

TESTIMONY TO: House Human Services Committee

FROM: Erica Beer & Crystal Bigelow, Northeastern Vermont Regional Hospital
Community Connections

RE: VT Foodbank NEK Day collaboration

DATE: January 22, 2026

Erica:

Hello, thank you for your time today. My name is Erica and I'm from Sutton, Vermont. I work at Northeastern Vermont regional hospital as a community health worker and this is my coworker, Crystal.

Crystal:

Hello, thank you for having us here today. I am Crystal Bigelow from Lyndonville and I am a community health worker with NVRH and navigator with Vermont health connect. My supervisor Deb and I are site coordinators and facilitate with the Vermont Foodbank for the VeggieVanGo food drop at Vermont State University - Lyndon.

My role is to help coordinate the volunteers at the food distribution and our colleague, Deb, does traffic and data collection. We have acknowledged an uptick in anxiety and concerns around food insecurity from consumers picking up at VeggieVanGo.

At our Lyndon drop we are serving between 350- 400 families per month. we're seeing a very diverse population of all ages that have expressed they are picking up more shares to distribute to friends, families, and neighbors. We hear words of gratitude toward volunteers at the food drop and excitement of food variety. Two Older Vermonters get particularly excited about beets for eating and canning. There is one gentleman that says each time "thank you for you're service." We are seeing an increase in community partners volunteering alongside of us because they see the positive impact this has on food insecurity in our area.

A local agency was able to partner with the Foodbank to have a food drop at their housing site to more directly serve those with barriers to access the food drop.

Erica:

As community health workers we work to connect families to resources and services to help address their needs such as food insecurity. We frequently refer families to commodities, VeggieVanGo, food shelves, and even connect to schools that are collaborating with the Foodbank for food access.

We would like to share a few stories:

I received a referral from a doctor's office requesting that I purchase a glucometer for a patient who was struggling to control her diabetes. After meeting with the patient, it was determined that she did not have food benefits or 3SquaresVT through Economic Services. She shares that while conversing with her community at the laundry mat she understood that financially she should qualify as her peers did and so believed she didn't have access to benefits due to her race. After exploring this further we discovered that she hadn't checked a specific box on the application to apply for benefits and this is why she didn't have the benefits. Now that she has access to the Foodbank and 3squares she stated she would no longer need the glucometer as she knows how to eat balanced meals and manage her chronic illness.

Crystal: My Story

We are seeing an increase in those experiencing financial insecurities due to high cost of living and things such as increased health care premiums in Vermont. A 36 year old single teacher walked into our office for help because she was loosing state and federal tax subsidies that had made her monthly premium affordable. That means this teacher earning a little over \$30 an hour is above the income threshold for Vermont health connect and is no longer eligible for help pay their monthly premium. She would now be responsible for a premium above \$1300 per month. With Rental costs so high she would be paying out half her gross income for housing and healthcare alone. Patient was crying in my office wondering how she would be able to afford food for the month. Scenarios like this are happening almost daily in our office, in our community and statewide. The ability for consumers to access low barrier food resources such as VVG programs out of the VT Foodbank are essential resources to help cushion the high cost of living.

Thank you!