

TESTIMONY TO: Senate Economic Development, Housing, and General Affairs
FROM: Carrie Stahler, Vermont Foodbank
RE: FY26 Budget Adjustment
DATE: January 30, 2026

Good morning, thank you for having us. My name is Carrie Stahler, I'm the Sr. Manager of Government Affairs at Vermont Foodbank. I'd like to ask for your support Foodbank's request for funding in the Budget Adjustment and to update you on that process as the Budget Adjustment enters the Senate.

Vermont Foodbank is seeking \$1.5 million in Budget Adjustment FY26 funding to fully fund the Vermonters Feeding Vermonters local food purchase program. We received \$500,000 last year through the FY26 budget process. Those funds were expended between July and October. We are seeking additional funding and there is \$400,000 in the version of the Budget Adjustment that the Senate just received.

This funding directly supports farms' bottom line. Our goal with this funding is to simultaneously support farms and people across Vermont who use our network of food shelves and meal sites, as well as our direct food distribution events. A Win-Win. Which is why this body helped to pass the Vermonters Feeding Vermonters grant program last year.

Vermonters continue to experience food insecurity at a rate that has increased in recent years. The State can make policy choices to support neighbors with the food they need today and support Vermont farm viability by fully funding the Vermonters Feeding Vermonters (VfV) program with an additional \$1.5 million now. For scale, at its peak, this program is able to operate at about \$2.3-\$2.4 million per year. This year it is about \$1 million because of funding restrictions. BAA funding will go directly to Vermont farmers for food grown here.

Through this program, the Vermont Foodbank and our partners purchase Vermont-grown food directly from farms. That food is distributed in a variety of ways through our existing infrastructure of food shelves, meal sites, and direct distributions at housing sites, schools, and hospitals. This food goes onto the tables of neighbors in all corners of the state, at no cost to them. These are folks in our communities who need food access support and cannot afford to purchase local food for themselves and their families.

Our farms in Vermont were our first businesses, and agriculture is still a crucial sector to our economic success as a state. We know from a [UVM study done in 2016](#) found that

for every dollar spent on local food purchased from Vermont farms, an additional \$.60 is contributed to the local economy.

This program operates in three ways to maximize capacity of farms:

- **Large-scale direct purchasing:** The FY26 appropriation of \$500k has been used to purchase food from larger farms, helping to fill shelves at Vermont Foodbank's food shelf partners and feed neighbors. Additional funding would allow us to purchase more food with state dollars and align with farmers' growing seasons. We are making direct contracting decisions with farms right now because farms are making growing decisions right now.
- **Grants to Network Partners:** we grant funds to our network partners to purchase smaller quantities of local food from smaller-scale farms.
- **Culturally Responsive Foods Purchases:** Produce purchases from key partners support the distinct needs of neighbors in communities with culturally preferred food needs. Additional state funding would allow us to support this portion with state dollars.

We are a uniquely supportive customer for Vermont farms in several ways:

- **We forward contract, meaning we are a guaranteed customer** for our farm partners. One of our farm partners, a potato farmer, described that as, "burying all of his money in the ground" then hoping to sell the crop in the fall. We guarantee that purchase and are flexibly able to take a wide variety of sizes, shapes, and colors of first quality produce.
- **We can accommodate replacements and nonstandard produce** – if we contract for 1000 pounds of potatoes, we can take russets or red potatoes. If you are a commercial account and you need baking potatoes, you can't substitute red potatoes, for example. For other produce, grocery stores need standard sized, picture-perfect vegetables. But we and our partners can take a bell pepper that is not a perfect rectangle or funky shaped potato, that is otherwise in perfect condition to cook and eat.
- **Our system gives farmers more efficiency** through decreased processing costs. We receive whole foods and can receive those in bulk crates or gaylords instead of 2 lb bags. Farms do not need to process food to be cooked or package in smaller sizes like they would for grocery stores or commercial accounts. Farms save labor costs and processing expenses. Apples are a good example. We can receive unbagged apples in huge crates, gaylords, that can be moved with fork trucks, as opposed to 3# bags.
- **Simplified distribution means farmers make one stop** instead of deliveries to many smaller locations. By using our three warehouse distribution centers in Brattleboro, Rutland and Barre, or, in some cases, direct delivery to local

partners, Vermont Foodbank's system maximizes moving food broadly out into communities without farmers needing to add to their business costs and capacity. They can focus on their expertise growing the food, we focus on our expertise moving the food.

Why do we need this funding now?

In order to support 200-300 farms across the state, we need adequate funding and it must align with the planning, planting, and growing season of Vermont's farms. This Budget Adjustment funding will allow us to plan for spring and early summer purchases, confidently forward contract with farms that are making planting decisions right now, and be ready for this coming year's growing season.

Earlier this week, a farm partner of our told another committee, "We are ordering seeds today, and we are a little later than we like to be, usually we do that at the end of the year. But this is when we do planning, order our seeds, order our amendments, and plan our contracts." All of those planning and planting decisions are impacted by knowing who will buy product that they will grow from April to October. Vermonters Feeding Vermonters guarantees farmers a market for the food they produce and does so efficiently because Vermont Foodbank handles the pickup and delivery to the "distributor," who, in our case, are our local food shelf partners or direct distribution events.

The Legislature can sustain this program, creating economic investment for 200-300 Vermont farms and providing fresh food for neighbors, with an additional \$1.5 million appropriation in the Budget Adjustment Act.

Thank you for your time, I'm happy to answer any questions you may have.