

**TESTIMONY TO: House Government Operations & Military Affairs**

**FROM: Carrie Stahler, Vermont Foodbank and Lyndon resident**

**RE: VT Foodbank FY27 funding request**

**DATE: January 22, 2026**

Thank you for your time today. My name is Carrie Stahler, I live in Lyndon, and I am the Sr. Manager of Government & Public Affairs at Vermont Foodbank. I'm here today in both a personal and professional capacity.

I'm here to ask for your support for Vermont Foodbank's FY27 request for \$5 million total, including \$1 million for Ready Response to disasters and emergencies, \$2 million in support for the Vermonters Feeding Vermonters program, and \$2 million to support our network partner organizations. I'm also joined by Jenna O'Farrell, Executive Director of Northeast Kingdom Community Action. NEKCA is one of Vermont Foodbank's key partners in the Northeast Kingdom serving our most rural communities.

As this committee knows well, 2023 and 2024 were challenging years due to disastrous flooding around the state. In particular, that flooding hit some rural areas of the Northeast Kingdom hard. In 2024, my family was one of the many stranded for weeks because of washed out roads in all directions. My family was stranded for about 7 weeks with no vehicle access in or out. In fact, the Lyndon emergency manager connected us with the local mountain rescue squad in case we needed emergency services. Our only way in and out was a half-mile hike to the top of the hill to catch rides with friends and family or for my kids to get rides to and from school. After a few weeks, we ran low on propane, and had to hike in a gas. We were fortunate, as that generator allowed us to continue to eat out of our freezer and our garden. But feeding a family of four for weeks that way was hard. We had to hike food in and out multiple times using old hiking backpacks filled with things we were not growing ourselves like cereal, rice, milk, and coffee. For us, this was a stressful, frustrating and challenging time.

It took nearly a year until the road was fully repaired. There were periods throughout the year, including in the dead of winter, where we still had to hike in and out because our car or truck could not make it across our fields to get to our house. Yet we consider ourselves to be lucky – we are able-bodied, the Town of Lyndon did outstanding work to get our road repaired, and we came out the other side relatively a bit more resilient. But I can't say the same is true for everyone. Others in the same area we live were not growing a garden and

didn't have a freezer full of food. Or their garden flooded and their power went out, thawing all of the food they had stored.

Shortly after these floods, I was helping at one of Vermont Foodbank's 25 monthly direct food distribution events and a family shared with me that their freezer had thawed in the power outages caused by floods, losing a year's worth of meat for their family that they had just purchased from a farm. That meant that they were using free sources of food like our direct distributions and NEKCA's food shelf until they figured out if they could replace that frozen food. Others asked if we had bottled water because their wells had been damaged. These are not standard requests at these produce-focused events. These are indications of communities where basic needs were not able to be met after a disaster, where Vermont Foodbank and our partners stepped in to offer some safety net. But that was not a systemic response; it was a stop gap. Our request for \$1 million in Ready Response funding is in part to support having food available in these types of disasters and other emergencies where food access is impacted. It is also a request to provide the support needed for Vermont Foodbank and our partners to work together with Vermont Emergency Management to plan ahead around the food needs of impacted neighbors in communities across the state, to maximize the existing resources among our 3 distribution centers and network of partners, and to find efficiencies and points of collaboration so we are truly creating a system that can be mobilized in the case of an emergency or a disaster.

While floods are a natural disaster we have too much experience with here in Vermont, in November of 2025 we also became familiar with another kind of food emergency when federal food benefits, known as 3SquaresVT here, were paused due to the government shutdown. I want to recognize and commend the legislature, the Emergency Board, and the Governor and his administration for their swift action to partially fund 3SquaresVT for the more than 64k people across the state who rely on that program. In another committee this morning, a community member from Concord, Vermont, in Essex County shared, "As an elderly, disabled person, I qualify for EBT ...with the tiny window of prior knowledge and preparedness, I was able to grow sprouts from beans, make soups and made do. One week later Vermont stepped up and helped its people...so we wouldn't have to make do, elders could have more than crackers and tea, kids could go to bed with a nice full tummy."

With funding from the State, we granted \$250,000 to about 56 food pantry partners in a matter of days. Those organizations, in turn, scrambled to purchase food to stock their shelves to help neighbors get through the first week of November without 3SquaresVT benefits – until the State could load partial benefits onto people's EBT cards. As you'll hear from Jenna, that funding was very necessary, but logistically stretched food shelf staff, volunteers, and community members working to purchase needed food, move that food

into community food shelf locations, and be ready for what was often an overwhelming amount of need in those first few days of the month. While it worked, and our partners stretched themselves to make it happen, one recently shared with me that “it felt just like when we had the floods – it was overwhelming.” The charitable food system is built, primarily, on the collaborative efforts of organizations across the state making the most of their efforts by distributing rescued edible food from grocers, retailers, and farms, and purchasing food to fill the gaps. During the pause in federal benefits, the opposite happened, with purchasing being the only way to adequately fill shelves, and organizations instantly needed more capacity to do that work.

We cannot continue to ask so much of our partners without together doing the work required to plan ahead, source and stage food resources, and recognize that there are different needs and different structures and systems needed in any emergency response, but particularly around food. We look forward to working together with this committee, with our partners at Vermont Emergency Management, and with our network of partners to ensure that people across Vermont are food secure, even in emergencies and disasters.

Thank you for your time and your support for Vermont Foodbanks’ FY27 request for \$5 million in funding including \$1 million for Ready Response, \$2 million for Vermonters Feeding Vermonters and \$2 million to support our network of partners.