

Testimony for House Human Services – Thursday, October 30, 2025

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Thank you chair and thank you committee for having me here today.

I want to recognize that right now, at this moment, there is so much worry and anxiety coming from our community of food access organizations and from our neighbors facing food insecurity. This is a uniquely challenging time, with threats to SNAP, a government shutdown, and neighbors facing confusing information. I'm sure many of you have heard from constituents who are concerned about what November will bring. While that is not the focus of my time here today, I want to recognize that this is the moment we are all collectively living through and how difficult that is for some of us and some of our neighbors. And still, we can, together, make choices that center the needs of our neighbors who are experiencing food insecurity, and other economic-oriented insecurities to ensure their needs are met.

I am going to spend my time today:

1. Detailing how the Vermont Foodbank and our network work together to provide food access to neighbors across the state
2. Sharing how our work supports neighbors who are experiencing financial insecurity in concert with other food access services.
3. Update the committee on what we know from the past few months, what is predicted for the remainder of 2025, and what we are hearing from our partners at this urgent moment.

Overview of Vermont Foodbank

Vermont Foodbank is Vermont's only food bank. We operate three warehouse-sized food distribution centers in Barre, Rutland, and Brattleboro. I am specifically not calling them warehouses because that implies we store food. We do not, we move food in and out and turn over the inventory in those spaces between 9 and 12 times a year to over 300 network and community partners. Each of our distribution centers has a freezer and cooler so we are able to handle fresh and frozen food as well as shelf-stable food.

Food Sourcing

We source that food from a variety of places. We operate two federal food programs, where we redistribute food provided by the federal government: the Commodity Supplemental Food Program (CSFP) which supports around 1500 older adults across Vermont who meet the income threshold of less than 150% of the Federal Poverty level, and food from a program called The Emergency Food Assistance Program (TEFAP) which provides food to about 80 of our food shelf partners and is distributed to individuals whose household income is below 300% of the federal poverty level.

We source donated food from everywhere we can – much of it comes to us through our national partnership with Feeding America, some comes from local manufacturers like, we receive large donations of food from grocery stores like Hannaford, and donations from other grocery partners through our Fresh Rescue pickup program, and from local and regional food drives across the state.

Because federal and donated food is not nearly enough to meet the current need, we also purchase food. This has been the area where we have seen the most growth over the past 5 years. We purchase large truckload quantities of food and pass the quantity savings on to our partners when they purchase smaller case-quantities from us. We also operate a local food purchasing program called Vermonters Feeding Vermonters which the legislature has supported this year – all Vermonters Feeding Vermonters food goes to our network at no cost to them.

Network partners have access to both donated and purchased food.

Who is Vermont Foodbank's Network

There are about 215 of Foodbank network partner organizations across the state and about 75 community partners. Network partners are mostly food shelves and meal sites around the state, community partners are generally schools, hospitals, SASH sites, and other partners that do not have standing food shelves, but we work with to distribute food to specific communities. Some of our network partners are large organizations like Capstone, who you heard from earlier. These larger organizations are open multiple days a week, have storage facilities so can receive larger loads of food from us and are well-known in their communities as resources when folks are struggling. Other partners are very small; maybe just a volunteer run operations that pops up once a month in a church basement or community building. Many of our smaller partners distribute all the food they receive in just a few days a month because they have no permanent storage space or facility.

All Foodbank network partners are independent 501c3 organizations that have a written agreement with Vermont Foodbank which includes requirements around food handling, storage, and other safety and dignity standards. One thing that someone said to me when I first joined Vermont Foodbank was that when you've seen one food shelf... you've seen one food shelf. Each is unique, serving different communities and demographics. And our partners know those communities because they are part of them. We and our network partners together make up the unseen safety net below the public safety net. When systems are not working for people, more all through the cracks and find us. This diversity is the strength of this network system. It also makes it very hard to generalize.

What Our Data Is Telling Us

We receive reports from partners quarterly. The last quarterly report was for the period of July – September and I was able to compare that to the same time period in 2024. Partners report unduplicated numbers of individuals and households visiting their food shelf by month. This means

we are only capturing the number of unique individuals or households coming through the door, not how frequently they visit, not how much food they take, and not how quickly the food moves off the shelves at any location.

Our data show that a majority of partners are seeing increases, but those increases vary widely. Generally, partners serving a broad rural area that lacks other free food resources, like the Sid’s Pantry in Concord who saw 48% increase in the number of individuals they serve, or a larger, centrally located food shelf like St. Brigid’s Kitchen and Pantry in Brattleboro, who saw a 37% increase over 2024, seem to be showing the biggest change from 2024 to 2025. But some moderately sized food shelves are tracking relatively the same in visits year over year. Waterbury Market, for example, showed a modest 3% decline in households visiting.

In addition to visit numbers, which do not tell the whole story, we measure pounds distributed. That is often an early indicator of change across our system. If partners are distributing more food because neighbors are visiting more frequently and need more food at those visits, it shows up in pounds distributed. Overall, our pounds distributed were up 8.5% from the July – September 2024 to 2025.

Looking at our top 15 partners who distribute the largest quantities of food, only one partner did NOT see increases in pounds distributed from 2024 to 2025. And six partners saw an increase of more than 55% in the number of pounds they distributed July – September year over year.

That is an enormous increase for any organization, seeing that six of our partners had increased food distribution of that scale an indication of a rise in food insecurity. Some partners are simply seeing more people. Some are seeing more people who visit more frequently, and some are seeing more people come through the door more frequently and they need more food. I’ve included the chart with the percentage change in my written testimony.

Partner	Change 2024 to 2025
Foodworks	-19%
Manchester Community Food Cupboard	2%
Feeding Champlain Valley	5%
Kitchen Cupboard GBCS	9%
Neighbors in Action	10%
BROC Community Action	13%
Capstone	14%
Upper Valley Haven	22%
HOPE (Middlebury)	55%
Sheldon UM Church	57%
Enough Ministries	82%
Burlington Salvation Army	116%
NorthWest Family Foods	154%
Just Basics	171%

This is also supported by what our partners are telling us.

The Sheldon Interfaith Food Shelf in Franklin County distributes about 25,000 pounds per month. For a recent Vermont Public article, John recently shared this quote, “I expect for 2025, we will see somewhere between a 10% and 15% increase, compared to 2024.” John shared that some of his guests travel upwards of 40 miles to visit the Sheldon Interfaith Food Shelf because there is not one in their town or it may not be open when they can get there.

When I spoke to Joh earlier this week, he was on his way to deliver food and a gas card to a family who could not get to the food shelf and was completely out of food. This selfless problem-solving spirit is what many of our partners and the volunteers who staff their food shelves embody. This is also not a sustainable system. If these community-level volunteers, many of whom are retirees, burn out, there are few to replace them. This continues to be a concern we hold – this system is precarious and is built on the generosity and free labor of volunteers across the state.

BROC in Rutland recently increased their open hours because they were experiencing standing-room only in their waiting area outside the food shelf, with roughly 100 people a day on “regular” days.

Ginger Morton of the Williston Community Food Shelf really names the challenge that people are going through, “It’s always worse in the winter because the vast majority of people that come to food shelves come because they can’t afford to pay for everything that they need to be able to keep themselves alive,” Morton said. Many of the food shelf’s clients are employed, and around 17% are senior citizens receiving Social Security benefits.

Shares Corporation in St. Johnsbury shared their concerns about keeping their shelves stocked, “I mean we got our delivery yesterday from the Foodbank but we’ve got hardly anything left on the shelves before that delivery came, just because as fast as we can get food it’s out the door.”

I want to underscore that this is what we heard before the federal shutdown and the threat of delayed 3SquaresVT benefits for November. This trend toward increased need is what we are hearing from all corners of the state. This trend began well before this moment. This year has made an already difficult trend of more reliance on food shelves and the Foodbank more dramatic, while at the same time several federal cuts have impacted the types and amounts of food available. Here is a quick recap of federal actions that have directly impacted our or our network’s ability to procure food:

- In the Spring, the federal TEFAP program cut 12 truckloads of primarily high-quality protein, that was food we expected to have delivered over the course of the year, but did not arrive. That puts more pressure on our food purchasing and protein costs more.
- Many of our larger partners experienced a loss from the cancellations of the 2025 Local Food Purchase Assistance Cooperative Agreements from the federal government. From 2022-2024

Vermont received about \$500k per year from the USDA that was distributed by VAAFM as grants to our partner organizations to purchase local food. For some partners, this was an additional \$50,000 in purchasing power that helped to fill the shelves, coolers, and freezers. That program and funding are gone.

- At the same time, the federal government reduced Vermont's caseload for the Commodity Supplemental Food Program from about 1625 to 1522. For the first time ever we have had to create a waiting list for older adults who want to use that monthly food box program.
- Canadian tariffs are impacting our food purchasing. While we have been able to get a waiver for food purchased from across the border – a source which saves us a lot in shipping costs – we are seeing prices on canned goods like soup increase 15-35% because of the aluminum tariff increasing can prices. This reduces our buying power and reduces the amount of food we are able to purchase with the same amount of money.
- Inflation on food prices creates the same strain on our budget and our partners' budgets that it does on household budgets.

Several partners are considering limiting things in some way to manage the higher pressure of food insecurity on their operations. The Williston Community Food Shelf told Vermont Public that, "Our numbers have risen dramatically in the last year." At this point, they have not limited how much food people can take but they have limited geographic regions. Clients from Williston, Richmond and St. George can shop three times a month. People from other towns can come in for an emergency bag of food twice a month.

In Sheldon, the food shelf has no residency restriction and no restriction on how frequently people return. But John shared, "We will not deviate from that as long as we possibly can. We may get to the point where we just can't get enough food to be able to do that."

If these financial pressures continue, more partners will be forced to make difficult decisions about how many people they can support or how much food they are able to give out.

Financial pressure is also the reason neighbors are in need of more support. Most people just want to shop at the grocery store to buy the food they need and want. While our partners and our efforts are critical, they dwarf in scale compared to the impact of SNAP. For every one meal food banks can provide to people, SNAP provides 9 meals.

How SNAP and Foodbank network intersect

Most people who have enough money buy food go to the grocery store, choose what they want, and buy it with cash or your debit or credit card. For people on 3SquaresVT, this is the same process, except they can use their EBT card to help pay for their purchase. Because 3SquaresVT is supplemental, it means that people are often using a combination of things to pay for a purchase – cash and EBT, or EBT and their own debit card, as well as the food shelf. Many of our food shelf partners see folks who receive 3SquaresVT every week because those benefits are not sufficient to

support people. Some of our partners have told me that they often recommend the strategy of shopping the food shelf first, then using 3SquaresVT to fill in what they cannot get for free. Our neighbors and partners are just like the rest of us thrifty Yankees, though perhaps even better at it than we are.

There is a neighbor who lives here in Central Vermont who has given me permission to use her experience as an example to help demonstrate this. Emily is disabled; she lives alone and uses a variety of local food access supports to meet her basic needs. Emily receives just \$24 per month in 3SquaresVT, despite being unable to work due to her disability and metastatic brain cancer which she has been battling over the past 8 months. Here are Emily's own words:

“My 3Squares is only \$24.00/month and I've been fortunate enough to have been able to triple my food stamps at the Farmers Market in October, and that friends continue to put money on my Meadow Mart gift card and have and continue to help me in so many other countless ways these past eight months. Nonetheless, I still have to come up with a little over \$500.00 in November for my eyeglasses (\$200.00 by 13 November) and other medically necessary items. About the same amount in December and January too. My co-pays for 4 prescriptions that we'll pick up tomorrow after my infusions will be just under \$20.00. One thing, like my 3Squares, helps offset something else.”

Clearly \$24 dollars a month is not enough for one person to feed themselves. Her food benefits allow her to put her cash toward other necessary, critical things like glasses and prescriptions, and when her 3SquaresVT benefits run out, she uses the food shelf.

Food shelves are not able to carry the wide variety of options available at the grocery store – variety that meets people's health and dietary needs or their cultural preferences for food. In fact, that was never the intention of this system. Food banks like ours were created to redistribute the excess in the food system, like short dated food from local stores, and to address short term, acute challenges: a job loss where folks need help until they can get a new job, a short term expense like a car or furnace repair that forces people to spend their money on an immediate need – even something worse like a house fire. However, now, neighbors are often “regulars” at the food shelf – unable to afford food on a regular basis because they do not have enough money each month to buy food. This is not a food problem; there is plenty of food in our country; this is a money problem. And, while 3SquaresVT is our most effective and efficient anti-hunger program, there is still a need for people to visit food shelves each week or month because current benefit levels are insufficient.

We have seen huge growth in the use of the Foodbank network as a source for food for people over the past 5 years. During the pandemic, we had the benefit of additional food and resources from the federal government, often passed through the State. While we had initially hoped that post-pandemic the numbers of people needing food support would start to go down, we have not seen that happen and are, once again, seeing an increase the amount of food being distributed.

What does the government shutdown mean for neighbors, for Vermont Foodbank, and for our partner food shelves and meal sites.

I want to shift gears a moment and talk about this moment with the government shutdown because that has presented a particularly difficult challenge for us and our partners, and I suspect we will have a few challenging weeks ahead. Last weekend, when all of the households who receive 3SquaresVT received a communications that they should not expect a November benefit unless the federal government reopens, many turned to their local food shelves. As you know, the USDA has said they will not issue federal benefits to people in November. Thankfully, yesterday the Emergency Board met and will be using state funds to provide 15 days worth of 3SquaresVT benefits to everyone in Vermont who receives this benefit and appropriated \$250,000 to Vermont Foodbank to urgently address the needs our partners are seeing. We cannot thank that group of lawmakers and the Joint Fiscal Committee enough. This is the support our neighbors need and the support that our food shelves need in this urgent moment. But neighbors acted on Monday to fill their pantries with the only resources left to them: local food shelves. Our partners shared that this week they have been seeing record numbers of people and that anxiety is high among visitors.

- BROC in Rutland offered that they saw 115 people on Monday, their highest 1-day attendance in recent years.
- South Burlington has shared that this past week was a “Very busy week at the SB Food Shelf. We had 108 customers, 9 of which were new. There was a definite sense of desperation among our customers this week. They heard the news that SNAP benefits were not coming from the Feds because of the government shutdown. That has a huge impact on so many of our customers.”
- Hannah Pick of the Putney Food Shelf shared, “In the nine years I’ve been doing this work, it is very rare that people write with a tone of true panic/worry, so that is standing out for me.” She then shared two emails from neighbors who said they were “panicking” or “really struggling to get dinner on the table” for their family of four each night.

This high need is beyond the normal increase of this season. It is beyond the normal increase of the trends we have been seeing. This is a manufactured crisis for our neighbors who use 3SquaresVT and is creating a crisis for our partners.

Again, we thank the Emergency Board and Joint Fiscal committees for supporting the needs of our neighbors and recognizing the pressure this urgent moment puts on Vermont Foodbank and our partners. While we hope for a swift resolution and the release of federal contingency funds for SNAP, we are so glad that the state has stepped in to care for our neighbors who were worrying that November benefits would not come.

This is a particularly challenging time for this benefit interruption for neighbors who receive 3SquaresVT. October – December are the busiest months for our network. There are many reasons

for this, including food holidays and the start of heating season. Many people tell us they have to choose between fuel and food. Additionally, this October is a 5-week month, meaning that people were already stretching their benefits across 5 weeks instead of 4, and this additional anxiety has meant that food shelves are seeing record visits this week. While many will now get partial benefits on their EBT cards on Nov 7, the will mean that high numbers of people visit local food shelves over the next week or two.

We all must continue to focus on supporting out neighbors to meet their basic needs. And we can make choices to ensure that they have access to the food they need. And you can continue to help keep our neighbors fed.

How You Can Continue to Help

In the past legislative session, we asked for \$5 million in support from the legislature. We received \$500,000 of that to support the Vermonters Feeding Vermonters program I mentioned earlier. We will be back in January and will continue to ask for support to ensure our distribution centers and our network of partners can keep providing food to our neighbors who are experiencing food insecurity.

Early in the session, we will ask that you address this need as soon as possible by appropriating an additional \$1.5 million to the Vermonters Feeding Vermonters program to purchase local food in the Budget Adjustment Act for FY26. And in FY27 budget, we are asking that the legislature appropriates \$5 million to support our work and our network. This money will be used in three ways:

- \$2 million to support local food purchases through the Vermonters Feeding Vermonters
- \$2 million to be used to purchase food that will go to our network at no cost to our partners
- \$1 million toward Ready Response work in collaboration with Vermont Emergency Management to address food access disaster readiness and planning

We are grateful for this time outside of the regular session to keep you updated on the many changes and external forces impacting the food security of neighbors across Vermont. I want to underscore that there are choices we can make to ensure our neighbors are fed and secure and we are here to do this work together with you, with our 300 partners across the state, for the nearly 70k people our network serves each month.

Thank you for your time.