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Senate Committee on Economic Development, Housing, & General Assistance

Hello, thank you for having me today. My name is Georgie Rubens, I live in Burlington, and I'm the Director of the Burlington Farmers Market and board member of the Vermont Farmers Market Association.

I'm here today to talk about 3SquaresVT and to ask you to 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.

The Crop Cash program doubles 3SquaresVT (SNAP) benefits for fruits and vegetables purchased at Vermont farmers markets. It's primarily federally funded, but requires a local cash match contribution. In 2023, Crop Cash Plus expanded Crop Cash to all SNAP-eligible foods (meat, eggs, dairy, bread). Crop Cash Plus had to be paused in 2024 due to lack of funding.

The reason I support the ask for Crop Cash Plus so strongly is because of the difference I have seen this program make to so many people in my community at the farmers market each week. Each market day I interact with 3SquaresVT customers at our market information booth - I run their EBT cards and in return give them tokens and Crop Cash coupons to spend at the market.

Having the opportunity to educate customers new to 3SquaresVT about the Crop Cash program is one of the things I love most about my job. Sometimes coming to the market is the first time a person learns about Crop Cash and Crop Cash Plus, and seeing people's faces light up when they find out about the additional funds they'll have to spend on groceries never gets old.

I'll never forget one customer from last summer who came to the booth to redeem tokens. It was the first market of the season where the Crop Cash Plus triple match was in effect, and when I ran her EBT card and gave her \$40 more than she was expecting in return, she didn't understand why and thought I'd made a mistake. I explained that more funds had been made available and that she could use the coupons on any grocery item at the market. After I told her this she was in such disbelief, that I had to explain three more times before she believed me. She was so thrilled that she came back to the booth later to show me everything she had bought with her Crop Cash and Crop Cash Plus coupons, and to express her gratitude.

I often think about this customer, and the many others who benefit from the matching program. It's so clear what a real difference it makes to their lives when they have funds to purchase not

just fresh produce, but also a range of grocery items to cover all of their dietary needs. As a market manager, consistent funding would enable me to reassure customers that they'll continue to have this support, and they can reliably plan their food budget around it.

Outside of supporting our customers, consistent funding for Crop Cash Plus would also support our farmer vendors, many of whom attribute 30-50% of sales on a given market day to transactions paid with Crop Cash Plus coupons.

Every market day I check in with our vendors, and when the Crop Cash Plus program isn't active, one of the most commonly asked questions I get is if/when it will return. For many of our farmer vendors that sell meat, milk, cheese, eggs, syrup, or other products that aren't covered by Crop Cash, when the Crop Cash Plus program isn't running, their market revenue takes a hit. Consistent funding would allow farm vendors to better anticipate sales revenue and support overall business planning.

Not only does Crop Cash Plus support our customers accessing a well-rounded diet, but it also supports our local food economy. Approximately half of the vendors at the Burlington Farmers Market are SNAP (and therefore Crop Cash Plus) eligible, but only an eighth or so accept Crop Cash alone. Consistent funding would not only bring our customers more choice when it comes to their grocery shopping, but also include more of our farmers and vendors and contribute to a stronger local economy.

As a pragmatist, tax-payer, former farmer, and someone who cares deeply about food access, I am a huge supporter of this program because of the positive impact it has both in providing people with access to fresh and healthy food, while simultaneously supporting our farms and local economy. It just makes so much sense!

It's for all of these reasons that I hope you will 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.

Thank you for listening, and I'd be happy to answer any questions that you have.