seattle residents and support childhood education. In 2021 alone, this tax brought in \$20.3 million, 61% of which was put toward food access programs, including support for food banks, and 39% of which was put toward child health and early learning programs. The program's food access funds supported not

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<sup>12</sup> B. Penkala, personal communication, April 8, 2025; Hope's Harvest. (n.d.). *Farm Fresh RI*. <https://www.farmfreshri.org/programs/hopes-harvest/>

<sup>13</sup> B. Penkala, personal communication, April 8, 2025; Hope's Harvest. (n.d.). *Farm Fresh RI*. <https://www.farmfreshri.org/programs/hopes-harvest/>

<sup>14</sup> M. Lorencz, personal communication, April 8, 2025; *Regional Farm to Food Bank Program*. (n.d.). New Mexico Association of Food Banks. <https://www.nmfoodbanks.org/farmtofoodbank>

only food banks but also provided fresh, culturally relevant food to community centers and schools, and funded the Fresh Bucks program, which functions much like 3SquaresVT.<sup>15</sup>

## Similar Program Models

Program Name	Population Served	Annual Funding Amount	Farm Partners	Funding Source	Renews each year?	Pays Farmers ?
Vermonters Feeding Vermonters	72,000 people per month (2024)	\$2,380,000 (2024)	299	State	No	Yes
Mainers Feeding Mainers	50,383 households per month (2024)	\$2,000,000* (2025)	90+	\$1M from state, remaining from grants and private donors	Yes	Yes
Rhode Island's Hope Harvest Program	35,000 people per month (2023)	[Data not collected]	55+	USDA LFPA**, LFS**, and private funding	No	Yes
New Mexico Grown: Regional Farm to Foodbanks Program	[Data not collected]	\$4,094,608 (2024)	200+	USDA LFPA**	No	Yes

Sources<sup>16</sup>

\* Currently requesting an additional \$1,000,000

\*\* Losing funding due to 2025 USDA funding freeze

## Conclusion

Since its inception in 2018, VFV has collaborated with 299 farms, purchased 104 types of products to improve food security, and contributed an estimated \$3.8 million to Vermont's economy. The program has delivered stable and guaranteed markets for local farmers and producers, offered consumers access to affordable food, and boosted Vermont's economy by

<sup>15</sup> *Sweetened Beverage Tax*. 2021. City of Seattle.

[https://www.seattle.gov/documents/Departments/SweetenedBeverageTaxCommAdvisoryBoard/FactSheets/Fact%20Sheet/2021\\_SBT\\_FactSheet\\_English.pdf](https://www.seattle.gov/documents/Departments/SweetenedBeverageTaxCommAdvisoryBoard/FactSheets/Fact%20Sheet/2021_SBT_FactSheet_English.pdf)

<sup>16</sup> B. Penkala, personal communication, April 8, 2025; *Case Study: Mainers Feeding Mainers, a State Farm-to-Food Bank Model*. (July 2022). Center for Science in the Public Interest. [https://www.cspinet.org/sites/default/files/2022-08/Case%20Study\\_MFM\\_FINAL.pdf](https://www.cspinet.org/sites/default/files/2022-08/Case%20Study_MFM_FINAL.pdf); Cover, S. *Maine lawmakers hear plea for more food bank funds*. (March 7, 2025). Spectrum News. <https://spectrumlocalnews.com/me/maine/news/2025/03/07/maine-lawmakers-hear-plea-for-more-food-bank-funds->; Cover, S. *Maine lawmaker proposes \$2M boost to hunger prevention programs*. (February 11, 2025). Spectrum News. <https://spectrumlocalnews.com/me/maine/politics/2025/02/11/with-high-food-prices-lingering--maine-lawmaker-proposes--2m-boost-to-hunger-prevention-programs->; Hilton, A. *Amid increased need, federal uncertainty, bill would double support for hunger relief program*. (March 6, 2025). Maine Morning Star. <https://mainemorningstar.com/2025/03/06/amid-increased-need-federal-uncertainty-bill-would-double-support-for-hunger-relief-program/>; *HHRI impact report 2018-2021*. Hope's Harvest. (2021). <https://www.farmfreshri.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/05/HHRI-Impact-Report-2021.pdf>; *Hope's Harvest*. Farm Fresh Rhode Island. (n.d.). <https://www.farmfreshri.org/programs/hopes-harvest/>; M. Lorencz, personal communication, April 8, 2025; *New Mexico Regional Farm to Food Bank 2024 Year End Report*. (2024). New Mexico Association of Food Banks. Vermont Foodbank. (February 2025). Vermonters Feeding Vermonters [Unpublished internal document]. <https://www.nmfoodbanks.org/reports>; N. Perry, personal communication, April 8, 2025; Vermont Foodbank. (February 2025). Vermonters Feeding Vermonters [Unpublished internal document].

keeping Vermont-grown food within the state. Despite these achievements, VFV currently struggles with limited and unstable funding to scale up the mini-grant component, which restricts larger purchases needed to meet increasing community demands. Logistics and external factors such as extreme weather conditions further complicate supply chains and operations once the growing season concludes. Other states have implemented varying models, such as Mainer's Feeding Mainers, in which the state's major foodbank handles administrative duties and logistics, Farm Fresh Rhode Island's Hope's Harvest program, which allows producers to list products for sale independently and at their own rates, and New Mexico's Regional Farm to Foodbank program which designates one organization to handle buying and is run solely through USDA funding. These programs operate through different funding models, but those reliant on USDA funds have had less certainty in the permanence of their operations. Seattle's "Sweetened Beverage Tax," provides a case study on routing tax revenue to programs aimed at making healthy food accessible to residents and supporting childhood education. With the ongoing, annual appropriations as outlined in H.167, additional funding could expand and streamline processes for participating farms and alleviate financial stress related to sourcing, distribution, and transportation costs.