

TESTIMONY TO: House Committee on Government Operations and Military Affairs

FROM: Jenna O'Farrell, Executive Director, NEKCA

RE: VT Foodbank FY27 funding request

DATE: January 22, 2026

I am Jenna O'Farrell, and I am providing testimony as the Executive Director of Northeast Kingdom Community Action (NEKCA) that serves Caledonia, Orleans and Essex counties. Thank you for the opportunity to share how our rural communities recovered from two devastating flooding events, with critical support from the **Vermont Food Bank**, and what these experiences reveal about how we must strengthen resilience moving forward.

In July of 2023 and again in July of 2024, communities across the Northeast Kingdom were severely impacted by catastrophic flooding caused by torrential rainstorms. Rivers overtopped their banks, infrastructure failed, and long-standing drainage limitations were laid bare. Entire neighborhoods were affected, homes were damaged, and access to basic necessities was disrupted.

Access to food and clean drinking water was urgent. With the support of the **Vermont Food Bank**, we were able to respond immediately. The **Vermont Food Bank** delivered water and shelf-stable food directly to our center, allowing us to distribute supplies locally and transport them into some of the most rural and hardest-hit communities. Their responsiveness ensured that families had access to essentials at a time when systems were strained and options were limited.

In November of 2025, the **Vermont Food Bank** was positioned to provide direct funds to Network Partners. The Legislative Emergency Board approved the release of funds to provide two weeks of November 3SquaresVT (SNAP) benefits to enrolled Vermonters. Because the processing of those funds onto EBT cards could not be complete until November 7th, the Emergency Board authorized the Department for Children and Families (DCF) to award \$250,000 to Vermont Foodbank to be channeled to some select Network Partners.

NEKCA received a portion of these funds that allowed our NEK food pantries to purchase food in response to increased community need during the gap in SNAP benefits in early November. We thank you, the Governor, and the Emergency Board for the funds to make additional food purchase possible. We used those funds to rapidly purchase and distribute staple foods like pasta, canned chicken, cooking oil, and canned soups to our food shelf locations in St. Johnsbury, Island Pond, and Newport. We set up mobile outreach locations for our rural Head Start families. While that effort was successful and resulted in the households and families we serve receiving additional food to get them through the first week of November, it was a difficult moment to logically respond to the emergency need for grocery foods in 3

different counties in just a few days. This response felt much like the needed response to floods in 2023 and 2024. Our staff worked overtime, on the weekends, and traveled a distance to be able to purchase in bulk.

In rural Vermont, waiting for state or federal assistance was not feasible in the early days of the disasters. Local municipalities lacked the funding and capacity to provide immediate relief during the recovery phase. Volunteers stepped into leadership roles despite facing their own hardships. While Vermonters are deeply resilient, resilience alone is not enough. It must be matched with reliable infrastructure and trusted partners. The **Vermont Food Bank** fills that gap and plays a vital role in ensuring communities can meet basic needs during crises.

Across the Northeast Kingdom, organizations have built strong, respectful, and collaborative relationships grounded in a shared commitment to community well-being. However, during these disasters, we were collectively under-resourced and exhausted.

Vermont's geopolitical landscape presents real challenges to implementing a county-centered response and recovery model. Service areas across state agencies, designated agencies, community action agencies, school districts, and health service regions do not align, making coordinated disaster responses and recovery difficult. These structural realities underscore why the **Vermont Food Bank** is such a trusted and effective resource in times of crisis: it is nimble, responsive, and grounded in local relationships.

As we look toward the future, strengthening disaster resilience in rural Vermont will require investment in local capacity, clearer coordination, and continued support for organizations like the **Vermont Food Bank** that consistently meet communities where they are in quick, respectful, and effective ways when they need it most.