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3SquaresVT Awareness Day
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House Committee on Human Services

My name is Anore Horton. I live in Williston, and I'm the Executive Director of Hunger Free Vermont. Hunger Free Vermont is a statewide nonprofit with a core role providing training, technical assistance, and policy support on all of the federal nutrition programs to improve how they work for all of us in Vermont, and public education and outreach to make sure everyone who needs them knows how to access them.

I'm here today for two purposes: to ask for your support on several important actions to help fight hunger in Vermont, and to provide all of you, and especially legislators new to this committee and new to this body, a brief overview of 3SquaresVT, to put these requests for policy action in context.

All of us collectively are here today to ask you to support four critical anti-hunger measures:

- 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. This would allow people who are elderly, disabled, or homeless to use their SNAP benefits at select restaurants, which would make it easier for them to access hot meals.
- NOFA-VT is requesting \$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
- 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.
- V4A requests 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.

3SquaresVT is the most effective hunger relief program in our country, and it's also an extremely effective economic stimulus program—so, it's a program that benefits all of us.

This is a federal program that is administered by states, so MOST of the rules and requirements, and all of the benefit funding, come from the federal government (USDA); however, there are certain flexibilities and options that states are allowed to choose to better tailor aspects of the program to meet the needs of the state's low income population.

The federal name of the program is SNAP (the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program)—formerly known as food stamps. The federal name changed in 2009 when the program was modernized to increase efficiency and reduce stigma associated with the program—this is when the program moved from books of "food stamps" to EBT (Electronic Benefit Transfer) cards. The federal government gave states permission to choose their own name for the program—this is why SNAP is called 3SquaresVT in our state. SNAP and 3SquaresVT are the SAME program. 3SquaresVT is administered by the Department for Children and Families Economic Services Division of the Agency of Human Services.

Eligibility for 3SquaresVT is very strict and is determined by both the federal government and the state of Vermont. In Vermont, people need to meet an income test to qualify—for a family of four, this means monthly earnings of less than roughly \$4,800 or annual earnings of roughly \$57,000. Benefit levels are scaled based on

income, monthly expenses, and the size of your household. Households can get a benefit as low as \$1 a month.

3SquaresVT benefits come on an EBT card that looks similar to a regular debit card, so a trip to the grocery store with 3SquaresVT looks like any other shopper's experience—this is very much by design, to try and preserve people's dignity and privacy. However, on the back end, every retailer that accepts SNAP has a complex computer system that automatically identifies items that are eligible to be purchased with SNAP, and only those items are deducted from the SNAP funds on the EBT card. There are more than 700 retailers in Vermont that accept SNAP. Each month, 3SVT keeps roughly \$13 million—federal dollars—in our state economy, supporting our local farmers, growers, businesses, and entire community.

In Vermont, about 65,000 people receive SNAP benefits—more than half of these people are older adults or children. We've heard many 3SquaresVT participants and families refer to it as a lifeline, and in many cases, the only reason they are able to afford groceries.

The state is granted options by the federal government to tailor the program to meet the needs and realities of our state. One of these options is allowing select populations to use their 3SquaresVT benefits to buy hot prepared meals at authorized restaurants—this is called the SNAP Restaurant Meals Program. This option was created specifically to support elderly people, disabled people, and people experiencing homelessness, because these populations typically encounter access barriers and challenges with being able to buy, store and cook food. In expanding the use of 3SquaresVT benefits to include restaurants, Restaurant Meals Programs aims to increase food security among these vulnerable populations by giving these select 3SquaresVT households an option to purchase a hot, nourishing meal.

There are as many as 58,000 people in Vermont whose income makes them eligible for 3SquaresVT and who are part of at least one of these groups right now.

Since the end of pandemic government support, the number of people at risk of hunger is rising every year. While 3SquaresVT is our most effective anti-hunger program, Many Vermonters at risk of hunger do not qualify. For one reason, the cut-off for SNAP income eligibility is so low that many people, especially in a high cost-of-living state like Vermont, are at risk of hunger, but are not eligible for SNAP.

3SquaresVT is *just* one part of the safety net and cannot meet the full need on its own—it's not designed to do that. We need to make sure every part of the safety net is strong—that includes local food access programs, Vermont Foodbank programs, and meal programs for older adults.

The message we want to convey to you today is that together, we can work to ensure that everyone in Vermont, at all times, has the food they need to thrive. Legislators have a critical role to play in making policy decisions that ensure food security for all. When the State of Vermont invests in meaningful support for food security, the positive impacts are felt across the entire state. There are policy choices in front of you this year that can support food security for all who live here.

In including language in the House of Representatives' Budget Adjustment bill for FY 25 directing DCF to make use of their available SNAP discretionary months to prevent people enrolled in 3SquaresVT facing a temporary challenge with their paperwork or facing an unexpected circumstance preventing them from meeting their work requirements, this Committee has already taken one very important and meaningful action to strengthen food security for some of our most vulnerable neighbors, and we deeply thank you.

In combination, the addition of the Restaurant Meals Program to our 3SquaresVT program, fully funding Crop Cash, Farm Share, and Meals on Wheels, and ensuring Vermont Foodbank's ability to buy and distribute more food and be prepared for disaster-related food distribution, will make a profound difference for people in Vermont facing hunger today, while also moving us down the road toward a stable and permanent food secure future for everyone. Thank you so much for your time.