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House Human Services

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Thank you Chair Wood and committee members for your time. My name is Ivy Enoch, and I live in Burlington. I am the Director of Policy and Advocacy at Hunger Free Vermont, and I'm here today with partners and neighbors for 3SquaresVT Awareness Day to acknowledge this essential program and to ask for your support on requests that, together, will ensure the best outcomes for people in Vermont—for our communities, our farmers, and our economy.

I do not need to introduce this program to any of you on this committee, but let me re-present us to the critical impact 3SquaresVT has on our communities statewide. 3SquaresVT supports nearly 10% of all Vermonters with essential funds for groceries. More than \$12 million are issued to 3SquaresVT households each month, making this an effective food security *and* economic stimulus program.

We've heard many 3SquaresVT participants refer to it as a lifeline, and in many cases, the only reason they are able to afford groceries. As someone who was raised by a loving and hardworking single dad, whose monthly grocery budget was our SNAP benefit, I know firsthand the power of SNAP to help families get by, to catch up, while still experiencing the joy of a shared meal.

Despite harmful federal changes to this program which went into effect in October 2025, 3SquaresVT remains our state's most effective and efficient program to reduce hunger and poverty. I know you are very familiar with the eligibility and funding changes passed in H.R.1, so I will just highlight that, in total, these changes have or will impact more than 7,000 3SquaresVT households, either by terminating their eligibility, or requiring them to report new information to keep their level of monthly benefits.

Compounding these complex eligibility changes that Vermont, and all states, were forced to implement in a fast-moving and challenging landscape, Vermont faces additional costs to administer 3SquaresVT beginning in October 2026. Hunger Free Vermont has been closely following the state's projections regarding increased SNAP administrative costs resulting from reduced federal funding. We are glad that the Administration included funding for this, and urge the Legislature to continue to pay close attention to full funding needed to make sure we keep this critical food security and economic development program thriving in our state.

Further, it is critical for Vermont to ensure that all eligible people are able to stay enrolled or be enrolled in 3SquaresVT, and we note with concern the change in enrollment over the last year, where approximately 4,000 are no longer enrolled. This decrease is more than double the reduction seen

from the prior year, and which far outpaces those who lost eligibility in October 2025 because of federal changes. These trends underscore the importance of ensuring administrative funding is sufficient to not only fill in federal gaps, but to actually support access, retention, and program integrity.

Not only that, these trends underscore the importance of investing in our state's existing network of benefit assisters embedded in communities across Vermont, a number of whom are also impacted by losses in federal funding. Benefit assisters help people decode complex application questions, understand what documentation is needed to verify their information, and what to expect in the mandatory interview. The importance of this service couldn't be more apparent than when we see major changes in eligibility, like with H.R. 1. Having Benefit Assistors at a person's regular local service provider will improve the chances that everyone who is eligible for 3SquaresVT will get the benefits they are entitled to.

Too many eligible Vermonters are still not getting this essential support. Despite its effectiveness, only about 40% of potentially eligible Vermonters are enrolled. Barriers like complex rules and paperwork prevent people from accessing 3SquaresVT, which is why trusted, trained benefits assisters are so critical.

We have a strong network of benefit assisters, and Vermont is often lifted up as a model for other states. These trained benefit assisters not only ensure a unified understanding of 3SquaresVT across the state, but actually support our state agency by helping ensure applications are completed accurately—reducing administrative burden on the state, and supporting a low SNAP payment error rate.

Benefit assisters improve the human experience of navigating paperwork, phone calls, and documents to access basic needs support. And, it can't be overstated that benefit assisters are responding now to many complex program changes and greater needs. Investing in this existing network of benefit assisters at trusted organizations across Vermont will have a multiplier effect by helping eligible people continue to receive 3SquaresVT, and keep those federal dollars flowing to our grocers, farmers, and overall economy.

We all want to ensure the best possible outcomes for all people living in Vermont. Benefit assisters exist to do just that in their communities—in your communities. Food security is a policy choice, and 3SquaresVT is an essential part of the pathway to supporting households while we work together to achieve food security for all in Vermont. There are policy choices in front of you this year that will go far in ensuring the best outcomes for Vermonters in this moment:

1. Please fully fund the administrative costs needed for state fiscal year 2027 to counter federal funding changes and keep 3SquaresVT available and accessible to people in Vermont
2. Please support the appropriation of \$4.95 million in FY2027 for Benefit Assistors for SNAP & Medicaid.