

Johanna Doren
NOFA-VT
3SquaresVT Awareness Day
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Senate Committee on Agriculture

Thank you committee chair and members. My name is Johanna Doren, I live in Winooski, and I am the Local Food Access Director with the Northeast Organic Farming Association of Vermont (NOFA-VT). Thank you for the opportunity to speak with you today.

I am thrilled to be here today to talk with the Senate Committee on Agriculture about the many ways SNAP and complementary food security programs work together to meet the needs of Vermonters and support our vital farming community.

We are here today with our partners and neighbors for SNAP Awareness Day and to ask for your support on several requests that together will move us closer to a food secure Vermont that also ensures our farmers thrive:

1. Support NOFA-VT's request for \$500,000 in base funding to Strengthen Vermont Farm Viability and Address Food Security by sustaining two proven programs: Crop Cash (Plus) and Farm Share.
2. 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.
3. Support the request for \$5 million in base and one-time funding in the FY25 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.
4. Support V4A's request for an additional \$2 million in base general funding for home-delivered meals for older Vermonters, "Meals on Wheels", including the option to draw down additional matching funds through the global commitment investment.

First, I want to share some background on SNAP, and how it impacts Vermonters and farmers. The federal program known as SNAP—Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program—is called 3SquaresVT in Vermont. It is intended to help people buy the groceries they need and want. This program is administered by the Department for Children and Families Economic Services Division of the Agency of Human Services. In Vermont, people can earn up to 185% of the federal poverty level to qualify—for a family of four, this means monthly earnings of \$4,810 or annual earnings of roughly \$57,000 per year. Benefit levels are scaled based on income and monthly expenses. Households can get a benefit as low as \$1 a month.

3SquaresVT benefits come on an EBT card that works just like a regular debit card, so a trip to the grocery store with 3SquaresVT looks like any other shopper's experience. People can use their benefits at any authorized retailer, including authorized farm stands, farmers markets (over 40 of them in the state!), and CSAs.

Each month, 3SVT keeps roughly \$13 million in our state economy, supporting our local farmers, growers, businesses, and entire community. In the first half of this fiscal year, at least \$130,000 in 3SquaresVT benefits have been spent at farmers markets alone. At NOFA-VT, we work to maximize the amount that flows directly to our local farmers. NOFA-VT's food security programs, like Crop Cash (Plus) and Farm Share, help extend this impact by providing an additional incentive for people to spend their 3SquaresVT benefits at farmers markets and CSAs. Vermont's food security depends on a viable agricultural sector, and these programs provide vital income to the people growing the food we all need.

In Vermont, about 65,000 people, nearly 40,000 households receive SNAP benefits. While 3SquaresVT effectively reaches the most low-income folks in Vermont, we know that the program only reaches roughly 40% of potentially eligible Vermonters according to Census income data.¹ There are a number of reasons for this, including additional eligibility requirements, the burdensome application process, and the stigma and shame many associate with applying for government food assistance, even if you are eligible.

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, the monthly benefits are not enough for many, and for others it is simply out of reach. For one reason, the cut-off for SNAP 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 SNAP.

3SquaresVT is *just* one part of the safety net and can't meet the need on its own—it's not designed to do that. We need to make sure every part of the safety net is strong—that includes NOFA-VT's local food security programs, Vermont Foodbank programs, and meal programs for older adults. You will hear today from a farmers market leader, a farmer, and a community member, each with an inspiring story about how these programs have a positive and critical impact on their lives and their communities.

The real 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, and support people and farmers in Vermont in recovering from the cascading crises of record-high inflation, catastrophic flooding, and the end to pandemic government support.

When the State of Vermont invests in meaningful support for food security, the positive impacts are felt across the entire state. There are policy choices in front of you this year that can support food security

¹ Roughly 165,000 people in VT live at or below 185% FPL. Source: American Community Survey (2022), accessed January 7, 2025

for all who live here. Here are actions you can take:

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Thank you for your time and for your consideration. I'd like to invite our next speaker to testify.