



CROSCUTTING ISSUES

Food Security in Vermont

How can we reduce food insecurity in Vermont? How can we increase the vitality and value of Vermont's food system while ensuring that all citizens have equitable access to fresh, healthy, local food?

Hunger (i.e., a painful sensation caused by a lack of food) and **food insecurity** (i.e., an inability to access enough food to meet basic needs due to financial constraints) are issues of growing concern in this country. **The *U.S. Department of Agriculture* (USDA) reports that an average of 13.6% of Vermonters were food insecure from 2007 to 2009 (an increase from an average of 10.2% from 2005 to 2007). Vermont ranks 20th in the nation for the prevalence of food insecurity, third highest in New England after Maine and Rhode Island.**¹ Emergency food assistance organizations reported an increasing number of clients in 2008. As the cost of food continues to rise and the impacts of the recession linger, many Vermonters are forced to make difficult choices. They may choose inexpensive, unhealthy food so that they can afford basic necessities such as heat, transportation, and medicine. Although the local food movement has provided access to an expanding market for Vermont producers, many farmers are not able to secure a reasonable standard of living for their families, and low income Vermonters are not able to incorporate fresh and affordable local foods in their diets.

Three of the goals identified in the Farm to Plate (F2P) Strategic Plan relate to food security for Vermonters.

GETTING TO 2020

Goals 18, 19, and 20 address the need to increase access to fresh, local food for all Vermonters.

Goal 18: All Vermonters will have access to fresh, nutritionally balanced food that they can afford.

Goal 19: Local, fresh food will be more available to people who are food insecure.

Goal 20: All Vermonters will have a greater understanding of how to obtain, grow, store, and prepare nutritional food.

Food security issues are covered in more depth in Appendix D: Dissolving the Double Bind.

CURRENT CONDITIONS

The combination of the recent economic recession, unemployment, and climbing food and fuel prices has driven record numbers of Vermonters to seek assistance from the supplemental and emergency food systems, as well as increased participation in community food security projects. This increase in food insecurity is apparent across the country. In the fall of 2009, *Feeding America*, the nation's largest food bank organization, surveyed 160 food bank network members from across the United States. They found that 100% of the participating food banks experienced an increase in demand for emergency food assistance in 2008. A similar national study conducted in 2008 reported charitable food sites experiencing a 30% increase, on average, in the number of people visiting food pantries.²

Many pressures affect food access in Vermont. Limited incomes, poverty, and lack of transportation are significant contributing factors to hunger and food insecurity,



Women and children "putting food by" in a Middlebury canning kitchen operation

though they are by no means the only causes. The concept of **food deserts** (i.e., areas in industrialized societies that lack access to healthy and affordable food) has been used around the country to describe the effects that these barriers have on food insecure individuals and families.³ However, it has also been argued that food deserts are an inadequate metaphor for food insecurity, and therefore, concentrating on increasing physical access to food in the absence of education or policy change will be ineffective.⁴ This argument calls for transportation issues (physical and economic barriers to food access) to be addressed in concert with education and policy-based efforts. It is apparent that addressing food access in our state is a complex and multifaceted puzzle.

Strategies for addressing food access generally fall into three categories: (1) **supplemental assistance programs** (often federally or state funded) to increase the consistency and nutritional quality of meals accessed by vulnerable groups; (2) using the **emergency or charitable food system** to meet the needs of citizens in crisis by providing food through food shelves and other mechanisms; and (3) **community food security projects** to focus on building communities' capacities to feed themselves through job training, food and nutrition education, and infrastructure development.

Leveraging resources to effectively and efficiently reduce food insecurity while continuing to develop Vermont's food system economy is a formidable task. The following sections provide an overview of food access and local food-related efforts and programs around Vermont.

🍏 Supplemental Assistance Programs: Federal Food Programs

The *Congressional Budget Office* estimates that, over a five-year period, the 2008 Farm Bill will spend \$188.9 billion on nutrition programs, equal to 66.5% of all funding for the Farm Bill. Table 4.1.1 presents an overview of the federal supplemental food assistance programs that support Vermont families and individuals.⁵

For example, the *Vermont Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children* (WIC) is a federal program run by the *Vermont Department of Health*. It is designed to improve the health status of low income, nutritionally at-risk Vermonters. Although the program is not exclusively a food access program, ensuring adequate

Table 4.1.1 : Federal Food Programs

| Program | Eligibility | Description |
|--|---|---|
| Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants and Children (WIC) | The program enrolls pregnant women (up to six weeks after birth or after pregnancy ends), breastfeeding women (up to infant's first birthday), non-breastfeeding postpartum women (up to six months after the birth of an infant or after pregnancy ends), infants (up to the first birthday), and children under the age of five. | A federal program run by the <i>Vermont Department of Health</i> . WIC is designed to improve the health status of low income, nutritionally at-risk Vermonters. The program provides food supplements by delivering food two times per month to participants' residences. Foods included in the deliveries include whole grain bread, peanut butter, canned beans, baby foods, cheeses, eggs, juice, cereal and milk. Participants in the WIC program also receive WIC Cash Value Voucher cards that allow them to purchase fruits and vegetables. This card looks like a credit or debit card, and can be used to purchase fresh, frozen, or canned fruits and vegetables at authorized grocery stores and co-ops. ⁶ |
| Farmers' Market Nutrition Program (FMNP) and Senior Farmers' Market Nutrition Program (SFMNP) | WIC participants and other low income Vermonters qualify for farmers' market produce coupons from the <i>Vermont Farm to Family Program</i> , supported primarily with federal <i>Farmers' Market Nutrition Program</i> (FMNP) funds. | The <i>Vermont Farm to Family</i> , which provided farmers' market coupons, is administered by the <i>Department for Children and Families</i> (DCF). DCF offices distribute the coupons earmarked for WIC participants, and <i>Community Action Agencies</i> distribute the federal senior coupons, plus a smaller set of state-funded coupons available to other low income households, such as families whose children are too old for WIC or single adults who are unemployed or have disabilities. All <i>Farm to Family</i> coupons are redeemable only for fresh fruits or vegetables sold at participating farmers' markets. |
| Supplemental Nutrition Access Program (SNAP) / 3SquaresVT | The amount of benefits that participants receive varies based on household income and number of dependents. In 2010, Vermonters who qualify had to gross less than \$20,036 (185% of federal poverty level for one person), and net less than \$10,830 (100% of the federal poverty level for one person) based on household size. Some households with members over 60 years old or people with disabilities may also qualify. ⁷ Currently, one out of every eight Vermonters receives benefits from 3SquaresVT. ⁸ | Formerly known as Food Stamps, the <i>Supplemental Nutrition Access Program</i> (SNAP), or <i>3Squares VT</i> , is administered by DCF. Recipients can access support and sign up for the program at one of twelve <i>Economic Services District Offices</i> around the state to receive monthly benefits that can be used to buy a variety of food items. |
| Older Americans Act Nutrition Services (OAA Title III C) | Americans aged 60 and older and their caregivers. | The program targets this population using two programs: (1) <i>Congregate Nutrition Services</i> (commonly known as Senior Meals) and (2) <i>Home Delivered Nutrition Services</i> (commonly known as Meals on Wheels). Both of these programs provide meals and nutritional services to seniors in a variety of settings, including senior centers and restaurants, as well as in their homes. In Vermont, the <i>Department of Disabilities, Aging and Independent Living</i> (DAIL) distributes these funds to the five <i>Area Agencies on Aging</i> (AAAs), which in turn contract with various food service providers to prepare and serve or deliver meals within their regions. ⁹ |

| Program | Eligibility | Description |
|--|--|---|
| <p>Child Nutrition Programs</p> | <p>Varies by program, but may include public and nonprofit private schools, residential child care institutions, and emergency shelters.</p> | <p>The list of child nutrition programs in the United States includes the National School Lunch Program, the School Breakfast Program, the Child and Adult Food Care Program, the After School Snack Program, the Special Milk Program, and the Summer Food Service Program. In Vermont, these programs are administered by the Vermont Department of Education. The National School Lunch and the School Breakfast Programs provide subsidies to public and nonprofit private schools and residential child care institutions. These subsidies help the school provide breakfast and lunch to qualifying students for free or at reduced-cost. The Special Milk Program provides subsidies for milk and snack purchases to schools (public and qualifying private) and residential child care institutions, provided students are not also enrolled in either the National School Lunch or School Breakfast program. When the school year ends, the Summer Food Service Program for Children (SFSP) is available for those children under 18 who qualify for free or reduced-cost school meals. This program has been in effect since 1968, and is administered by the USDA's Food and Nutrition Service.¹⁰ Child care centers, outside-of-school-hours care centers, family day care homes, some adult day care centers, emergency shelters, and after-school care programs that do not qualify for the National School Lunch Program, the School Breakfast Program, or the Special Milk Program may be eligible for enrollment in the Child and Adult Care Food Program (CACFP). This program provides subsidies for meals served at these settings.¹¹</p> |
| <p>Commodity Supplemental Food Program (CSFP)</p> | <p>Eligible participants must either be 60 years old or older, a child under six years of age, or a woman who is pregnant or who has given birth in the last year. Individuals are not allowed to be enrolled in CSFP and WIC simultaneously. Individuals enrolled in SNAP, Medicaid, or the Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) program are immediately eligible for CSFP.</p> | <p>A drop site delivery service administered by the Vermont Foodbank, this program distributes nutrition information and 31 pounds of food (such as cereal, juice, and cheese) to eligible participants. The program is specifically designed to supplement SNAP benefits, helping recipients access essential nutritious foods that they could not otherwise afford.</p> |
| <p>Emergency Food Assistance Program (TEFAP)</p> | <p>Individuals and families that meet state-designated poverty levels.</p> | <p>Administered by the USDA's Food and Nutrition Service, this program processes and packages food before delivering it to state agencies to deliver to families, serve as meals, or otherwise distribute. In Vermont, the Vermont Foodbank distributes food through TEFAP to food shelves rather than to homes. The federal program requires that food packages delivered through TEFAP be based on income eligibility.¹² Meals prepared and served at food shelves and other meals sites are not based on income eligibility. By eliminating home delivery in Vermont, the Foodbank reduces administrative costs associated with keeping track of recipients' levels of need. In Vermont, the program is administered by the Agency of Human Services, Child Development Division/Donated Food Section.</p> |

nutrition among its recipients is key to WIC's efforts to increase the health and well-being of vulnerable individuals and families. This program serves 55% of all infants and 40% of children under five in the Vermont.¹³ Most approved WIC products are sourced from outside of Vermont. However, some products are sourced from Vermont producers including bread. *La Panciata Bakery* in Northfield has created a loaf that meets WIC nutritional criteria and provides this bread to all WIC recipients who receive food deliveries. In addition, work is underway to establish a contract with [Vermont Soy](#). [Thomas Dairy](#) in Rutland is the largest milk contractor for Vermont WIC, and all cheese is sourced from [Cabot](#).

WIC participants and other low income Vermonters qualify for farmers' market produce coupons from the [Vermont Farm to Family Program](#), supported primarily with federal [Farmers' Market Nutrition Program \(FMNP\)](#) funds. All *Farm to Family* coupons are redeemable only for fresh fruits or vegetables sold at participating farmers' markets. According to a DCF report, 2009 **Farm to Family coupon redemptions generated \$118,992 in produce sales for 297 participating growers selling at 56 farmers' markets in Vermont.** The coupons benefited 4,916 households made up of 2,411 families that included 2,641 WIC participants, plus 1,518 elderly households and 987 other low income households that received state-funded coupons. Nationally, \$43 million in federal WIC and Senior FMNP funds were allocated to states in 2009. About 19,000 farmers and 3,700 farmers' markets participated in one or both FMNPs, and the coupon benefits went to 3 million WIC participants and seniors.¹⁴

Another federal program, the [Supplemental Nutrition Access Program \(SNAP\)](#), formerly the Food Stamp program) serves **one out of every eight Vermonters receives benefits** (in Vermont, SNAP was renamed [3Squares VT](#)).¹⁵ Since the beginning of the program toward the end of the Great Depression, there has been a strong correlation between unemployment rates and participation rates in the Food Stamp Program.¹⁶ Participants in 3SquaresVT receive monthly benefits on electronic debit (EBT) cards. These benefits can be used to buy a variety of food items including meat, dairy, cereals, vegetables, cold prepared food, seeds, and plants. The benefits cannot be used to purchase hot meals, pet food, soap, paper products, alcohol, cigarettes, and other nonfood items.¹⁷

Currently, 3SquaresVT benefits are transferred electronically to recipient debit cards on a monthly basis. Before this system was put in place, food stamp recipients were able to use their paper food stamps at farmers' markets, farm stands, and other direct marketing venues. Since the transition to this system, many farmers' markets are unable to accept 3SquaresVT benefits, primarily because they do not have access to the necessary technology to process payments in an efficient manner. While free EBT machines that require phone line hook-ups are available, and should be utilized whenever possible, many markets are located outdoors or in buildings that require wireless connections. Local food advocates in Vermont have been working hard to increase the prevalence of wireless card readers at Vermont farmers' markets. This is not only to ensure that Vermont farmers can capture federal dollars in a direct market, but also to ensure that 3SquaresVT participant have continuous access to fresh, healthy, and local food.

🍎 Vermont's Charitable Food System

This section presents an overview of the emergency and charitable programs in Vermont. Table 4.1.1 presents an overview of emergency or charitable food assistance programs that support Vermont families and individuals. **Approximately 8,200 individuals receive emergency food assistance in any given week in Vermont.**¹⁸ Although many of these people have jobs (37% of households served by the [Vermont Foodbank](#) include at least one employed adult), they often live on the edge of their financial resources. Of households served by the [Vermont Foodbank](#), 69% have incomes below the official federal poverty levels of \$10,830 per year or \$902.50 per month for a family of one, or \$22,050 per year or \$1,837 per month for a family of four.¹⁹ This means that people often have to make the terrible choice between eating and meeting other basic needs such as heating their homes or keeping a roof over their heads. Of the clients who receive food at organizations belonging to the [Vermont Foodbank](#) network, 42% must choose between paying for food and paying for utilities or heating fuel; 23% must choose between food and medicine or medical care; and 34% must choose between food and paying their rent or mortgage. A lack of access to personal or public transportation also contributes to families' and individuals' ability to work or access food. Of the clients served by the [Vermont Foodbank](#), 35% do not have access to a working car.²⁰

Table 4.1.2: Vermont's Charitable Food System

| Program | Eligibility | Description |
|---|---|--|
| Vermont Foodbank | Vermont Foodbank partners, including food shelves and food pantries, community meal sites, after-school programs, shelters, and rehabilitation centers. | The Vermont Foodbank sources food from national manufacturers, the U.S. commodity program, local retailers, grocers, restaurants, bakeries, cafeterias, and farms and distributes it to their 280 partner organizations within Vermont. ²¹ The Foodbank also distributes food for seniors and other special populations to specific drop-off sites, and to communities that are limited or lacking in charitable distribution sites through their mobile program. Six Vermont schools also participate in the Backpack Program, through which teachers place nonperishable food in backpacks for children to take home to ensure that they have food over the weekend. The Vermont Foodbank currently has four programs that specifically focus on getting locally produced food to people in need — namely the Gleaning Program, the Foodbank Farming Network, the Kingsbury Farm in the Mad River Valley, and Pick for Your Neighbor. |
| Emergency and Public Charitable Food Distribution Sites: Food Shelves, Soup Kitchens, and Community Meal Sites | Food insecure Vermonters. | Charitable food distribution sites are divided into two categories. The first category, food shelves (also called food pantries), provide groceries for people to take and consume at home. The second category, soup kitchens and other types of community meal sites, provide prepared meals for people to eat in group settings on site. These charitable food distribution sites are usually community-based programs funded through a variety of mechanisms, often run by volunteers through faith-based organizations. Vermont has at least 135 food shelves and 35 community food sites, or 170 charitable distribution sites that are free, locally organized, and open to the public. ²² The majority of these (at least 100) are operated by faith-based organizations. Other hosts include 19 local agencies, 7 town clerks, and 20 family centers or similar organizations. ²³ |
| Food Rescue (multiple organizations) | Food insecure Vermonters. | Food rescue is the act of retrieving safe, edible food that would otherwise go to waste. ²⁴ It may include food that has passed its "sell by" date, food that has been over-ordered by restaurants, or produce with cosmetic imperfections. Businesses that donate food to food rescue programs may receive tax credits for their donations, and they are protected from liability lawsuits as a result of the Good Samaritan Food Donation Act. ²⁵ |

| Program | Eligibility | Description |
|---|---------------------------|---|
| Gleaning Programs (multiple organizations) | Food insecure Vermonters. | Gleaning refers to the act of gathering produce that is left over from farmers' fields after the commercial harvest and encompasses all food that is harvested, rescued, or donated directly from Vermont farms, orchards, farmers' markets, home gardens, and Grow an Extra Row , or similar programs for provision to the charitable food system. Five organizations and one individual (the Vermont Foodbank, <i>Willing Hands</i> , the <i>Intervale Center</i> , <i>Post Oil Solutions</i> , <i>Rutland Area Farm and Food Link</i> (RAFFL), and Corinne Almquist) currently run coordinated gleaning programs in Vermont. |

Figure 4.1.1 shows the location of community meals sites, food shelves, and *Commodity Supplemental Food Program* (CSFP) drop sites for each county in relation to the percentage of the population enrolled in the SNAP program. Food pantries and community meal sites provide food and/or a place to eat for a significant portion of Vermont's population. **In 2008, approximately 31,000 people, or 5% of Vermont's population, visited a food shelf or community meal site in a typical month.**²⁶ That same year, the total value of food provided through food pantries and community meal sites in Vermont amounted to approximately \$11 million dollars (based on \$9,500,000 for the total value provided through food shelves and \$1,700,400 through community meal sites).²⁷

The majority of the charitable food sites in Vermont belong to the Vermont Foodbank network and source the bulk of the food they serve from the Foodbank (70.4% of the food provided by pantries, and 36.8% of the food served by community kitchens comes from the Vermont Foodbank).²⁸ Much of the food that these organizations purchase tends to be healthy produce, dairy products, and meats — items that are also produced by Vermont farmers and could be sourced in Vermont. In a 2010 survey of Vermont Foodbank partners, 77.1% of the community meal sites purchased fresh fruits and vegetables; 47.3% of the pantries and 80.0% of the meal sites purchased beef, pork, poultry, fish, beans, eggs and nuts; and 6.7% of the pantries and 88.6% of the meal sites purchased milk, yogurt, and cheese.²⁹

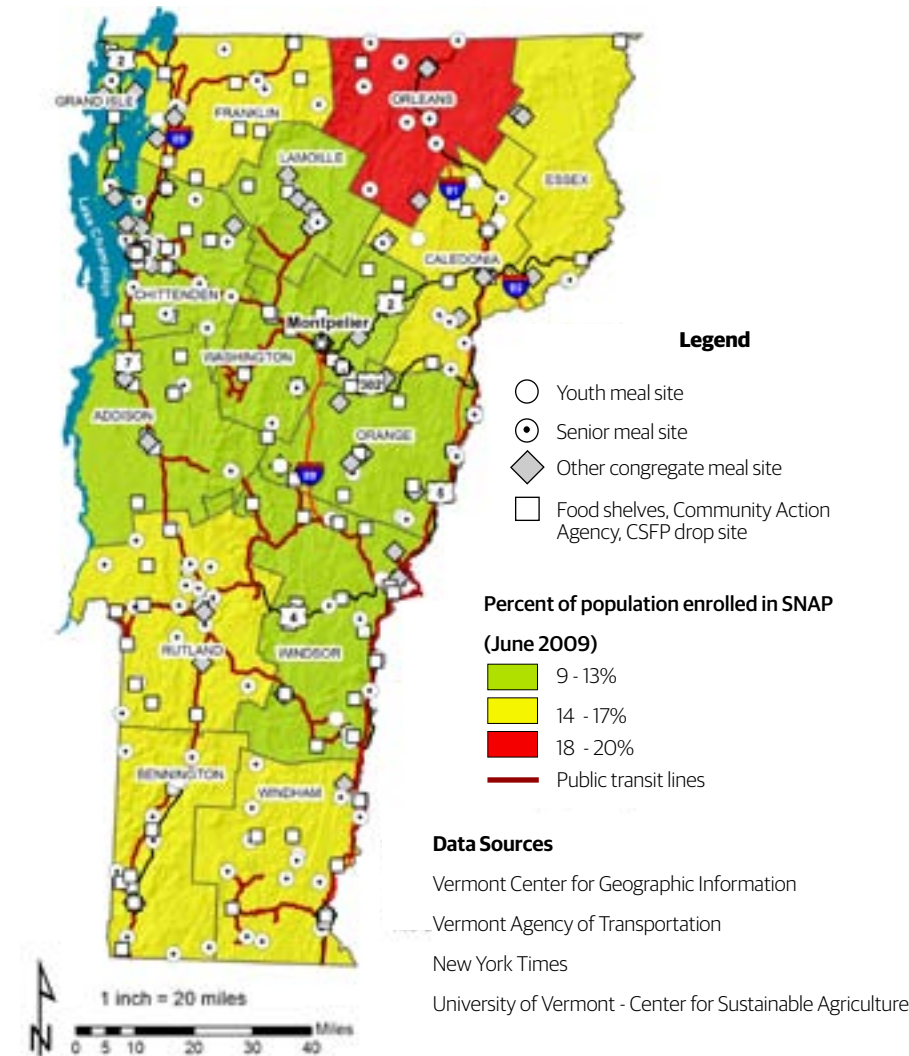
The fact that charitable food sites purchase some of the food they provide, along with their desire for more fruits and vegetables, meats, and dairy products presents an opportunity for introducing more locally produced

nutrient-dense food into the charitable food system. These purchases would probably have to be subsidized in some manner to be affordable for most charitable sites. As such, these sales cannot be relied on by any individual farm for the bulk of their profit, but they can provide a reliable market, especially for beginning farmers, as has been demonstrated by the *Farm to Table Program* and by *Post Oil Solution's* low income farmer's market CSA at an affordable housing site.

However, to increase distribution of fresh produce and meat at charitable food sites in Vermont, more on-site storage capacity is needed because most charitable food sites lack sufficient cold storage space. Many food shelves and community meal sites are open only once a week or less, yet very few have the capacity to store fresh food. This lack of cold storage capacity can prevent those who manage these sites from accepting fresh perishable foods from gleaning programs and other donations. Half the respondents to the Vermont Foodbank survey do not have access to a refrigerator or freezer, and 69% of the respondents identified cold storage as the greatest barrier to providing more fresh meat and produce to their clients.³⁰

Figure 4.1.2 illustrates how food flows through this system in Vermont. It distinguishes between charitable food sites that are part of the "emergency" food system (i.e., sites that were specifically intended to provide short-term assistance to people in crises) and nonemergency programs that provide food at low or no cost as part of an on-going program.

Figure 4.1.1: Food Access - Charitable Food Sites



The *Vermont Foodbank* currently has four programs that specifically focus on getting locally produced food to people in need.

➤ The **Gleaning Program** coordinates gleaning efforts in four regions of the state and provides guidance and support to gleaning organizations in other regions. In 2009, the *Foodbank* gleaning program distributed more than 409,000 pounds of fresh fruits and vegetables gleaned or donated from 73 farms to charitable food sites throughout the state.

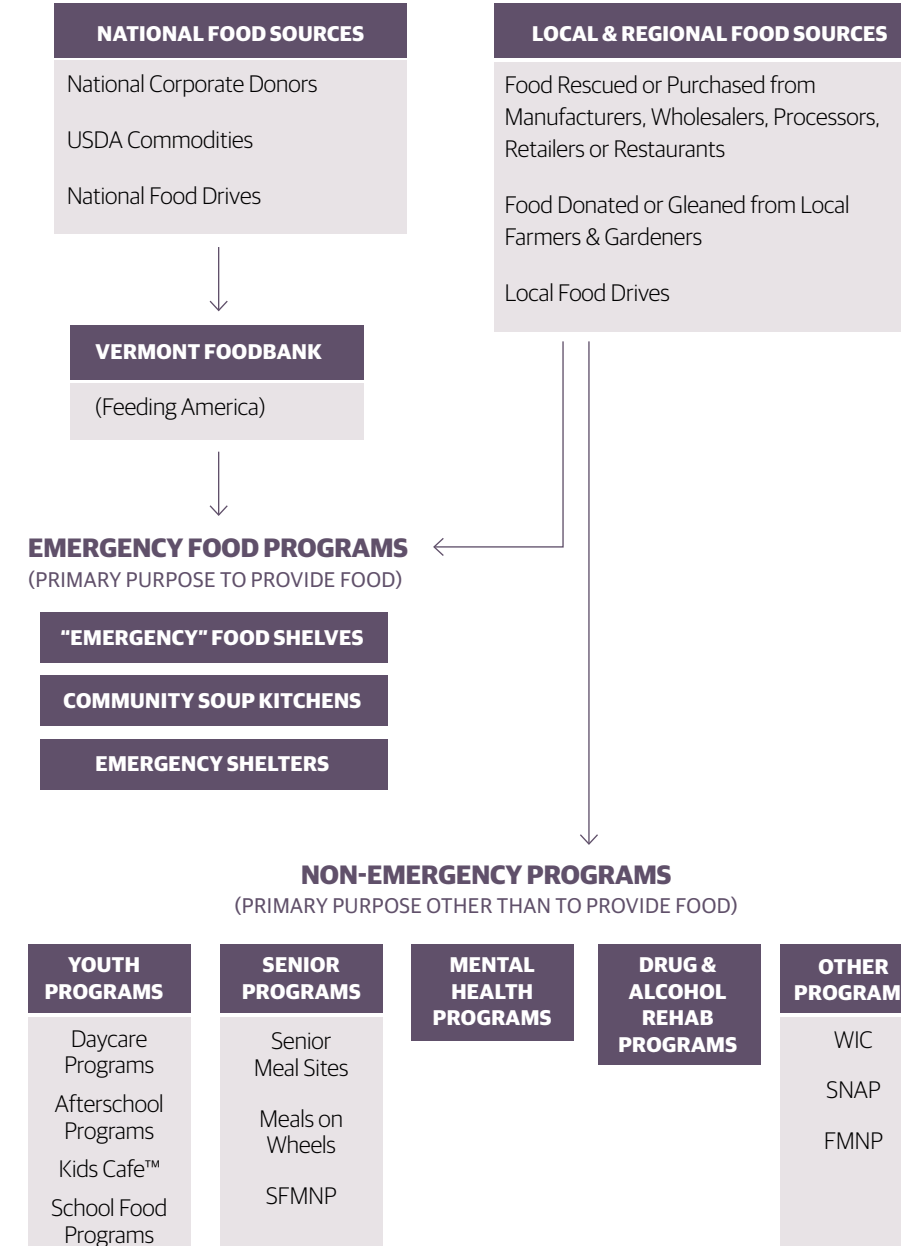
➤ The **Foodbank Farming Network**, a program founded by *Food Works at Two Rivers Center* and the *Vermont Foodbank* (and now run entirely by the *Foodbank*) purchases food directly from farmers and then sells the produce as “shares” to its network partners. In 2009, seven farms participated in this program, producing over 40,000 pounds of 10 fall storage crops that were distributed in monthly shares over a five-month period beginning in August.

➤ The *Foodbank* recently purchased *Kingsbury Farm* in the Mad River Valley. When the farm initially came up for sale, members of the local community decided that they wanted to keep the land in agricultural production and put together a coalition to select farmers to operate the farm.³¹ Soon this farm will be cultivating crops under a lease agreement with a for-profit farmer/business specifically for *Foodbank* partners as well as conserving open land and providing recreation space for area residents.

➤ **Pick for Your Neighbor** is a collaborative program between the *Vermont Foodbank* and the *Vermont Agency of Agriculture, Farm and Markets* (VAAF) that encourages U-pick customers at participating orchards to pick and purchase extra apples to be integrated into the *Vermont Foodbank* inventory and distribution network.

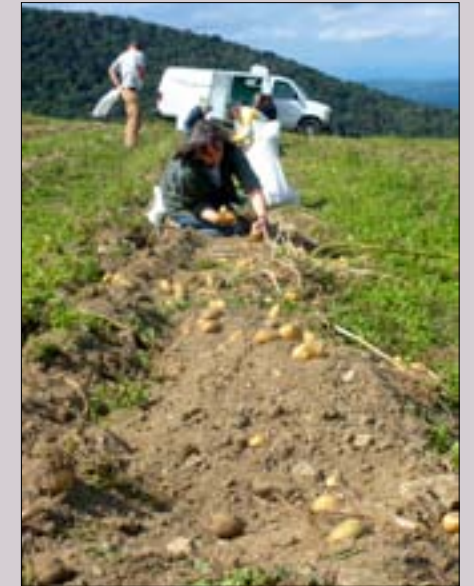
Because the *Foodbank* is the primary supplier of food to Vermont’s charitable food system, where the *Foodbank* chooses to source its food has a significant impact on the access and availability of local foods for food-insecure families and individuals in Vermont. By establishing the preceding programs, the *Foodbank* has made a commitment to increase the amount of locally produced foods it provides to its network partners.

Figure 4.1.2: How Food Flows through the Charitable Food System: Sources and Distributors of Free and Reduced Cost Food³²



Vermont Foodbank Gleaning Program

Gleaning, the act of harvesting leftover produce from farm fields, has a rich history going back to the Old Testament, which advised leaving the corners of fields for the poor and needy to harvest. Today, volunteers salvage excess or cosmetically unmarketable produce and donate the fresh vegetables to local emergency food sites, retirement communities, after school programs, and shelters through the *Vermont Foodbank* network.



Volunteers harvesting potatoes for the Vermont Foodbank Gleaning Program.

The *Vermont Foodbank* Gleaning Program started when Theresa Snow began gleaning from *Pete’s Greens* in 2004. In 2005, she and Jen O’Donnell created *Salvation Farms* to serve the Lamoille Valley area. Between 2005 and 2008, the organization gleaned over 88,000 pounds from Lamoille Valley farms alone. In January 2008, *Salvation Farms* became a program under the umbrella of the *Vermont Foodbank*.

Gleaning programs can be replicated in any community to bring fresh produce to food sites in Vermont. Rather than let slightly blemished, but perfectly edible food rot in the field, gleaners across the state ensure that food insecure Vermonters have access to nutritionally dense, farm fresh foods.

PHOTO CREDIT: Vermont Foodbank

Community Food Security Projects

This section presents an overview of the food security projects that strengthen a community's capacity to meet their own food needs. Table 4.1.3 highlights efforts that are working to build the capacity of Vermont communities to grow, access, and utilize food for themselves.

Although there will always be a need for the social safety net provided by the charitable food system, the long-term goal of a truly secure food system in Vermont is to maximize the ability of all of our residents to purchase or cultivate food for themselves whenever possible. Community food security is defined as "a condition in which all community residents obtain a safe, culturally acceptable, nutritionally adequate diet through a sustainable food system that maximizes community self-reliance and social justice."³³

In contrast to the charitable systems' necessary approach of providing free and low-cost food to people in need, community food security programs seek to build capacity and infrastructure to enable individuals and communities to grow, access, and prepare fresh, nutritious foods for themselves in a long-term sustainable manner. Using local resources, leadership, and volunteers, community food security stresses collaboration and partnership across often disconnected sectors. For example, public health employees, grassroots organizations, farmers' market organizations, and youth programs can work together on common projects related to increasing food access.

In 2006, Vermont's legislature passed the Rozo McLaughlin Farm-to-School Act (Act 145). This program provides grants and technical assistance for schools to purchase food from neighboring farms and incorporate education about agriculture and nutrition into their curricula. Since the passing of Act 145, the VAAF's *Farm to School grant program* has provided \$380,000 to schools and school districts to plan or implement Farm-to-School programs³⁴ and \$60,000 to *Vermont Food Education Every Day* (VT-FEED) and other organizations to provide technical assistance to schools. To date, 44 schools and school districts have received funding through this program. Currently, at least 16 of the 44 schools receiving Farm to School grants have 50% or more of their students receiving free or reduced-price school meals.³⁵

As with the charitable food system, limited food storage and processing capacity present challenges for schools that want to integrate local food into their menus. Contemporary school kitchens are not designed to cook large amounts of whole foods; rather they have been designed to warm and serve processed and prepared foods. To date, every Farm to School grant recipient has needed to invest in new equipment to process and store local products. When these investments have been possible, they have resulted in improved diet-related behavior among students. For example, *Woodstock Union High and Middle Schools* reported an increase in lunch participation from 50% to 65% of students.³⁶ Adding salad bars, in particular, has been an effective vehicle to get students to eat more fresh fruits and vegetables, and it is relatively easy to integrate local food into salads.

The *Friends of Burlington Gardens/Vermont Community Garden Network* has received federal funds to enhance farm to school programs by supporting community gardens established on land at or adjacent to 40 of Vermont's 393 public schools. The 40 school-community gardens will receive mini-grants and technical assistance from *Friends of Burlington Gardens* to develop their garden sites. *UVM Extension Master Gardeners* will provide on-site support. The gardens will enhance the school and summer programs of collaborating nonprofits, including Vermont-FEED, *Green Mountain Farm-to-School*, *Upper Valley Farm to School*, and *Hunger Free Vermont*.³⁷



Garden at the Underhill School

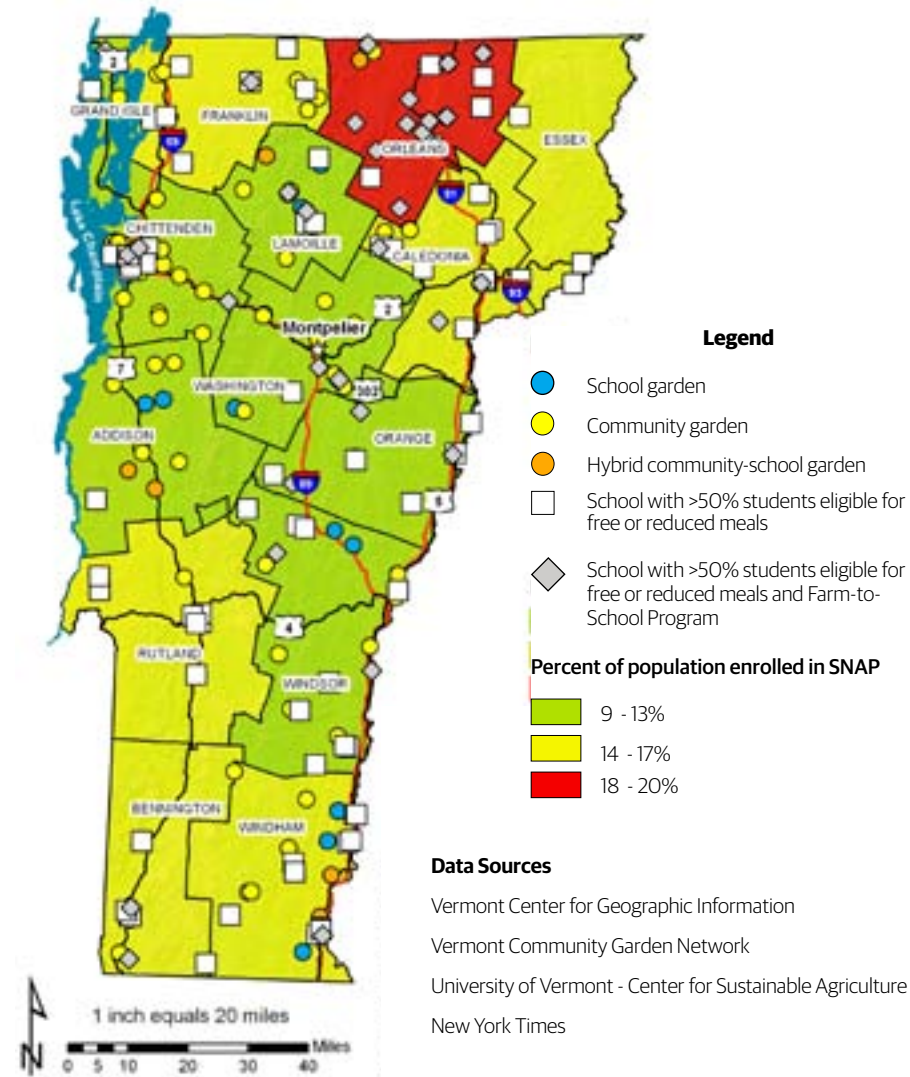
PHOTO CREDIT: Friends of Burlington Gardens

Figure 4.1.3 illustrates the location of school and community gardens as well as schools with farm to school programs in relation to the percent of the population enrolled in SNAP by county. It also identifies individual schools where greater than 50% of the students are eligible for free and reduced-price meals, and which of these schools have a farm to school program in place.

Table 4.1.3: Vermont's Community Food Security Activities

| Program | Eligibility | Description |
|--------------------------------|--|--|
| Farm to School Programs | Schools in Vermont. | Farm to school programs build direct relationships between schools and farms, as well as educate children about where food comes from, how to prepare fresh whole foods, and how to have a healthy diet. <i>Green Mountain Farm-to-School</i> coordinates efforts at 21 schools in the Northeast Kingdom, <i>Upper Valley Farm to School</i> works with 9 schools in the Upper Valley Region of Vermont and New Hampshire, and <i>Vermont Food Education Every Day</i> (VT-FEED) has been able to bring Farm to School initiatives to more than 75 schools throughout the state. There are also a few independent Farm to School projects that are not affiliated with any of the preceding programs. |
| Community Gardens | Farm to school programs and community gardens. | Community gardens promote community well-being by providing land, tools, and educational opportunities for people to grow food for themselves and others. Vermont has over 180 community gardens. This number includes school and teaching gardens, neighborhood gardens, and allotment gardens. Many of these gardens serve low to moderate income households. ³⁸ The <i>Friends of Burlington Gardens/Vermont Community Garden Network</i> has received federal funds to enhance farm to school programs by supporting community gardens established on land at or adjacent to 40 of Vermont's 393 public schools. |
| Regional Food Centers | | Vermont currently has eight regional food centers: (1) the <i>Intervale Center</i> (Chittenden County and surrounding areas); (2) <i>Vital Communities Valley Food and Farm</i> (the Upper Valley of Vermont and New Hampshire); (3) <i>Rutland Area Farm and Food Link</i> (RAFFL — Rutland County and surrounding areas); (4) <i>Local Agricultural Community Exchange</i> (LACE — Central Vermont); (5) <i>Post Oil Solutions</i> and <i>Great Falls Food Hub</i> (Windham and Windsor Counties in Vermont and Sullivan and Cheshire Counties in New Hampshire); (6) <i>Food Works at Two Rivers Center</i> (Central Vermont); (7) The <i>Center for an Agricultural Economy</i> (Greater Hardwick Area); and (8) the <i>Addison County Relocalization Network</i> (ACORN). Some of the regional food centers' programming currently addresses food storage, processing, and distribution infrastructure within their individual regions. A number of the regional food centers explicitly include food security as a critical part of their mission and run innovative projects to improve food security in their areas. |

Figure 4.1.3: Community and School Gardens, Farm-to-School Programs, and Schools with >50% Students Eligible for Free or Reduced Meals



ANALYSIS

Access, Availability, and Utilization

To conceptualize how programs in Vermont can address the issue of food security, we have used an internationally recognized framework that divides food security efforts into three categories: access, availability, and utilization.

FOOD ACCESS is the way people obtain available food. Normally, food is accessed through a combination of home production, purchase, barter, gifts, borrowing and food aid. Food access is ensured when communities and households and all individuals within them have adequate resources, such as money, to obtain appropriate foods for a nutritious diet. Access depends on income, and on the price of food. It also depends on market, social, and institutional entitlement programs to which individuals have access.

FOOD AVAILABILITY in a country, region, or local area means that food is physically present because it has been grown, manufactured, imported, or transported there. For example, food is available because it can be found in markets; because it is produced on local farms, on local land or in home gardens; or because it arrives as aid.

FOOD UTILIZATION is the way people use the food. This depends on the quality of the food and people's preparation and storage methods, nutritional and cooking knowledge, and health status.

Access: All Vermonters will have access to fresh, nutritionally balanced food that they can afford.

🍏 Opportunities at the Federal Level

On a national level, there is increasing federal support for increasing access to healthy food in U.S. schools. Specifically, First Lady Michelle Obama's *Let's Move* campaign³⁹ promises to increase education around food choices for families, increase support for school meal programs, increase physical education and activity, and address food deserts in the United States. In keeping with this initiative, the Obama administration

is seeking strong reauthorization of the **Child and Nutrition Act** and has released \$400 million as part of its **Healthy Food Financing Initiative**, the goal of which is to eliminate food deserts by bringing retailers that stock healthy food to underserved regions in the country. This initiative is a collaborative effort on the part of the Departments of Treasury, Agriculture, and Health and Human Services.⁴⁰ These efforts will be moved forward by offering tax credits to stores that open in distressed and economically disadvantaged areas, and through additional support to community development financial institutions. The USDA will make additional loans and grants available for projects that increase access to healthy food for low income Americans. Community development organizations will also have access to increased funding to support retailers, farmers' markets, and other markets that increase the accessibility of fresh, healthy food.⁴¹

There is also increasing support for local food systems coming from the USDA, as seen in public statements issued by USDA Secretary Tom Vilsack and Deputy Secretary Kathleen Merrigan. The *Know Your Farmer, Know Your Food*⁴² initiative's goal is to create new economic opportunities for American farmers. Part of this initiative is increased funding for Community Food Projects, which seek to meet the needs of low income Americans in underserved areas. According to the USDA, "The primary goals of the Community Food Projects program are to (1) meet the food needs of low-income individuals; (2) increase the food self-reliance of low-income communities; (3) promote comprehensive responses to local food, farm and nutrition issues; and (4) meet specific state, local or neighborhood food and agricultural needs, including needs relating to infrastructure improvement and development, planning for long-term solutions and the creation of innovative marketing activities that mutually benefit agricultural producers and low-income consumers."⁴³

🍏 Opportunities in the Charitable Food System

A number of food advocacy organizations in Vermont are pioneering new models for providing fresh, locally grown food to the charitable food system. In addition, other states have modeled innovative new tax structures and programs that enhance agricultural viability and food access efforts. This section highlights a few of the most notable efforts.

🍏 Gleaning Coordinators

In 2009 the gleaning program at the *Vermont Foodbank* received 408,806 pounds of donated produce with a market value of \$483,379. They achieved this using only four gleaning coordinators in four regions of the state.⁴⁴ If the state had more gleaning coordinators and a system for collecting donations, these organizations and others like them would be able to rescue a much greater quantity of food that might otherwise go to waste. **The need exists for 8 to 10 regional coordinators throughout the state contributing an average of 20 hours per week year-round.** Regional coordinators could be affiliated with the *Vermont Foodbank*, *Willing Hands*, regional food centers, Community Action Agencies, and/or other organizations within a region, such as some of the NOFA-VT farm to community mentors. Food could be stored at regional food center facilities once established, at a willing farm, or within an already existing storage facility (e.g., *Vermont Foodbank* distribution centers).⁴⁵ Food collected through these programs can be distributed through established networks or utilized by community groups.

Funding for coordinators should include monies for programmatic and operational needs (i.e., storage for field supplies, field vehicles, and administrative supports such as phones and laptops, as well as salaries). Gleaning coordinators should be established first in regions where there is great need but little activity, such as the Northeast Kingdom, the Lake Champlain Islands, and Bennington County, with one new coordinator added to the state every year.



Volunteers harvest greens at Vermont Foodbank Farm

PHOTO CREDIT: Vermont Foodbank

Proposed Donated Crops Tax Credit for Vermont Farmers

Currently, farmers who donate produce to the charitable food system are told that they can write off the donation on their taxes, but in most cases they are not able to do so. This is because taxpayers can deduct an expense only once, and since most farmers write off seeds as a business expense they cannot also deduct the cost of a mature plant as a charitable donation.⁴⁶ **Instituting a state refundable tax credit for a percentage of the value of all donated food would reimburse farmers for making donations to gleaning programs and encourage more farmers to participate in gleaning programs.** The tax credit would allow Vermont farmers to apply for a credit equaling 25% of the market value of the donated goods at the time of donation. Donations would be receipted by the receiving organization, and the market value would be determined by the donor. As an example of the impact of such a tax credit, a 25% credit would have cost the state approximately \$121,000 in 2010 based on the \$483,379 value of the produce gleaned by the *Vermont Foodbank*. The dollars would go directly to the farmers. The *Vermont Foodbank* presented a proposal for such a tax credit for farmers during the 2010 legislative session, based on a similar statute passed in Oregon in 2001.



Vermont Foodbank Warehouse

Proposed Foodbank Program for Donated Dairy Beef

The current Federal USDA School Lunch policy states that schools can only use meat from USDA inspected slaughterhouses, yet in many ways, state inspection is the equivalent of USDA inspections. A pilot program should explore the potential of using state inspected slaughterhouses to provide meat to schools.

The *Vermont Foodbank* is currently exploring options that would facilitate the donation of dairy beef cows to the charitable food system. A number of other states including Idaho and Montana have similar programs whereby farmers can donate cattle to the charitable food system. The *Foodbank*, an intermediary organization, or the VAAFM could coordinate the processing and distribution of the beef. The seasonality of meat production places the greatest pressure on slaughterhouses from August to December. However, dairy cows are culled every day, year round. If the *Foodbank* or another organization ran its program from January to July, in addition to providing locally raised protein to people in need, it could help keep Vermont slaughterhouses operating at full capacity year-round.⁴⁷

Community Kitchen Job Training Program

The *Vermont Foodbank* partners with the *Chittenden Emergency Food Shelf* and the *Champlain Valley Office of Economic Opportunity* to run the community kitchen program. The community kitchen program helps unemployed and underemployed men and women build the skills and prepare for a career in the food service industry while also turning donated, rescued, and gleaned food into meals for food-insecure Vermonters. Students in the program intern at *Sodexo Corporation* sites in Burlington, including at *UVM Sodexo Campus Services*. In 2008, the Community Kitchen program processed and distributed 288,805 pounds of food sourced from the *Intervale* as well as supermarkets and other food rescue sources. Other food banks around the country have instituted similar job training programs to help food bank clients develop skills and become fully employed.⁴⁸

Opportunities in Community Food Security

Vermont has a number of projects that work to build the capacity of communities to grow, access, and use food for themselves. One of the most successful district-led farm to school efforts in Vermont is the *Burlington School Food Project* (BSFP), a collaboration of many partners including *Shelburne Farms* (Sustainable Schools Project), *Burlington School Food Service*, *Friends of Burlington Gardens* (Healthy City Youth Initiative), Vermont-FEED, and *City Market/Onion River Co-op*. The group has made significant progress in shifting the food culture in Chittenden County by addressing access, availability, and utilization of local food in several key ways (1) The Burlington School district provides a livable wage (\$15.23 in 2010) for food service employees; (2) school employees work with local producers to provide food or develop new products that are affordable for local schools and manageable for food service employees; and (3) the program works to increase food access while simultaneously reducing the stigma experienced by students who receive assistance for school food.

In addition to its work addressing cultural changes around food and food service in schools, BSFP has dramatically increased access to local food and fresh fruits and vegetables (from any source) for students in the *Burlington School District*. In 2003, the dollar value of fresh fruits and vegetables purchased by the *Burlington School District* totaled \$5,000. This increased to \$120,000 in 2009. The value of local food (primarily sourced directly from farmers) in 2009 was \$90,000. Key to the success of this effort is the work of the *Vermont Food Service Directors Association*, a group of 135 schools that work together to negotiate contracts and make local food more accessible for schools. A critical change made by the *Burlington School District* that has helped the BSFP make great strides in their food procurement strategies is the creation of a farm to school coordinator position. The coordinator is responsible for working with food service employees to create new menu options that incorporate locally available food, as well as act as a liaison between local farms and the school district.

VAAFM Beef to Schools Program

Both the *Vermont Foodbank* and the VAAFM in partnership with VT-FEED are exploring options for providing local ground beef to the charitable food system and Vermont schools, respectively. While the *Foodbank* is proposing a program through

which farmers would receive a tax credit for donating dairy beef cows to the charitable system, the VAAFM and VT-FEED are proposing that schools would purchase beef from cattle farmers at a fair market price.⁴⁹ A pilot program on ground beef would identify the logistical, infrastructure, and policy issues; determine the costs associated with operating each proposal; determine where economies of scale can be used by aggregating product; and determine the potential economic benefits for farmers, processors, and distributors selling beef through the VAAFM program.

Currently, some schools around the state including the *Doty School* in Worcester, *Sharon Elementary School* and *Randolph Elementary School* are buying local beef directly from the processor such as *Royal Butcher* in Randolph, but as of yet there is no consistent affordable option through a wholesale distributor. The *Doty School* was able to reduce the cost of the meat by purchasing entire sides of beef with a neighboring farmer and then arranging for the processing themselves. *Green Mountain Farm-to-School* helps six schools and four senior meal sites purchase local beef from *Brault's Slaughterhouse* through its Green Mountain Farm Direct program. *Green Mountain Farm-to-School* is working with *Brault's* to develop a supply chain, storage system, and audit trail so that sites would know exactly which farm the beef came from.⁵⁰

Food Councils and Community Food Assessments

Many communities around Vermont are in the process of creating groups to create food plans and implement policies that will address food security in a systematic manner. Examples include the *Rutland Regional Planning Commission* (RAFFL began as a project of the Regional Planning Commission), the *Central Vermont Food Council* (which is currently inventorying and mapping its agricultural assets), the *Waterbury-Duxbury Food Council*, the *Burlington Food Council*, the *Upper Valley Food Council* and ACORN.

Food councils bring together stakeholders from diverse sectors to examine how a food system is working and develop recommendations on how to improve it. Food councils can be particularly effective at integrating food security issues into government policies. Today there are over 50 food policy councils in the United States.⁵¹ Founded in 2003, the *Burlington Food Council* is one of the oldest in Vermont and has helped launch a number of influential community food security projects in the Burlington area, including the *Burlington School Food Project*, and has conducted a community food assessment.⁵²

A community food assessment is a process for discovering community food needs and assets, with the goal of developing projects and policies that will improve food security for all residents. Assessments may include interviews, focus groups and surveys, and can vary in the degree to which they integrate citizens in the process. The more participatory community food assessments can be particularly powerful in bringing residents together and building social capital as neighbors learn about one-another and develop projects to address hunger in their communities.^{53,54} *Hunger Free Vermont*, in partnership with *Northfield Savings Bank*, has been piloting the Community Hunger Assessment, Intervention, and Resources Project (CHAIR) in Washington and Chittenden Counties since July 2006. Over a three-year period, the program has succeeded in creating hunger councils in both counties that have been able to significantly increase participation in nutrition programs.⁵⁵

In Brattleboro, the Community Food Security Project of *Post Oil Solutions* conducted a rapid community food assessment between December 2008 and April 2009, resulting in the publication of a report in June 2009. The assessment revealed that the barriers to greater food security are often related to structural problems that are not unique to the Brattleboro area, including lack of understanding of community food security, lack of jobs, lack of livable wages, lack of local food system infrastructure, lack of time, convenience as a priority, lack of nutrition education, and an overall societal mentality that values cheap food. In responding to the barriers identified, participants had many ideas about how government, business, and community or civic organizations can and should participate.⁵⁶

Food councils and community food assessment efforts should be supported and expanded throughout Vermont to allow towns to consider how they will include community food security and issues around access, availability, and utilization of food in their town plans — including everything from the use of agricultural lands, to public transportation routes, to providing for residents in emergencies.

➤ Storage, Processing, Aggregation, and Transportation Infrastructure

Very few food shelves or meal sites have the capacity to store fresh food. This lack of cold storage facilities can prevent those who manage these sites from accepting fresh perishable foods through gleaning and donation. Similarly, although some schools are

able to store and process fresh foods on site, many do not have sufficient equipment and other infrastructure to do so, thus hampering their ability to serve fresh, local foods. If central locations could be identified or developed where perishable foods could be kept cool for up to a week, food shelves could then use locally harvested foods on an as-needed basis. If processing centers were available, foods that are highly perishable, such as tomatoes, or slightly compromised, such as winter squashes with some soft spots, could be frozen or processed into shelf-stable products, thus decreasing the loss of fruits and vegetables, and increasing the amount of local produce available to food shelves on a year-round basis.

An inventory should be conducted to identify existing storage and processing facilities that could also be used to store and prepare food for schools and charitable food sites. It would be critical to include existing businesses and entrepreneurs in this inventory and assessment. For example, the *Skinny Pancake* restaurant and NOFA-VT have designed a proposal for a shared commercial kitchen that would provide food for *Skinny Pancake's* for-profit ventures and also for the food service programs within the *Burlington School District*.⁵⁷ Similarly, a portion of the *Vermont Refrigerated Storage* facility in Shoreham could be used to store produce for charitable food sites in Addison County. Programs also could be developed at Vermont Correctional facilities to process locally raised foods for the charitable food system at low cost while simultaneously providing job training in the food service industry for inmates.⁵⁸

Programs such as *Food Works at Two Rivers Center's* Farm-to-Table, RAFFL's Grow an Extra Row, and *Green Mountain Farm-to-School's* farm direct program can and are creating economies of scale by aggregating fresh and processed foods for distribution to schools, senior meals sites, hospitals, and restaurants in their regions. Currently, these programs are funded by grants, although the Farm to Table model is increasingly moving toward a mechanism whereby higher income members such as *National Life Insurance* subsidize memberships for charitable organizations and low income members. Similar subsidized aggregation models could be implemented to distribute local foods to charitable food sites throughout the state.

Many of Vermont's existing public transit routes already include grocery stores and access to downtown areas where farmers' markets are located. The statewide Elderly and Disabled program also accommodates single trips for essential shopping to

anyone who is 60 or older or disabled. However, in preparing for the *Vermont Agency of Transportations'* (VTrans) upcoming five year Public Transit Policy Planning process, Regional Planning Commissions, in collaboration with local transportation providers and the Public Transit Section of VTrans, could broaden access to food by paying special attention to: (1) building grocery store stops into public transit routes that currently lack them; (2) adding farmers' market stops on the days of market operations; (3) ensuring that affordable housing projects and senior centers have reliable public transportation connecting them to food shopping, food shelves, and meal sites; and (4) working with other organizations to advertising all options for reaching food through public transportation.⁵⁹

➤ Integrate Local Purchasing in Food Assistance Programs

Program for Women, Infants and Children (WIC)

In coming years, WIC benefits will be administered exclusively through EBT cards. The first step in this direction is the newly introduced WIC fruit and vegetable vouchers. Currently, the WIC fruit and vegetable vouchers can be used only in locations that have been authorized by WIC, which currently includes grocery stores and some food co-ops.⁶⁰ The card is not currently used in direct market venues such as farmers' markets or CSAs, though other states have used vouchers in order to increase benefit access in direct market venues. To ensure that recipients of WIC benefits are able to access fruits and vegetables that are fresh, nutritious, locally produced, and competitively priced, farmers' markets and other direct markets should be included in planning related to the transition from WIC home delivery to WIC EBT. On a national scale, WIC fruit and vegetable benefits generate a \$500 million dollar annual market for fresh fruits and vegetables. Capturing even a fraction of that market would greatly increase the vitality of the Vermont local food economy.⁶¹

The *Farm to Family* program is highly successful in providing opportunities for WIC participants, seniors, and other low income Vermonters who experience food insecurity to access fresh, nutritious, locally grown, and competitively priced produce at farmers' markets. Even with the additional federal funds received in 2010, the \$159,000 program budget is sufficient to serve only about 10% of the Vermont households that qualify. Some, perhaps half, of the eligible Vermonters may disregard

the program because they are not interested in fresh produce or lack ready access to a farmers' market offering a good selection of fresh fruits and vegetables. To increase access to *Farm to Family* benefits for the other eligible Vermonters, however, the program needs additional financial support until federal allocation procedures are revised to better serve Vermonters. Any significant program expansion would be feasible only if the state and local agencies that distribute the coupons and reimburse farmers' markets for the value of redeemed coupons have the staff and other resources required to manage the expanded operating costs and workload.

3SquaresVT/SNAP

3SquaresVT/SNAP benefits are transferred electronically to recipient Electronic Benefit Transfer (EBT) cards on a monthly basis. These debit cards can be used at any location that is authorized by the USDA — Food and Nutrition Services (FNS). Before this electronic banking system was implemented in 2002, food stamp recipients were able to use paper food stamps at farmers' markets, farm stands, and other direct market venues. Since the transition to the electronic system, local food advocates in Vermont have been working hard to increase the prevalence of wireless card readers at Vermont farmers' markets.

In 2007, NOFA-VT and several partners (including the *Department for Children and Families*, *Hunger Free Vermont*, the *VAAFM*, and two Vermont resource conservation and development councils) initiated Vermont's first grant program to help farmers' markets set up central card readers to be shared by all vendors of the market. This was done by subsidizing the cost of the card readers (which can cost around \$1,100), providing technical support for market managers, and helping with a promotional campaign for the market. Though NOFA-VT and its partners have done (and continue to do) an excellent job of getting card readers to many farmers' markets, this access needs to be expanded to all farmers' markets, as well as to CSAs, farm stands, and other direct marketing venues in Vermont. One way that the State of Vermont could support this is by covering all EBT wireless transaction fees at farmers' markets (\$0.15 per transaction). The federal government would reimburse Vermont up to 50% of the cost.⁶² The potential economic impact of capturing federal food assistance in direct markets should not be underestimated.^{63,64}

PHOTO CREDIT: NOFA-VT



3SquaresVT tokens and EBT Machine at the Brattleboro Farmers Markets

In a state characterized by its rural landscape, with limited public transportation options in many communities, it is of great importance that all eligible retailers be required to accept EBT cards. This policy change necessitates education geared towards retailers that includes staff training in 3SquaresVT requirements and basic principles of nutrition. In addition, training must include customer service specifically targeted towards decreasing perceived stigmas related to the use of SNAP benefits. To decrease cost and increase efficiency of these trainings, Vermont WIC and the *Department of Children and Families* should collaborate to offer trainings that address both WIC Fruit and Vegetable Benefit Cards and SNAP EBT cards.

Often, families who do not receive 3SquaresVT financial benefits do not realize that enrolling in the program can qualify their children for child nutrition programs. In the past, the group [End Hunger Connecticut!](#) provided \$750 mini-grants to Connecticut meal providers to work on increasing participation in federal entitlement programs such as SNAP and child nutrition programs. One round of mini-grants enabled schools and child care institutions to launch informational campaigns that resulted in 400

more children accessing daily meals. Similar efforts should be supported in Vermont to increase enrollment in child nutrition programs. To increase support for local food purchasing, these grants should be awarded to institutions that demonstrate the greatest need and make sustained and proven efforts to source local food when possible. Administrators of the grant must develop criteria that clearly articulates what constitutes "sustained and proven effort" and provide follow-up to ensure that grant recipients use funds for their intended purpose. Additional funding is also needed to support efforts to increase awareness about food insecurity and the availability of public programs. These funds should be used for the development of outreach materials geared toward eligible individuals and families.

The increasing popularity of community supported agriculture (CSA) as a method of direct marketing in the United States has led to a growing diversity of delivery methods of preordered fresh food. These ventures are based on a subscription system. These ventures echo programs geared toward food-insecure individuals and families including the Commodity Supplemental Food Program (CSFP) and WIC home delivery. However, WIC will soon be discontinuing home delivery, and CSFP reaches only a small fraction of those in need. **Providing support for 3SquaresVT recipients to join existing CSAs will expand local markets for Vermont farmers.** Creating opportunities for low income Vermonters to access fresh, local, healthy food in the same way that their financially secure neighbors and community members do will also decrease the perceived prevalence of stereotypes and social stigmas related to the use of federal food benefits. Support of the [NOFA-VT Farm Share Program](#) is one mechanism for achieving this. Additionally, technical support provided by SNAP offices, [UVM Extension](#), or other nonprofit organizations could help farmers navigate the logistical hurdles of accepting CSA members enrolled in 3SquaresVT (including transportation and billing issues). To ensure that these initiatives meet the needs of the target population, it must be established that there is an unmet demand for CSAs among food-insecure Vermonters and their financial risk must be limited. (This can be done by ensuring that participants are guaranteed the value of the food they are paying for).⁶⁵

PHOTO CREDIT: Vermont Foodbank

School Breakfast Program

In 2008 the Vermont Legislature passed legislation that led to a dramatic increase in participation in the School Breakfast Program. Under current federal legislation, students can qualify for either free or reduced-price school meals. Students who qualify for reduced-price meals often struggle to pay the reduced fee, making them more vulnerable to food insecurity and hunger than their fellow students. According to the *Hunger Free Vermont*, "families in this income range are most likely to have children that go without food during the school day or that accrue debts with school food service programs."⁶⁶ Vermont legislation requires the state to provide extra funds to the School Breakfast Program to supplement the federal funds. The total cost of the expansion in 2009 was \$132,477.⁶⁷ This adjustment allows all students who previously qualified only for reduced-cost school breakfast to access these meals for free.



Pre-schooler enrolled in the Special Milk Program

U.S. Senator Bernie Sanders is currently working to expand the National School Lunch Program in a similar manner. Until Senator Sanders and other congressional delegates are successful at affecting federal policy in this way, the responsibility for subsidizing the School Lunch Program falls to the state or other funders. Vermont currently has the 3rd highest percentage of eligible students enrolled in the School Breakfast Program. Increased access to free school lunches would increase enrollment in this program as well. In Vermont, however, there continues to be extensive unmet needs despite federal food assistance programs. Increased access to school meals would help to alleviate the reliance on emergency food, while demonstrating to the rest of the country the importance of providing access to school lunch for all children. This change would cost approximately \$669,455 per year, including both school lunch and breakfast.⁶⁸

Address the Needs of Unserved and Under-Served Vermonters

Community Action Agencies

Currently, Community Action Agencies are restricted in their ability to purchase local food on contract from local growers. To increase purchasing power among Community Action Agencies and establish stronger relationships between these organizations and the farms in their communities, legislative language should be adapted that demonstrates the state's approval of local contracts. Facilitation of these contracts will require an additional staff person at each participating agency, though significant increases in food budgets are not necessarily required.⁶⁹

Immigrants

The [New Farms for New Americans](#) program is administered by the [Association of Africans Living in Vermont](#) (AALV) in Burlington. The *Intervale Center* and the *USDA Farm Service Agency* are consulting partners on the program. The program works with recent immigrants and refugees to support new agricultural businesses. This program increases participant access to healthy, fresh food (grown by the participants themselves) and also provides support for farmers to work with food purchasers in the northwestern part of the state. Currently, 50 families are involved in the *New Farms for New Americans* program.

Support for farmers who would like to graduate from the farm incubator program to owning their own farm businesses is also needed. These farmers require language and cultural support to take advantage of [USDA Farms Service Agency](#) programs. This support could come in the form of vocational English as a second language training, farm accounting classes, assistance with applying for loans, and technical support for growing and marketing.

To increase the effectiveness of this program, it is necessary to decrease the cost of accessing land in Chittenden County. Currently, the rent paid to the Winooski Valley Park District for incubator land equals \$1,400 per acre, per year. Access to additional or alternative sites would increase the number of families who could participate in the program.

Children

Currently, WIC does not cover children over the age of five years old. The CSFP is designed to meet the needs of children who are no longer eligible for WIC. However, CSFP is designed to supplement 3SquaresVT benefits, not to provide for the complete nutritional needs of these children. Often, by the time the parents are able to navigate the system and sign their child up for CSFP, the child is almost six years old. Experts suggest either extending WIC benefits to children up to six years of age, or creating a new WIC service dedicated to children age 5 to 12 that includes milk, vegetables, and protein. Local food should be emphasized in both food delivery and educational material in the expanded program.

Older Vermonters

Elders have been identified as a group in particular need of food assistance, due in part to their limited fixed incomes and often high medical expenses. According to the [Champlain Valley Agency on Aging](#), 50% of seniors who are admitted for hospital treatment suffer from malnutrition significant enough to either cause illness or impede recovery.⁷⁰ The *Vermont Area Agencies on Aging* (AAAs) currently contracts with meal program providers and caterers in all regions of the state. The AAAs recognize the opportunities and challenges presented by the taste preferences of an aging population. All AAAs have collectively decided to work together to increase the use of local foods in their community and Meals on Wheels programs. For the AAAs to achieve their goal, stronger ties among agency staff, caterers, and farmers must continue to be developed. The agencies can work together to address some of the barriers such as the increased cost of labor, storage, food costs, and transportation, to name just a few.



Breakfast at a Senior Meal site.

Reduce Participation Barriers

A barrier to enrollment in many federal food assistance programs is the time it takes to become and stay enrolled, especially in programs that require household financial reporting (as opposed to automatic eligibility based on regional income trends). Many individuals who are eligible for 3SquaresVT do not apply because they believe the benefits are insignificant compared to the time required, wages lost, and general burden of staying enrolled in the program.⁷¹ In reality, 85% of households enrolled in 3SquaresVT receive \$50 per month or more in SNAP assistance, a significant contribution to monthly household expenses.⁷² **To increase enrollment, categorical eligibility between food assistance programs should be implemented widely.** Categorical eligibility is when individuals or families in need who apply and are accepted to one program are immediately listed as eligible for other programs.

Increasing categorical eligibility between programs will increase enrollment rates, which could foster additional opportunities for local purchasing. For example, children who come from households enrolled in 3SquaresVT would automatically be eligible for free school meals. Schools would receive the maximum amount of reimbursement for meals served to these students, whereas they would receive a lower rate of reimbursement if the same students were enrolled for reduced-priced meals through the National School Lunch Program. A greater reimbursement rate gives schools a slightly more flexible budget, increasing the potential for purchasing local products. The transition to categorical eligibility would be difficult. Therefore, a 10 year graduated plan should be developed by the state agencies and organizations that administer current programs.

In 2009, 119 Vermont schools qualified for At-Risk Child and Adult Care Food Program (i.e., 50% or more of the families in the community met income requirement that made their children eligible for free school meals.) These meals are automatically reimbursed to service providers at the maximum possible rate. Although areas designated as at-risk benefit from the added support of this program, children who struggle with food insecurity and who live in rural areas remain underserved. Because poverty is more dispersed in rural areas, service providers are required to collect household-level financial data to determine whether children qualify for one of three levels of reimbursement. The administrative time and cost are a significant barriers to these service providers. To enroll more providers to offer nutritious meals to food-

insecure children, the federal qualifications for areas to receive these benefits should be adjusted. These adjustments reduce administrative cost by standardizing the reimbursement rate for meals served and eliminating the need for service providers to collect household-level data. Historically, limits for similar programs (the Summer Food Program) have been as low as 33%.⁷³ *Hunger Free Vermont* estimates that by lowering the at-risk designation to 40% or more of families in the community meeting the requirement for free school meals, CACFP could reach an additional 13,000 Vermont children in an additional 60 school districts. This would cost an estimated \$578,000 per year.⁷⁴ A greater number of students served would potentially create a larger market for local producers, if local food purchasing is incentivized.

Increasing enrollment rates for child nutrition programs is a perennial goal in Vermont. Integrating local food purchasing into strategies to increase enrollment can simultaneously break down social barriers between high and low income Vermonters and increase the use of local foods in schools, child care centers, and child care homes. Incentives for institutions with enrollment in free and reduced-price categories above a pre-determined level could include cash for local food purchases or subsidized CSA shares. Making local food more available to children in need will directly challenge the perception that local food is only for high income Vermonters.

Availability: Local, fresh food will be more available to people who are food-insecure.

Community Food Security

Vermont state law (VSA Title 24, §4382, Chapter 117) requires that Vermont towns revise their town plans every five years. This statute could be amended to include a requirement that municipalities consider food security in their town planning process.^{75, 76}

Town-based food security planning efforts could be modeled on the town energy committees that evolved in response to energy-related concerns such as climate change and peak oil. A network of town-based volunteer organizations receive support from the [Vermont Energy and Climate Action Network](#) (VECAN) and have made great strides in implementing energy plans for Vermont towns and municipalities and engaging citizens in the process.

Although town and regional planning efforts would be driven primarily by citizen volunteers, the Governor's *Hunger Task Force* can support a statewide town-by-town strategic plan to eliminate hunger in Vermont and identify the appropriate types of technical assistance. For example, *UVM Extension* currently provides extensive education and technical support on municipal planning to town officers and citizens. Extension personnel could train town officers in integrating food issues into town plans and provide models for doing so through the Town Officers Education Conference and other venues.⁷⁷ Regional planning commissions also provide planning assistance to towns and appear to be poised to take a more active role in planning around food and agriculture issues in the state.

Services could include "(1) Sharing best practices for how to conducting a community food assessment and sharing models of best practices for drafting and implementing effective food plans; (2) advising on providing access to food for at-risk or marginally at-risk citizens when planning for emergencies and providing sample materials to towns for how this emergency planning can be done; (3) building and administering a pool of state, federal, and charitable funds that communities can access to support effective planning."⁷⁸

Senator Sanders has secured a \$120,000 federal grant for *Friends of Burlington Gardens* and the *Vermont Community Garden Network* to create a statewide, school-based summer gardening initiative that teaches Vermont children and youth how to grow fresh produce using land on or adjacent to school campuses, especially in low income communities.^{79, 80} The initial funding will be used to establish 40 school community gardens statewide. As the program develops, additional support will be required to provide technical assistance and mini-grants to sustain the community gardens and expand participation among food-insecure households. Long-term funding for community and school garden programs should continue to come from federal sources such as the Child Nutrition Act to provide access to fresh food and nutrition and gardening education to food-insecure families nationwide.

Utilization: All Vermonters will have a greater understanding of how to obtain, grow, store, and prepare nutritional food.

🍌 Nutritional Education and Food Literacy

Currently, there are statewide programs that educate recipients of federal food assistance about food safety, nutrition, budgeting, and other topics. The *Expanded Food and Nutrition Education Program* (EFNEP) at *UVM Extension* has provided education in these areas for more than 40 years through classes and partnerships with community organizations. From 2009 to 2011, the *Center for Sustainable Agriculture*, EFNEP, and *Hunger Free Vermont* are partnering on a class pilot project that integrates traditional educational material (related to nutrition and food safety) with a new curriculum that focuses on local food access. If the pilot is successful, this program and others like it should be made available statewide.

The 2002 Farm Security and Rural Investment Act allocated \$15 million in Senior Farmers' Market Nutrition Program grants to 32 states, three Indian tribal organizations, Guam, Puerto Rico, and Washington D.C.⁸¹ Of the funding that Vermont receives on an annual basis for the support of this program, a portion of it is directed towards benefits for use at farmers' markets, and a portion is directed toward the Senior Farm Share program. In 2009, the Senior Farm Share program provided a CSA share valued at \$50 per season to 940 eligible Vermonters living in subsidized housing. In contrast, seniors were given \$30 per month to use at farmers' markets. In both cases, benefits are given and recipients are required to receive nutrition education. This component of the program, however, is not funded. To increase the use of local food and the effectiveness of the farm share program, nutrition education must be supported through additional funding for programs such as EFNEP.

In 2009, 119 of Vermont's 393 public schools were located in areas in which 50% or more of the households had net incomes that would make their children eligible for free school meals. Currently, 16 of the 44 schools receiving farm to school grants have 50% or more of their students receiving free or reduced-price school meals.⁸² Expanding farm to school programs to all 119 schools with 50% or greater eligibility would help bring food literacy and nutrition education to more food-insecure

Food Works: Good Food-Good Medicine

Food Works at Two Rivers

Center's "Good Food-Good Medicine" program takes a seasonal approach to good health and nutrition at two low-income housing sites in Barre. In the spring and summer months, residents at Highgate and Green Acres apartments grow their own food in the community garden or in raised container beds, while the fall focuses on harvest,



Shared meal with participants of Good Food, Good Medicine program in Barre.

food preservation, and seasonal cooking. A monthly community meal continues through the winter with special attention towards health, wellness, and herbalism.

The program not only increases residents' food security and independence, but has reintroduced participants to skills that were not passed down in the last few decades. "We're finding a strong desire by people to relearn new skills," said Joseph Kiefer of *Food Works*, "and we realized that to have a long term impact on people's lives, it took a sustained commitment to relationship building throughout the year."

Classes include the entire family, with children eager to help cook meals and grow their own food, which leads to exposure to new vegetables, like rutabagas, parsnips and chioggia beets. "Part of it includes retraining the tongue to local, healthy foods and withdrawing from high fat, high salt, industrial diets," Kiefer said. "Meanwhile, the backyard herbalism classes help to address many of the health and wellness issues people are facing, such as weak immune and respiratory systems." Participants grow their own herbs and learn to make teas, vinegars, and tinctures to support their overall health and wellness.

PHOTO CREDIT: Food Works at Two Rivers Center

households and introduce more low income youth to fresh, whole foods. However, many of these schools need funding to purchase processing equipment, improve cooking facilities, and increase storage capacity for fresh foods, as well as to train staff in the sourcing and preparation of local foods.

The VAAF and advocacy organizations should push for increased funding for farm to school coordinators, equipment purchases and school infrastructure improvements, and professional development of food service workers, in the next Federal Farm Bill and in the current reauthorization of the Child Nutrition Act (and through Senator Leahy's Bill S.3123, the Growing Farm to School programs Act). As demonstrated by the *Burlington School Food Project*, farm to school coordinators can play a key role in training food service staff and helping to source and distribute local foods throughout school districts.

Table 4.1.4: Objectives and Strategies for Expanding Food Access and Developing the Vermont Local Food System

| CATEGORY | OBJECTIVE | STRATEGY |
|---|---|---|
| Research Strategies | | |
| ACCESS | Use a percentage of storage, processing, and aggregation infrastructure to distribute local foods to people with limited resources. | Inventory existing storage and processing facilities that can be used by schools and charitable food sites. |
| Natural Resource, Physical Infrastructure, and Technology Strategies | | |
| ACCESS | Improve access to fresh, local food by addressing the transportation barriers experienced by low income Vermonters. | Integrate access to food distribution sites into <i>Agency of Transportation</i> planning. |
| Sales and Distribution Strategies | | |
| ACCESS | Use a percentage of storage, processing, and aggregation infrastructure to distribute local foods to people with limited resources. | Provide funding for organizations to replicate aggregation and distribution programs that serve low-income residents. |
| ACCESS | Increase the ability to integrate local purchasing into current WIC benefit programs (fruits and vegetable vouchers, Farm to Family coupons, and deliverables). | Support direct market vendors to accept WIC fruit and vegetable vouchers. |
| ACCESS | Increase access to locally produced food through direct marketing venues for recipients of 3SquaresVT (SNAP). | Increase use of 3SquaresVT cards at direct market venues. |
| | | Create additional opportunities for low-income Vermonters to participate in CSAs. |
| | | Support eligible retailers to accept SNAP EBT cards. |
| ACCESS | Increase the quantity of fresh local produce at all food shelves and charitable meal sites throughout the state. | Establish a pilot program to supply ground beef to charitable food sites, schools, and hospitals. |

| CATEGORY | OBJECTIVE | STRATEGY |
|--|--|---|
| Technical Assistance and Business Planning Strategies | | |
| AVAILABILITY | Help all Vermont towns identify actions they can take to address food insecurity and incorporate those actions into their town plans. | Assist towns and regional groups of towns as they conduct community food assessments and incorporate food security into town plans. |
| Financing Strategies | | |
| ACCESS | Increase access to locally produced food through direct marketing venues for recipients of 3SquaresVT (SNAP). | Fund the Harvest Health program. |
| | | Provide grants to educate eligible individuals about 3SquaresVT while incentivizing local food purchasing. |
| ACCESS | Increase the ability to integrate local purchasing into current WIC benefit programs (fruits and vegetable vouchers, Farm to Family coupons, and deliverables). | Increase funding for Vermont Farm to Family. |
| AVAILABILITY | Establish community or school gardens within walking or bicycling distance of every population center in Vermont with a population of 500 or more. | Provide funding to organizations that develop and sustain community school gardens that serve underserved youth, older adults, and their families. |
| UTILIZATION | Educate recipients of federal and state food assistance to make healthy and safe food choices. Increase education about food shopping skills and local purchasing. | Fund required nutrition education for seniors through the Senior Farmers Market Nutrition program. |
| Network Development Strategies | | |
| ACCESS | Increase the quantity of fresh local produce at all food shelves and charitable meal sites throughout the state. | Establish and fully fund gleaning programs and coordinators in every region of the state by 2014. |
| ACCESS | Identify and address the needs of food insecure groups that are unserved or underserved (i.e., immigrants, elders, and the homeless). | Support Area Agencies on Aging to build relationships among their organizations, farmers, and caterers. |
| CROSS-CUTTING | Support organizations to measure the success of and increase the efficiency and effectiveness of programs that address food insecurity and focus on local food economic development. | Create a funding pool dedicated to supporting impact evaluation for organizations and groups that focus on increasing local food access for food insecure Vermonters. Share best practices across all food security stakeholder groups. |

| CATEGORY | OBJECTIVE | STRATEGY |
|---|---|--|
| Education Strategies | | |
| UTILIZATION | Educate recipients of federal and state food assistance to make healthy and safe food choices. Increase education about food shopping skills and local purchasing. | Support nutrition education programming that emphasizes food access and local food for recipients of federal and state food programs. |
| Workforce Development Strategies | | |
| ACCESS | Identify and address the needs of food insecure groups that are unserved or underserved (i.e. immigrants, elders, and the homeless). | Support agricultural entrepreneurship in immigrant and refugee communities. |
| Regulation Strategies | | |
| ACCESS | Increase enrollment in child nutrition programs, increase funding for school meal provisions, and integrate local purchasing into schools and childcare facilities. | Eliminate the reduced-price category for school lunch. |
| ACCESS | Identify and address the needs of food insecure groups that are unserved or underserved (i.e. immigrants, elders, and the homeless). | Create enabling legislation to allow contracts between food shelves and Community Action Agencies and farmers for the provision of local food to these agencies. |
| | | Provide WIC coverage for children in the "gap year." |
| ACCESS | Identify and address barriers to enrollment in federal food assistance programs. Increase enrollment rates for eligible benefit recipients. | Gradually schedule and implement categorical eligibility for federal food assistance programs. |
| | | Lower Child and Adult Care Food Program eligibility requirements for those at-risk, thereby leveraging federal funds for local purchasing. |
| UTILIZATION | Establish a Farm to School program in every school in which more than 50% of the students receive free or reduced-price meals. | Secure federal funds to increase the number and capacity of farm to school programs to at-risk schools. |

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CROSSCUTTING ISSUES

4.1 Food Security in Vermont

Credits

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