

TESTIMONY TO: House Human Services Committee

FROM: Carrie Stahler, Vermont Foodbank and resident of Lyndon

RE: VT Foodbank FY27 requests & NEK Day collaboration

DATE: January 22, 2026

Good morning, thank you for having us. My name is Carrie Stahler, I'm the Sr. Manager of Government Affairs at Vermont Foodbank and resident of Lyndon in the Northeast Kingdom. I'm here in both my professional and personal capacity today.

Today, we are here to celebrate the Northeast Kingdom for NEK Day and to talk about the unique needs, challenges, and opportunities in the most rural region of our state. As part of that, I would like to ask you to support the work of Vermont Foodbank and our partners in the NEK, and across the state with an FY27 appropriation of \$5 million, including \$2 million to support our network of partners, \$2 million for the Vermonters Feeding Vermonters program, and \$1 million for Ready Response to support food access in disasters and emergencies.

First, I'd like to share a few statistics that make this region unique. The Northeast Kingdom, which essentially consists of Caledonia, Orleans, and Essex Counties, is about 2000 square miles. Vermont is about 9600 square miles of land, so the NEK is roughly 20% of the state's, but includes only about 10% of the state's population, making it our most rural region. Today's testimony will help lend context to the challenges and opportunities that are unique to this area – but are also shared by other similarly rural regions across the state. The rural nature of the NEK offers incredible natural beauty, outdoor recreation, and small town charm, but also creates challenges accessing services, including food, health care, and jobs.

One thing that links these together is the dependence on transportation. In our work at Vermont Foodbank, the logistics of moving food to our partner organizations is part of the complex puzzle of transportation in this region. With few concentrated hubs where populations live, we rely on rural partners like Sid's Pantry in Concord, the Gilman Senior Center in Gilman, NEKCA's locations in Island Pond, Newport, and St. Johnsbury, and Northeastern Vermont Regional Hospital and North Country Hospital who host VeggieVanGo events in St. Johnsbury and Newport. Neighbors coming to these locations frequently pick up and deliver food to their neighbors who cannot drive, do not currently have transportation, or whose work hours don't align with food distribution or food pantry open hours. This mutual aid is part of what makes this region work and is critical to ensuring our food is making its way to neighbors who need it. But that lack of central hubs

also means that service delivery is more challenging for our care workers who support community members.

Today, you will hear how our network partners and community health workers in our region connect with community members seeking health care to problem solve, find solutions, and connect dots – ensuring that folks are able to access the programs and benefits that meet their basic needs, support their health, and learn about resources that they qualify for.

I'm proud to live in this part of the state and to have seen the folks in this room use creativity, connectedness, and ingenuity to make sure neighbors have their basic needs met. It is my hope that the state continues to act as partners to maximize the impact that we all can have for folk in the NEK and across the state and why I hope you will support Vermont Foodbank's request for \$5 million in FY27.

I'm joined today by Kelsey Stavseth, Executive Director of Northeast Kingdom Human Services, Denise Walton, volunteer with Sid's Pantry and community member from Concord, and Erica Beer and Crystal Bigelow, community health workers with Northeastern Vermont Regional Hospital's Community Connections and our VeggieVanGo site partners at Vermont State University – Lyndon.

Thank you.