

SNAP/EBT Awareness Day
Lisa Bergström Testimony

Thank you for having me.

My name is Lisa Bergström. My husband Trevor and I own and operate two food businesses in Vermont: Pingala Cafe and the Broccoli Bar. Pingala Cafe is a quick service vegan restaurant with two Burlington locations. The Broccoli Bar is a mobile events food trailer with a brick and mortar outpost on UVM campus. Both businesses recently celebrated their 10 year anniversaries and we're looking forward to serving many more meals in the years to come.

I would like to share a story with you all. As I was preparing to testify and speak to how the Restaurant Meals program would be beneficial to the restaurants who participate, I reached out to some of our employees and customers to hear their thoughts. I talked to one of our regulars, Leslie. Leslie has been homeless for many years, she reads the financial times daily and has wonderful book recommendations. She was one of many who started to come to us for a hot meal several times a week when we participated in Everyone Eats. From late 2020, to early 2023, we served 125 meals a day through this program, which collectively served over 1,000,000 meals. During this time period, it accounted for over 20% of our total revenue. It enabled us to remain open, retain our staff, purchase more local foods, and gain a much deeper connection with our local community.

When Everyone Eats came to an end in 2023, we launched our Pay It Forward program, largely to be able to continue welcoming folks like Leslie. The Pay It Forward lets anyone purchase a \$10 meal for anyone in need. We follow the honor system, if you ask for a Pay It Forward meal, we will serve you. Leslie has been continuing to eat at Pingala through this program. During our recent conversation, she told me that "If you really want to help people, one of the best things you can do is offer food (not money)". She went on to further explain the many benefits of receiving a ready to eat, hot, meal such as not having to lug groceries on the bus, find a microwave, and how these are especially valuable to folks with disabilities and the elderly as something as simple as doing the dishes, or chopping produce can be a barrier for them. She also said that unlike food stamps, one cannot as easily convert a restaurant meal to money to be used for other goods.

Our Pay It Forward program is a good idea, but in reality it doesn't work. We receive about four requests for a meal for every one donation. As these are also technically a meal purchased, they are still subject to Meals and Room tax as well as Burlington Gross Receipt Tax.

Seasonality can drastically fluctuate business for Vermont Restaurants as you may well know. On a typical February day, my business will do 30% or less than the sales that we do on an average day in July, yet I have the same overheads, many of the same expenses, and I try to keep as many staff members as I can employed through the cold months. If Vermont were to join the nine other states that have implemented a Restaurant Meal Program, participating restaurants would likely have that extra, year-round, steady and reliable income to soften the drastic changes that can occur in semi seasonal business.

Because of the success of Everyone Eats, what I think Vermont would do differently than the states currently offering the Restaurant Meals program is attract more restaurants using high quality, locally grown, produce and foods. To put it simply, Vermont would do it more Vermonty.

It's both my professional and personal opinion, that including the Restaurant Meals Program in the budget for 2026 would have a hugely positive impact to restaurants, restaurant workers, local farmers and participants. I would be thrilled to see this implemented.

Thank you for your time.