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3SquaresVT Awareness Day
Senate Committee on Government Operations

Thank you committee chair and members.

My name is Anore Horton. I live in Williston, and I'm the Executive Director of Hunger Free Vermont. Hunger Free Vermont is a statewide nonprofit with a core role providing training, technical assistance, and policy support on all of the federal nutrition programs to improve how they work for all of us in Vermont, and public education and outreach to make sure everyone who needs them knows how to access them. As our state has faced multiple crises and disasters over the past four years, we have also, like so many other nonprofits, found ourselves engaging with state agencies in emergency response work, and I'd like to first thank this Committee for your support last session for the inclusion of food distribution in Act 143—to help ensure that planning for keeping people fed during emergencies is fully incorporated into Vermont's emergency preparedness and response planning.

As the Committee on Government Operations, your work touches the lives of every single one of us in Vermont. When government programs function well and are tailored as much as possible to best serve those who need them the most, that makes a really big difference. That is why we are here with our partners and neighbors for 3SquaresVT Awareness Day, to make sure this committee in particular has an overview of 3SquaresVT and how you can help it work in more flexible ways for some of our most vulnerable populations. We are also here to ask for your support on four requests that together will make Vermont more food secure:

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 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 (the 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. 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.¹ Benefit levels are scaled based on income, monthly expenses, and the size of your household. Households can get a benefit as low as \$1 a month.

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.² 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 in supporting people in Vermont as we work to recover from the cascading crises impacting our state—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 for all who live here. Here are actions you can take:

5. 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.
6. 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

¹ [2024 Basic Needs Budgets and Livable Wage Report](#)-Vermont Joint Fiscal Office

² Roughly 165,000 people in VT live at or below 185% FPL. Source: American Community Survey (2022), accessed January 7, 2025

7. Support the request for \$5 million in base and one-time funding in the FY26 budget for 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.
8. 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.

Thank you for your time and for your consideration.