



3SquaresVT Awareness Day

February 6, 2025

Senate Econ. Dev., Housing, & General Affairs

My name is Ivy Enoch, I live in Burlington and I am the SNAP Policy & Training Lead at Hunger Free Vermont. Thank you, Chair and committee members for this opportunity to testify. We're here with our partners and neighbors for 3SquaresVT Awareness Day to ask for your support on requests that, together, move us closer to ending hunger in Vermont. Those requests are:

1. 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.
2. Support \$500,000 in base funding to strengthen Vermont farms and food security by sustaining two proven programs run by NOFA-VT (the Northeast Organic Farming Association of Vermont): CROP CASH (PLUS) and FARM SHARE
3. Support the request for \$5 million in base and one-time funding in the FY26 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. Include an additional \$2 million in base general funding for home-delivered meals for older and disabled Vermonters through the "Meals on Wheels" programs operated through Vermont's Area Agencies on Aging, including the option to draw down additional matching funds through the global commitment investment.

The federal nutrition program known as SNAP—Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program—is called 3SquaresVT in Vermont (it used to be known as "Food Stamps"). It is intended to help people with low incomes buy the groceries they need to prevent hunger. The 3SquaresVT program is administered by the Department for Children and Families Economic Services Division within the Agency of Human Services.

We've heard many 3SquaresVT participants refer to it as a lifeline, and in many cases, the only reason they are able to afford groceries. As someone who was raised by an extremely loving and hardworking single father, raising twin daughters, I know that the SNAP benefit my dad received was our entire monthly grocery budget. I know firsthand the power of SNAP to help families get by, to catch up, while still experiencing the joy of a nourishing shared meal. I would not be where I am today without SNAP.

Eligibility for 3SquaresVT is determined by both the federal government and the state of Vermont. In Vermont, people and families with incomes at or below 185% of the federal poverty level can qualify—for a family of four, this means monthly earnings of no more than \$4,810 or annual earnings of roughly \$57,000 per year. That is only about half of what our

Joint Fiscal Office calculates a family of four needs to earn to meet all of their basic needs in our state. Benefit levels are scaled based on income and monthly expenses.

3SquaresVT benefits are deposited every month on a household's 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—this is very much by design, and every retailer that accepts SNAP has a complex computer system that automatically identifies items that are eligible to be purchased with SNAP. There are more than 700 retailers in Vermont that accept SNAP. Each month, 3SVT keeps roughly \$13 million—federal dollars—in our state economy, supporting our local farmers, growers, businesses, and entire community.

The state is granted options by the federal government to tailor the program to meet our state needs. One of these options is allowing select populations to use their 3SquaresVT benefits to buy hot prepared meals at authorized restaurants—this is called the SNAP Restaurant Meals Program. This option is exclusively for elderly people, disabled people, and people experiencing homelessness, because these populations typically encounter access barriers and challenges with being able to buy, store and cook food. In expanding the use of 3SquaresVT benefits to include restaurants, we can increase food security among these vulnerable populations by giving these select 3SquaresVT households an option to purchase a hot, nourishing meal.

In Vermont, about 65,000 people, nearly 40,000 households receive 3SquaresVT—more than half of these people are older adults or children. 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. There are a number of reasons for this discrepancy, including additional eligibility requirements, the burdensome application process, as well as the stigma and shame many associate with applying for government food assistance, even if you are eligible.

We see an even greater gap between the number of Vermonters reached by 3SquaresVT and the number of folks who are at risk of hunger. In 2022, UVM researchers found that 2 in 5 people in Vermont were at risk of hunger over the past year. USDA research indicates that food insecurity is still increasing nationwide. Since the end of pandemic government support, food insecurity is rising every year, and we know that 4.5 million more households are food insecure in the U.S. today than in 2021.

3SquaresVT is our most effective anti-hunger program, and at the same time it does not reach many Vermonters at risk of hunger. 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.

The 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 there are policy choices in front of you this year that can move us forward, together. Thank you so much for your time.

