

John Sayles
3SquaresVT Awareness Day
February 6, 2025
House Government Operations & Military Affairs

Thank you committee chair and members. My name is John Sayles, I am the CEO of Vermont Foodbank and I live in Montpelier. I appreciate all of the time you have given us today to share information about how critical 3SquaresVT is for our neighbors, and about ways that food access programs impact everyone in Vermont and intersect with government operations that are under your jurisdiction.

I want to reiterate our requests before you this legislative session - these are policy choices you can make to ensure that people across Vermont have access to the food they need and want:

1. Pass legislation to instruct the State to opt into the SNAP Restaurant Meals Program and appropriate \$75,000 to cover restaurant start up costs, and \$100,000 for a staff position within DCF to administer the program.
2. Support \$500,000 in base funding to strengthen Vermont farms and food security by sustaining two proven programs run by NOFA-VT (the Northeast Organic Farming Association of Vermont): CROP CASH (PLUS) and FARM SHARE
3. Support the request for \$5 million in base and one-time funding in the FY26 budget for the Vermont Foodbank to be prepared when disasters strike our neighbors in towns across Vermont, to purchase and distribute food, and support the network of community-based food shelves and meal sites.
4. Include an additional \$2 million in base general funding for home-delivered meals for older and disabled Vermonters through the "Meals on Wheels" programs operated through Vermont's Area Agencies on Aging, including the option to draw down additional matching funds through the global commitment investment.

I also want to go back to a point Anore made in her introduction. 3SquaresVT is *just* one part of the safety net and can't meet the need on its own. I'm here to help you understand what the other food security puzzle pieces are for people in communities like yours. I know last year you worked on S.310, the bill that eventually became Act 143 and has now added food security language to emergency planning information. We need that critical tool because right now, across the state, food security in disasters, and in everyday emergencies, is a community-level issue, but that work is primarily done by local food shelves, meal sites, mutual aid organizations, friends and neighbors, even when people have access to critical programs like 3SquaresVT. Each event, or situation can have unique and different characteristics, making it harder or easier to use existing resources to solve the new and changing issues that arise.

In Vermont, we now have a number of these experiences under our belts - from the pandemic, floods, at least one major ice storm resulting in a multi-day power outage. Each of these unique events resulted in different experiences for people in communities right next door to one

another, or to communities in different corners of the state. For example, in the 2023 floods, the towns of Johnson and Londonderry both had grocery stores that flooded and the response was very different. While Londonderry finally got their store back and open, Johnson's grocery store chose not to reopen, meaning a trip to Morrisville for groceries now.

In other communities, grocery stores were not impacted, but roads were washed out, bridges and culverts washed away, and access to those store locations was difficult for days, or weeks. I want to share a quote from a couple in the Northeast Kingdom whose home, property and road were severely hit by flooding in the summer of 2024.

"This summer, our road got so annihilated that it disconnected from the main road," Gardenia elaborated. "There were periods of time I didn't have access to food. I had to reach out and someone had to come by ATV to deliver food. I live so rurally that there are no reliable delivery services. Our road is still damaged and disconnecting more and more with every rain." "I had seeds that I started plants with, and I got as starts from the farmer's market. A lot of my growing spaces flooded, and I had root rot that killed the crops that I was trying to save for winter..."

These are folks who are working hard to get by and disasters are a setback that is difficult to recover from. These folks got support from NEKCA and from Vermont Foodbank's 3SquaresVT hotline. More and more of our network partner organizations like NEKCA are helping feed people in the long recovery periods after flooding, winter storms, and other severe weather events that are becoming more frequent in Vermont.

While many of our neighbors benefit from 3SquaresVT, they do not meet the high, sustained need for food access across the state of Vermont. That is where Vermont Foodbank, our partners come in. Our work to redistribute food across the state is critical to helping people meet their needs. This food comes to Vermont Foodbank in a number of ways - through grocery retailer donations, community donations, federal food programs, and food purchases. The greatest area of growth we have experienced since 2020 is in food purchase. This includes both food purchased from Vermont farms, but also food purchased from other sources in quantities that are increasing to simply meet the needs in front of us. These "shocks" due to weather events, economic conditions, or public health crises are most difficult for our most vulnerable neighbors. Dr. Meredith Niles and her team at UVM have data supporting this. I invite you [to review her team's brief](#) comparing the experiences of people who are food secure with the experiences of people who are food insecure. I've included a link in my written testimony.

Vermont Foodbank estimates that in 2024, we served an average of 72,000 people per month. As many of our network partner organizations, some of who are with us here in the State House today, will tell you, many of the individuals that visit their food shelf or meal sites also use 3SquaresVT. 3SquaresVT is intended to be a "Supplemental" program, and in many cases, households are also using charitable food access points to supplement their food needs as well. There are also a number of people who are not eligible for or who cannot access 3SquaresVT. All of those people are welcome at food shelves, meal sites, and direct distribution events across the state. As we experience more challenging disasters or emergencies, Vermont

Foodbank and our network of partners need to remain responsive and ready to support communities. Embedded within our request, which you have a copy of, is \$1.75 million for responsive readiness funding through Vermont Emergency management, to formalize this work to ensure that we are all ready to support our most vulnerable neighbors in challenging events.

These programs work together with 3SquaresVT to weave together the food safety net for neighbors across Vermont in “normal” times and to help respond to challenging events in communities across the state. We need to be responsive and ready to help our network support neighbors at the community level. You have the opportunity this session to invest in meaningful support for food security. When you do, the positive impacts are felt across all 14 counties in Vermont. There are policy choices in front of you this year that can support food security for all who live here. Again, I would like to reiterate the programs that we are asking you to support to create food security for neighbors across Vermont:

1. Support NOFA-VT’s request for \$500,000 in base funding to Strengthen Vermont Farm Viability and Address Food Security by sustaining two proven programs: Crop Cash (Plus) and Farm Share.
2. Pass legislation to instruct the State to opt into the SNAP Restaurant Meals Program and appropriate \$75,000 to cover restaurant start up costs, and \$100,000 for a staff position within DCF to administer the program.
3. Support the request for \$5 million in base and one-time funding in the FY25 budget for the Vermont Foodbank to be prepared when disasters strike our neighbors in towns across Vermont, to purchase and distribute food, and support the network of community-based food shelves and meal sites.
4. Support V4A’s request for an additional \$2 million in base general funding for home-delivered meals for older Vermonters, “Meals on Wheels”, including the option to draw down additional matching funds through the global commitment investment.

Thank you for your time and for your consideration. We would be happy to talk with any of you after the hearing or to take questions if there is time.