

3SquaresVT Awareness Day - Reschedule
February 13, 2025
House Human Services Committee

My name is Carrie Stahler, I'm the Sr. Manager of Government & Public Affairs at Vermont Foodbank and I live in Lyndon.

I want to reiterate our request for support on several important actions to help create food security for everyone in Vermont, including:

- 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.
- 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
- 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.
- 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.

As you heard last week from our neighbors and partners, 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. For every one meal that Vermont Foodbank provides, 3SquaresVT provides 9 meals, according to our national partners at Feeding America. The charitable sector can't solve hunger alone, but is a critical safety net for many of our neighbors who receive 3SquaresVT benefits, and those who are not eligible or who do not receive benefits. That is where Vermont Foodbank and our network partners across Vermont fit into the puzzle of ways people in Vermont can meet their needs for food.

Vermont Foodbank's mission is to gather and share quality food and nurture partnerships so that no one in Vermont will go hungry.

Vermont Foodbank is the largest and only food bank in Vermont. We are a statewide organization with three large distribution centers in Barre, Brattleboro and Rutland. These facilities move 12-15 million pounds of food per year. You can think of us like a wholesale distributor of charitable food. That food goes out to about 220 community-level network partner organizations. These are the food shelves and meal sites in your home communities. Last week you heard Amy talk about the BROCC food shelf - they are one of our largest partners in the greater Rutland region. There are partners like that serving all 14 counties across Vermont.

Vermont Foodbank estimates that we and our network of partners served an average of 72,000 people per month across the state in 2024. That number is actually higher than at some points during the pandemic. We can directly attribute that to people having more money available to meet their own basic needs. One of the ways they had more money was because 3SquaresVT benefits were increased to their maximum levels for household sizes.

In addition, other supports like a federal child tax credit and expanded unemployment, were in place, giving households more financial flexibility, and Vermont Foodbank and our partners were able to stay well-stocked thanks to generous philanthropic and state funding and the AAA organizations were able to use this additional state support to strengthen Meals on Wheels programs across Vermont. In the years since, both state funding, and, to a lesser degree, philanthropic funding have ended, and all of the federal supports households were benefiting from have returned to their pre-pandemic forms - while the need for food support has remained high. We know this because of numbers that our network partner organizations report to us, but also because of the amount of food that our distribution centers are handling. A “normal” year for Vermont Foodbank used to look like 10-11 million pounds of food, last year we distributed 14.5 million pounds of food.

The work Vermont Foodbank and these partners do is critical to our neighbors, your constituents, meeting their daily need for food. Through this collaborative system, people can access food that comes through federal food programs like The Emergency Food Assistance Program, donations from grocery retailers, food from farms, including local Vermont farms, and food that is purchased in bulk at pallet-prices so we can help our partners access food at more affordable prices.

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, it is simply out of reach for many Vermonters at risk of hunger. For one reason, the cut-off for 3SquaresVT 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 3SquaresVT. When people cannot get this help, they turn to community level food access organizations like our network partners and meal programs to access food. Dr. Meredith Niles and her team at UVM have data supporting this, I invite you to review her brief comparing the experiences of people who are food secure with the experiences of people who are food insecure; here is a [link to this study](#).

In this study, Dr. Niles and her team compared the experiences of people who they were able to identify as food secure or food insecure using a standard set of 6 questions developed by the United States Department of Agriculture, the USDA.

The first slide is an overview of the findings of this study, I'll just read a few key points:

2. FI households had up to 8 times greater prevalence of adverse financial events during and since the financial shock of the COVID-19 pandemic as compared to food secure (FS) households.
3. On average, FI households experienced 3 adverse financial events over the past 4 years, compared to 1 among FS households. More than 1 in 4 FI households missed utility payments, had new credit card debt, only paid credit card minimums, were unable to pay medical bills/debt, missed rent payments, or took on additional work to cover costs.
7. These findings suggest that FI households faced greater financial shocks in the last few years, which affected food acquisition, food security, and health in complex, interconnected ways. Attention to ongoing financial, transportation, and healthcare access and affordability challenges are critical in assisting households that continue

to struggle with food insecurity and may not recover from shocks as well as food secure households.

On this next slide the chart shows the reasons people reported most frequently which challenged their ability to access food. You can see clearly the biggest reason for food insecure households right at the top: Lacked money.

This study also found that for those enrolled in SNAP or 3SquaresVT, the additional monthly federal program benefit food insecure households need to meet their food needs is \$288.

This next slide just goes into a little more detail about this recovery time that is often required for households to get back to square one after an adverse financial event:

- **Nearly half (46.5%) of FI respondents reported missing payments for utilities or accruing new credit card debt (44.1%) since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic (March 2020) (Figure 3).** Looking at the relative prevalence of these events between FI and FS households, FI households had up to 8 times greater prevalence of adverse financial events (e.g., missing rent payments, dropping out of school to work), **and on average FI households had three adverse financial events, compared to one for FS households (Figure 4).**

This data really helps us at Vermont Foodbank understand what we have seen from a “worms eye view” on the ground. We know that financial shocks, or adverse financial events can impact households and it takes households with lower incomes longer to come back from that. You can see that in our data around flooding. We know that as people deplete their financial resources directly after disaster events, they are not able to use that money for all the normal things they usually would, and we see a bump in food distributed through our network in the months following a disaster event. You can see that in this chart comparing 2023 to 2024 flood events.

Again, 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 - including support for the charitable food system by providing \$5 million for Vermont Foodbank and our partners to be ready when disasters strike, and to purchase and distribute food to people across Vermont, and an additional \$2 million base funding for home-delivered meals for older and disabled Vermonters through the “Meals on Wheels” programs. Additionally, options and incentives like the Restaurant Meals Program and Crop Cash and Farm Share ensure that 3SquaresVT is being used most effectively to support people’s unique needs, and our local businesses and farms, creating a win-win for Vermont people, and Vermont businesses.

The positive impacts of these programs are felt across the entire state. There are policy choices in front of you this year that can support food security for everyone who lives here in Vermont. Thank you so much for your time.