

Testimony – Vermont Senate Committee on Health and Welfare

Submitted by Christine Hadekel, Food & Farm Program Director, Vermont Youth Conservation Corps

Good morning Chair Lyons and members of the committee.

My name is Christine Hadekel, and I'm the Director of the Food & Farm Program with Vermont Youth Conservation Corps. I'm joined today by my VYCC colleagues Breck Knauft and Leah Mital.

VYCC operates an 11-acre organic farm in Richmond that serves both as a production farm and an agricultural training hub for young people. It also serves as the hub where we coordinate the Health Care Share, Vermont's largest and longest-running Food as Medicine program.

Through the Health Care Share, healthcare providers prescribe fresh, locally grown produce to patients who are experiencing food insecurity and diet-related chronic disease. Each week, VYCC provides these households with a share of fresh vegetables, along with recipes and nutrition education to help them incorporate those foods into their daily lives.

Right now, the Health Care Share serves over 450 households across 9 healthcare partners in 5 counties, delivering more than 50,000 pounds of Vermont-grown produce each growing season.

Food as Medicine programs like ours are gaining attention nationwide because food access is one of the most powerful drivers of health outcomes. There is growing evidence that these programs can reduce healthcare utilization and costs by helping patients better manage conditions like diabetes and heart disease.

The Impact of the Program

Data we collect through the Health Care Share shows the power of integrating food directly into healthcare.

Participants consistently report meaningful health improvements, including:

- Reductions in A1C levels
- Weight loss
- Increased energy

These outcomes reflect better management of chronic diseases.

Because participating households are referred through their healthcare providers, the Health Care Share is not just increasing access to food—it's supporting people in following care plans that rely on improved nutrition. One participant reduced their A1C from 8.0 to 5.2, reflecting a major improvement in blood sugar control.

The program also helps families manage rising food costs. One participant told us: *"My food stamps were cut twice last year. This program helped me have fresh vegetables while using my SNAP benefits for other groceries."*

The Challenge: Transportation Limits Our Reach

Demand for the Health Care Share continues to grow as providers recognize the role nutrition plays in preventing and managing chronic disease.

The Health Care Share already has:

- Established healthcare partnerships
- Farm production systems
- Distribution coordination
- Trained staff and AmeriCorps members

Right now, transportation capacity is the primary bottleneck limiting our growth. We rely on a single leased cargo van and make multiple trips to reach clinics across several counties.

Each week, our team harvests, packs, and delivers thousands of pounds of fresh produce—driving roughly 400 miles to distribute more than 450 shares across Chittenden County, Central Vermont, and the Northeast Kingdom.

Because we're operating with one vehicle, these routes require long-distance travel and repeated trips, which directly limits how many additional households and healthcare partners we can serve.

With two additional vans, we could run routes simultaneously—organizing deliveries by region instead of repeating long trips. This would allow us to reach more clinics, reduce travel time, and bring food distribution points closer to patients—ultimately serving more Vermonters, more effectively.

Transportation is also a barrier for families themselves. Clinics consistently report that families often live far from share pickup sites, lack reliable vehicles, or have mobility challenges. Without reliable distribution systems, programs like ours will struggle to reach the people who need them most.

Our Request

To address this, we are requesting a one-time capital investment of \$100,000 to purchase two cargo vans for the Health Care Share.

These vans would allow us to:

- Expand to more healthcare partners
- Serve more Vermonters facing food insecurity and chronic disease
- Deliver more Vermont-grown produce
- Strengthen connections between local farms and healthcare systems

With these vehicles, we can scale the program without significantly increasing ongoing costs.

We are already making strategic investments to scale this program. At our East Monitor Barn, we're expanding cooler storage and building a larger, winterized wash and pack facility. These improvements allow us to handle more produce, improve food safety, and extend the season. They position us to serve more patients—but transportation is the critical missing link that allows that increased capacity to actually reach people.

Closing

I'll close with one simple point: Food is medicine—but only if we can get it to the people who need it. Transportation is the critical link that allows this program to reach more Vermonters. The people we serve through our program are managing chronic conditions like diabetes and hypertension. Improving access to healthy food is also an investment in better health outcomes and lower long-term healthcare costs.

Thank you for your time and consideration. With your support, we can get more fresh, local food to the Vermonters who need it most.