

Written Testimony – Carrie Stahler BAA 1-10-22

Good afternoon and thank you.

My name is Carrie Stahler, I live in Lyndon and I am the Government and Public Affairs Officer for the Vermont Foodbank.

I ask you to support the work of the Vermont Foodbank and our 300 statewide partners with \$6 million in one-time funds from FY22 budget adjustment to address ongoing, increased food insecurity. Last session we requested \$8 million and received \$1 million - we have since used that funding to purchase food. Thank you for that support.

The COVID-19 pandemic continues to disrupt the lives of neighbors across the state. This has a direct impact on people's ability to access enough food for themselves and their families. The contrast between the pre-pandemic rate of food insecurity of 9.6% and the current rate of 27% is stark.

This increase is reflected in our own distribution data. In 2021 we distributed 17.6 million lbs of food, compared to roughly 11 million lbs pre-pandemic. We have seen a 46% increase in households visiting our VeggieVanGo events since 2019. Several VeggieVanGo events had record attendance in November and December, a clear sign that food insecurity is not improving.

Many people were set back financially by the pandemic. Some of our neighbors were more likely to experience food insecurity than others – according to Dr. Meredith Niles, who you heard from last week, households with children are 2.4 times more likely to experience food insecurity than those without children, households experiencing job disruptions are 3 times more likely to experience food insecurity than those that did not experience job disruptions, and people over 55 years old are more likely to experience food insecurity than those younger than 55.

<https://scholarworks.uvm.edu/calsfac/187/>

While recovery has begun, many households are still struggling. Pandemic relief programs made a huge difference, but many of them have ended – without those supports, people are, again, struggling to put food on the table and are relying on our direct distributions, our network partners food shelves, or other food assistance programs.

A majority of the people using food assistance are working Vermonters. Many of our neighbors cannot afford increased housing, heat and food costs driven up by inflation that is quickly outpacing wages. At the Foodbank, our own food costs are up 3 to 30% in the past few months.

Please support the work of The Vermont Foodbank with an appropriation of \$6 million to ensure that the basic need of providing food to our neighbors is supported while this pandemic continues to challenge our communities. This request meets the ARPA funding requirements by responding to the public health crisis and addressing the negative economic impacts of the pandemic.

Thank you for your time.