

# OPEN LETTER TO VERMONT POLICY MAKERS

## RE: Food Security Emergency in Vermont

### June 3, 2020

Dear Vermont Policy Makers:

**We write to draw your attention to an urgent and unprecedented food security crisis in Vermont, and to ask you to commit funds to address this crisis now.**

Coronavirus Relief Funds must be directed quickly to begin to address the rising food insecurity in our state. We ask that \$18 million be allocated to support the structures and systems in place now to meet the increased demand, transportation needs, labor costs, and communication needs associated with the COVID-19 response efforts. We are also recommending an additional \$20 million be allocated for direct support to families to increase current 3SquaresVT benefits by 15% and allow for a surge in applications when new outreach efforts are implemented.

The \$18 million total includes financial support for currently overburdened programs like school and summer meal programs for children and the Vermont Foodbank's efforts to distribute food — including local food through Vermonters Feeding Vermonters — in partnership with its 215 network partners to families and individuals across the state. It also includes a stimulus for schools to purchase food from VT farmers and producers; provision of school meals to early childhood sites, and feeding homeless households staying in motels during the pandemic. The funding will also cover the cost of increased outreach needed for 3SquaresVT and additional Crop Cash funding for Vermont families to access local food at farmers markets. *We cannot wait for potential FEMA reimbursement for these huge expenses that our agencies, our partners, and our school districts are shouldering on behalf of the State at this time.*

As we begin to emerge from the immediate COVID-19 emergency, we are seeing alarming signs of increasing food insecurity for Vermonters and their families. We write this letter to call your attention to the rising threat of hunger and ask that you work with us and others to ensure a well-planned and executed response at the state level. The State of Vermont cannot expect our schools and charitable food system to shoulder the entire burden without state support. We are concerned for the health and well-being of Vermonters, especially our most vulnerable communities. As extra unemployment benefits at the federal level are withdrawn and people exhaust their savings, we expect that **food insecurity is going to increase**, or in the best case, remain at current high levels for the next 12-24 months.

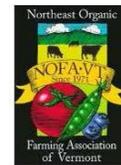
We consider this situation to be at emergency levels. Various data points tell us of the increasing need.

- The Vermont Foodbank has seen drastic increases in the number of people reaching out for help, ranging up to an 800% increase at partner sites and distributions.
- The most recent data from Feeding America, released in mid-May estimates the number of food insecure people in Vermont has increased by 46% and that child food insecurity in VT has increased by 60%.

***The pandemic has shone a light on the thousands of people who have long lived in poverty in Vermont, and has also resulted in families who have never before been worried about putting food on their table, after suddenly losing their jobs, facing that very reality for the first time. We know that children and people from marginalized populations are especially vulnerable to hunger. No person living in Vermont should be worried about how they will get the food they need to be healthy.***

At the same time that families across our state are facing rising food insecurity, Vermont's farmers are struggling from the loss of key markets like restaurants and institutions. The State needs to invest in programs that help ensure Vermonters are fed while supporting Vermont's farmers. Programs such as The VT Foodbank's Vermonters Feeding Vermonters and NOFA-VT's Crop Cash and Farm Share, as well as investments in school meals programs' ability to purchase local food, will work to address immediate needs while also leading to a more localized, resilient food system in the future.

We understand that the State of Vermont and VT National Guard's support for the Farmers to Families Food Box distribution efforts will be ending in mid-June. As this assistance is withdrawn, replacement resources will be needed to continue distributing this emergency food to Vermont families. Millions of meals worth of food have already been distributed, and high demand continues at all distribution locations. It takes an enormous amount of labor and organization to ensure that these foods are distributed across the state equitably and safely.



The USDA has indicated that this program will continue through the end of the year with the potential to provide roughly 1.6 million pounds of food per month. This would almost double the Vermont Foodbank's average distribution during that time period and would require double the resources to execute given the challenge of distributing perishable, pre-boxed food. Considerable support is needed for the Foodbank to accommodate that need; we must collectively be prepared to sustain the effort for the next six months or risk missing out on these federal food resources available to our state, and the revenues to Vermont farmers that are providing food for the boxes.

**We have not yet passed into a recovery phase with regard to food insecurity.** As we continue to respond to the crisis and move toward recovery, we must also lay a foundation for reduced food insecurity in the future. Settling for returning to some "tolerable" number of hungry Vermonters is not acceptable, and would be a terrible waste of the opportunity we have as a state to make real change. 3SquaresVT is the most streamlined and dignified way for Vermonters with insufficient incomes to access food, and brings millions of needed federal dollars into our local food economy. To combat the deep barriers and stigma that potential participants face in applying to 3SquaresVT, the State must invest in expanding outreach efforts to ensure that anyone who needs 3SquaresVT benefits learns that the program is available to them and is able to access help in applying for the program.

3SquaresVT benefit levels were never adequate for families facing food insecurity, and now more than ever, the benefit falls short for families to afford a nutritious diet. *The State of Vermont must seize the opportunity presented by this crisis to help 3SquaresVT benefits meet people's needs by supplementing the federal benefits.* The federal government is considering increasing benefits amounts by 15%, as it did temporarily in 2009. The State has the opportunity to act quickly and increase benefits now, until Congress can make a decision to support this increase with federal dollars.

**To appropriately address the rising food insecurity in our state, losses to farmers and the rising costs and demands that schools, food shelves and others are facing, the response must be comprehensive and holistic.** We must support access to 3SquaresVT and school meals while also supporting the charitable food system and Crop Cash. The need is urgent and rapidly rising. The solutions are established, and known. Do not allow Vermonters to fall further and further into poverty, to go to bed hungry so that their children can eat, or to choose between paying rent, buying food, or taking their medications. **The time to act is now.**

Thank you for your thoughtful consideration.

ATTACHMENTS:

- [Vermont Foodbank budget for charitable food system](#)
- [Vermont Farm to School Network memo re: supporting local food purchasing for schools](#)
- [NOFA-VT letter to Senate Agriculture Committee](#)
- [Hunger Free Vermont Letter re: School feeding and 3SquaresVT](#)

Sincerely,

John Sayles, CEO, Vermont Foodbank  
Betsy Rosenbluth, Project Director, Vermont FEED  
Grace Oedel, Executive Director, Northeast Organic Farming  
Association - Vermont  
Anore Horton, Executive Director, Hunger Free Vermont