

Chair Marcotte and members of the Committee, thank you for considering my comments on the important subject of nutrition assistance.

For the record, my name is Allan Reetz. I serve as Director of Public & Government Affairs for Hanover Co-op Food Stores of Vermont and New Hampshire. Despite being incorporated in New Hampshire, our cooperative's roots and commitment in Vermont run deep and long. That includes our bustling store on Maple Street in White River Junction, an auto service center in Norwich, Production Kitchen in Wilder, and our administrative offices in Hartford. Our Vermont payroll is roughly \$8 million, and we buy about \$12 million worth of Vermont farm and food products each year.

And when it comes to food assistance efforts, the success we're having in our Vermont store has delivered hundreds of thousands of dollars of savings for struggling Vermonters. I will share a few details about that further down in my remarks.

If you remember nothing else from my testimony, please know that cooperatives like ours and so many locally owned grocers across Vermont have an unwavering commitment to serve their communities. Running an independent food store is hard work. But we learned long ago that it is one thing to be neighbors, yet being neighborly is how community grows strong. That makes the hard work rewarding.

In the months and years ahead, as you work to support food access efforts at the state level, we will be at our stores as your partners in the community. We are standing with you to support and strengthen proven funding that helps more Vermonters get the food they need.

That could be a senior who should have a full stomach before taking medications, or a parent trying to get more quality protein onto their child's dinner plate. Have you ever tried to keep food in the refrigerator with a teenager in the house? Imagine being that struggling parent. Or that teen. Some in this room have lived that experience.

Each day at our store, we see the positive difference legislative action is having. And knowing that you'll be considering the Restaurant Meals Program is great news. It is another way local businesses can step up to join the effort. During the Everyone Eats effort, we all saw how they want to pitch in to deliver impact.

Even though hunger and need for assistance is on the increase, I must emphasize that, together, we are making a difference. Together, we are reducing pain, filling plates, and making it a bit easier for growing teenagers.

At Hanover Co-op, and at cooperatives around the state such as Hunger Mountain, City Market, Brattleboro, Middlebury, and others have a program called *Food for All*. Here's how it works at our cooperative. For anyone enrolled in a program such as 3SquaresVermont and WIC, we automatically lower the cost of every qualifying item by 10 percent. It's an easy way we can stretch a person's food dollar. And for those who don't qualify for those nutritional assistance programs, they only need to show us a letter from a community assistance organization that demonstrates need, then we enroll them in Food for All. They automatically get 10 percent off typical SNAP and WIC purchases.

And in case anyone thinks that food co-ops like ours are too niche to serve low income residents, stop by our store and I'll give you a tour. Or, just look at the numbers here to see just how much money we saved low income customers in recent years. Those Food for All customers saved over \$350,000 dollars at our stores since 2018...and our White River Junction store leads even our biggest store with nearly \$30,000 in extra qualifying discounts last year alone. Again, that doesn't count the extra money we're saving folks on SNAP- and WIC-based programs. Yes. It's money out of our bottom line, but we're happy to know that it is turning into more food in more refrigerators.

Helping neighbors have enough to eat is a concern for independent grocers accepting EBT across Vermont. Walk into any locally owned store and you get a general understanding of the work involved to keep the shelves stocked, the food fresh, and employees on-hand to serve you.

And more small independent retailers want to help, too. Yesterday, I had a call with Lauren Stevens, who, with her husband Peter, own Brownsville Butcher & Pantry. Lauren told me they want to make 2025 the year they join the 3Squares effort. They are a small store that is big enough to help locals avoid a long drive just to get food for another meal.

I told Lauren that when they are ready, I'll have them up to our store to meet with our teams they can learn the ins and outs of the program and be dialed in for success from day one. It's all about being neighborly.

Like two pines in an open, windy field, we stand stronger together than we do apart. We're here to stand with you, and to express our gratitude for the work of Hunger Free Vermont and their 30-plus years of breaking the cycle of hunger.



January's cold temperatures have become February's depleted oil tanks and shrinking wood piles. So together, let's keep our focus on stretching dollars and feeding neighbors.

Respectfully submitted,

Allan Reetz
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Hanover Co-op Food for All discounts provided to low-income Vermonters. Totals do not include 10 percent savings extended to shoppers enrolled in 3Squares (SNAP) and WIC.

FOOD FOR ALL	2024	SEVEN YEAR TOTALS
HANOVER	\$7,337.82	\$60,592.77
LEBANON	\$23,687.25	\$123,147.17
WHITE RIVER	\$29,411.50	\$175,319.26
TOTALS	\$60,436.5	
	7	\$359,059.20