



# A Future Where Everyone Eats

Lessons and Opportunities from a Successful Pandemic Relief Program

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## Executive Summary

In 2020, the Vermont Everyone Eats (VEE) program emerged as one of the most notable successes in the state's COVID-19 pandemic response. This innovative program provided free, healthy prepared meals to all Vermonters whose access to food was negatively affected by COVID-19 while also providing a stabilizing source of income for Vermont restaurants and much-needed revenue to farmers and food producers.

VEE, funded by the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA), was initially slated to run from August through December 2020. But as the pandemic unfolded and FEMA funding continued, the program was extended seven times. In July 2022, when FEMA announced a shift to a 90/10 cost-sharing model, the Vermont legislature approved a onetime \$1.3 million allocation to cover the required 10% to continue the program for another 9–12 months. All authorized funds for VEE needed to be fully expended as of March 31, 2023.

This report is not intended to make a case for continuing the program in its current form. But VEE achieved some unique accomplishments that should be incorporated long-term into Vermont's food systems and economic resilience realms. VEE was dreamed up and built when everyone needed help, and the resulting systemic approach created a brand-new **collaboration** between farmers, restaurants, and nonprofit food providers. This produced an economic **multiplier effect** more significant than relief programs aimed at helping these sectors separately could have done. VEE drew **new financial resources** to our state, and its strong, **stigma-free brand** encouraged participation from recipients who might have been reluctant to seek food assistance in the past. As official statewide VEE funding wrapped up, we began seeing a variety of local grassroots initiatives seeking ways to make the most of these lessons and continue to make prepared meals available to those who need them.

By continuing to focus on funding for restaurant meals to meet Vermonters' food needs and generate economic opportunity for the hospitality and agriculture sectors, we can leverage the momentum created by VEE and the work of its collaborating restaurants, community organizations, farmers, and agencies. We must enable Vermont to access sustainable federal funding as one element of a diversified funding stack for future programs linking economic and agricultural resilience and food security while further improving the accessibility and dignity of supplemental food.

We recommend creating a full-time Prepared Meals Advocate position within an existing statewide entity whose primary mission is to organize and work with businesses, specifically restaurants. The goal is to sustain and further the role of restaurants and food producers in the Vermont food security and resilience conversation and discuss and investigate programming initiatives. The advocate will coordinate a diverse network of stakeholders in a community of practice toward sustainable statewide efforts and all levels of policy work. Ultimately, this work will strengthen collaborative connections between the hospitality and agriculture sectors and anti-hunger advocates.

This report serves as an initial landscape assessment of current conditions and a road map for carrying forward VEE’s best practices, from emergency relief to sustained programming. Our goal is to permanently adopt the successful strategies forged in a crisis to *augment* the incredible work of advocates, policymakers, state administrators, nonprofit organizations, politicians, small businesses, and community members across the state. What parts of the VEE program can live on to ensure that Vermonters are food secure and that our rural communities thrive?

## About This Report

This document considers how VEE supported Vermont’s eaters, restaurants, farmers, and food producers and identifies the program elements worthy of preservation. It recognizes programs, policies, structures, and collaborations that could be used to embed the novel successes of VEE into the existing food system and economic resilience landscape in Vermont.

To research and prepare this report, we engaged in individual and group discussions with people directly involved in running VEE, food security advocates, economic development organizations, and experts inside and outside Vermont. Their identification of successes, pain points, and needs going forward helped inform our conclusions and recommendations. Appendix B includes a list of people interviewed as well as a list of information sources.

## Unique Accomplishments of Vermont Everyone Eats

By March 31, 2023, VEE, a \$49 million program had provided over 3.9 million meals (averaging an estimated 28,485 per week) to food-insecure Vermont eaters in all 14 counties. The peak distribution was 50,797 meals per week in December 2020. More than 321 Vermont restaurants made these meals, and 274 Vermont farmers and food producers provided an average of 35% of the ingredients used. Approximately \$7.4 million has been paid to Vermont farmers and food producers. A 2021 survey of restaurants participating in VEE showed that more than 400 full-time jobs (3.7 jobs per restaurant) were saved, added, or expanded because of the VEE program. More than one in six respondents reported that their restaurant would have permanently closed had they not participated.

In addition to these successes—providing prepared meals to Vermonters, offering a stabilizing source of income for Vermont restaurants, and channeling much-needed revenue to farmers and food producers—VEE had unique accomplishments that should be incorporated into the food systems and economic resilience realms in Vermont:



**New collaborations**



**Multiplier effect**



**New financial resources**



**Strong brand**



*VEE created collaborations between organizations, entities, and sectors that operated separately before the pandemic.*

Before the COVID-19 pandemic, the food security ecosystem's relationships with restaurants and farms were skewed toward philanthropy. However, there were exceptions. Age Well Restaurant Ticket Program (described in detail later) creates collaboration between the charitable food system and Vermont businesses by facilitating purchasing. Also contributing significantly to the food security landscape are groceries of all sizes, co-ops, general stores, and farm stands that accept both SNAP and WIC benefits.

When the pandemic began, we saw the number of Vermonters in need dramatically increase while the food production and distribution models for food-insecure Vermonters were disrupted. In March 2020, restaurants were told to shut their doors or pivot to an exclusively take-out model. It was a moment of new need for restaurants, which was alarming for the industry. Farmers and food producers whose business models counted on sales to restaurants, school lunch programs, and closed-down markets faced an uncertain future. In response, VEE ushered in a new partnership between Vermont eaters, restaurants, and local growers and makers, utilizing untapped relationships to meet the needs of all three groups. These unique collaborations were threefold: (1) state agencies—Agriculture, Food & Markets; Commerce and Community Development; Health & Human Services; and Emergency Management—working closely with a united program vision; (2) restaurants and anti-hunger partners developing strategic relationships; and (3) food hubs, economic development groups, and community organizations significantly deepening their working relationships with restaurant and farm partners.

In a survey administered by VEE in April–May 2021, restaurant owners overwhelmingly and emphatically agreed that program participation provided their restaurant with opportunities to build or strengthen relationships with community organizations, Vermont farmers, and food producers while contributing to their economic viability.

*“I think it really saved our town, not to be too dramatic. So many restaurants closed during the pandemic nationwide, and very few closed in Brattleboro.”*

*~ Leda Scheintaub, Dosa Kitchen*

*“This program is seamless and touches so many in need. Restaurants, farmers, and hungry Vermonters. This is one of the most brilliant programs that I’ve ever been involved in.”*

*~ Anonymous restaurant owner*

Through reciprocity, VEE has brought Vermont eaters, locally owned restaurants, and farmers into closer connection and created a collaboration with food security advocates and policymakers, introducing the innovative idea that state and local agencies focused on food security and those focused on economic resilience of the restaurant and farming sectors could work together because of common goals of building thriving, resilient Vermont communities.

*“[VEE] helped sow seeds for future work, as well as thinking about food access differently.”*

*~ Community hub staffer*



***The collaboration at the heart of VEE is what created its powerful multiplier effect.***

VEE demonstrated the powerful multiplier effect, the re-spending of dollars in local economies that a publicly funded program could have when it is *designed* to simultaneously meet the distinctively different needs of multiple sectors. Each FEMA dollar used to purchase meals had an impact on a Vermont restaurateur, a Vermont farmer or food producer, *and* a Vermont eater; therefore, VEE increased the impact of each dollar invested in the program. Relief programs that addressed the needs of these groups separately would have needed to invest significantly more money to have the same impact.

Elizabeth Schuster and Michelle Klieger, agricultural economists contracted by VEE to establish the program’s economic impact, have estimated that the \$49 million spent through the VEE program has spurred as much as \$78 million in additional local spending. This represents a 2.6 multiplier effect. Previous studies have shown that the multiplier effect for spending in food systems is between 1.4 and 2.6.

Pingala Cafe, a vegan restaurant in Burlington, VT, serves food truck-inspired cuisine and culture. They take an “inside-out approach” to everything they do. “It’s not the food we make; it’s why we

make it. It's not the ingredients we use; it's the ingredients we don't use."

From October 2020, when Pingala joined the program, through early 2023, VEE has generated 20% of Pingala's total revenue. Following are some of Pingala's local purchasing during that period:

- \$90,000: All Souls Tortilleria, tortillas made with a portion of Vermont-grown corn
- \$35,000: Pitchfork Farm, Lewis Creek Farm, and other local farmers' vegetables
- \$12,000: Brigham Hill Maple, maple syrup



***VEE brought new financial resources into the food security and economic development realms.***

VEE created a new market channel for restaurants, farmers, and food distributors, which increased economic resilience by diversifying customers and supply chains. During the pandemic, Vermonters negatively affected by COVID-19 became customers for restaurants that had lost their support base. Farmers and food producers were called on to supply products because of VEE's directive to source at least 10% of ingredients locally.

Historically, the federal government has reimbursed for prepared meals such as Meals on Wheels or public school lunch programs at far lower rates than the \$10.00 (+\$2.50 admin) per-meal VEE reimbursement rate. This precedent-setting funding more accurately reflects the cost of food and the people power it takes to feed people while supporting the local economy without relying on externalized costs.



***VEE was able to create a strong brand free of the stigma often associated with supplemental food assistance. That, coupled with VEE's unique self-certification process and nontraditional distribution model, ensured that many food-insecure Vermonters were connected with needed resources.***

Currently, two of every five people in Vermont are experiencing hunger.<sup>1</sup> The stigma associated with using safety net programs remains.<sup>2</sup> In a June 2021 survey of Everyone Eats participants, VEE administrators found that (1) it was important to participants that VEE offers restaurant-quality prepared meals, as this type of support meets various food security needs, including financial and dietary needs, and (2) participants experienced a sense of dignity directly correlated to the unique design of VEE, including the accessibility of marketable meals prepared by restaurants, the low

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<sup>1</sup> Mikaela Lefrak and Matthew F. Smith, "Two Out of Every Five Vermonters Is Food Insecure, New Data Show," *Vermont Edition*, Vermont Public, September 28, 2022, <https://www.vermontpublic.org/show/vermont-edition/2022-09-28/after-pandemic-surge-vermont-foodbank-says-inflation-is-triggering-a-new-wave-of-need>.

<sup>2</sup> "Hunger in Vermont," Hunger Free Vermont, accessed April 27, 2023, <https://www.hungerfreevt.org/hunger-in-vermont>.

barrier for entry, the reciprocity of multiple food system stakeholders benefiting from the program, and the kindness of staff and volunteers.

*“It made us feel more comfortable that there was no application, so we didn’t have to make it known we needed a little help.”*

~ Anonymous VEE meal recipient

VEE encouraged anyone with a self-identified need to participate. The tone-setting name, Everyone Eats, was intentionally chosen to highlight the stigma-free, instant, and easy aspects of the program. One distribution channel was the Localvore app, with which users needing food could appear no different from a cash-paying customer walking into a restaurant to pick up a meal. At meal distribution sites within the community, VEE reached Vermonters where they were comfortable. For example, bringing home meals to their family after hanging out at their local Boys & Girls Club felt easy and anxiety-free. No reservations, no waiting period, and a low barrier for entry were unique to VEE and were successful in reaching eaters in need who were uncomfortable participating in other programs.

The power of reciprocity was essential in removing the stigma of a food distribution program. Knowing that restaurants prepared the meals created a universality of experience, and knowing that the meals were helping to keep restaurants open and support local farmers gave a community that had never accessed help before, or did not identify with needing help, an invitation to join. Everyone was a part of it: both helping and receiving.

*“The [Vermont] Everyone Eats program was a lifesaver. It’s one of the few systems that works well to connect those who grow, those who cook, and those who eat.”<sup>3</sup>*

~ Anonymous Restaurant Owner

Post-VEE statewide funding, a variety of local and grassroots initiatives are seeking to continue the momentum of the program’s success:

- Partnerships with Area Agencies on Aging:
  - A pilot program with Senior Solutions, Chester Helping Hands, and Springfield Family Center will provide restaurant meals to service areas of Windsor County as a supplemental option for existing senior meals recipients. Senior Solutions offers a \$5.34-per-meal payment, with the requested portion sizes for seniors being

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<sup>3</sup> Claire Whitehouse, David Conner, Lisa Chase, and Travis W. Reynolds, “The Experience of Vermont Local Food Businesses during the First Year of the COVID-19 Pandemic,” *Journal of Agriculture, Food Systems, and Community Development* 12, no. 2 (Winter 2022–2023): 201–4, <https://www.foodsystemsjournal.org/index.php/fsj/article/view/1130>.

approximately half the size of a VEE meal. In addition to identifying an appropriate container that is microwave-, freezer-, and dishwasher-safe, restaurants interested in participating have submitted a four-week sample menu to be evaluated by nutritionist staff to ensure that meals meet the nutritional requirements of the Older Americans Act. While this program has started with a small sample size, the hope is to continue growing it to reach meal recipients throughout Windsor and Windham Counties.

- Putney Community Cares was awarded a grant from the United Way of Windham County (UWWC) to support seeking a partnership with local food producers to prepare their Meals on Wheels offerings. Putney Community Cares coordinates Meals on Wheels in partnership with Senior Solutions. The UWWC grant supports purchasing suitable containers for use by local food producers. This will allow the Meals on Wheels per-meal reimbursement to go directly to the cost of producing the meal.
- Food Is Medicine movement: North Star Health in Springfield has an arm of care called Lifestyle Medicine, which considers the full range of lifestyle factors that address the underlying causes of disease and the everyday choices that affect health, including modification of nutritional intake. A potential collaboration with Springfield Family Center, currently in the preliminary stage, would provide their clientele with healthy food options prepared by local chefs as an introduction to changing eating habits per physician orders.
- Downtown Brattleboro Alliance (DBA) collaborated with Brattleboro Museum & Art Center (BMAC) to raise funds for 226 additional meals to the Groundworks Homeless Shelter. These funds were generated by BMAC during their year end membership appeal. These meals will go to the local shelter for congregate meals. Hopefully, this will be a precedent for future support and partnership.
- Brattleboro Boys & Girls Club wants to continue accessing restaurant lunches during vacation weeks. It has contacted local VEE restaurants to brainstorm how this could be accomplished.
- Skinny Pancake is in conversation with The Genny Craftsbury and Pingala Cafe (in Burlington) and invites all who want to be in a community of practice to figure out how to continue making free meals available to the community. Fundraising is still to be determined and could include some combination of self-funding, round-ups, and community funds.
- Vermont Farmers Food Center, the food hub in Rutland County, will continue Rutland County Eats, distributing 200 meals per week for at least the first two months after VEE funding ends. The Vermont Farmers Food Center online market, where prepared meals are sold to the community, contributes a percentage of sales to fund the free prepared meals.



- Center for an Agricultural Economy in greater Hardwick will conduct a listening campaign with participants and restaurants about what the ending of VEE means to the community and what kind of need is out there. As 32% of Orleans County’s population is over the age of 60, the center is mainly looking to serve the older Vermont community.
- New Moon Catering in Burlington continues to raise funds through its business and recently received ARPA funding that will allow it to continue offering free meals in partnership with a local cafe.
- Rally Cat’s Cupboard, the University of Vermont student food pantry, seeks funding to order prepared meals directly from the restaurant it created a relationship with during VEE.
- Local ingredient purchasing: Many restaurants continue the sourcing habits they developed through the VEE program. This includes ordering through local food distributors like Food Connects.
- The Giving Fridge, a Middlebury-based initiative launched in December 2020, distributes free meals via automated refrigerators and heated food lockers. The program has invested more than \$250,000 back into the community, in part via an effective fundraising campaign that includes partnerships with restaurants in Addison County. Participating restaurants can use the automated units during busy times for take-out pickup and donate some of the proceeds from those meals to the Giving Fridge. Giving Fridge founder Bethanie Farrell also started the Everything Nice plant boutique to generate funding for the Giving Fridge. In 2023, these efforts unite to transform Middlebury’s historic Battell Block into a mixed-use space focused on food and community enrichment.

*“VEE has raised awareness of gaps in the existing systems addressing food insecurity in the state as well as the ongoing business challenges faced by Vermont restaurants and farmers in our seasonally driven state economy.”<sup>4</sup>*

*~ Josh Hanford, commissioner of the Department of Housing and Community Development*

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<sup>4</sup> Southeastern Vermont Community Action, “Pandemic Recovery Food Assistance Program to Wind Down,” press release, January 24, 2023, <https://img1.wsimg.com/blobby/go/a925333d-65bb-4391-b6e8-b1c6258363bc/downloads/VEE%20PRES%20RELEASE%201-24-2023.pdf?ver=1680382397461>.

# Current Conditions: Resources and Needs

## Current Food Systems Planning

In 2019, the Vermont Sustainable Jobs Fund was reauthorized by the Vermont legislature to create the Vermont Agriculture & Food System Strategic Plan, 2021–2030 (the Plan). The Plan, published in February 2021, contains a vision for Vermont’s food system to achieve the following outcomes by 2023:

1. *Increase sustainable economic development, and create jobs in Vermont’s food and farm sectors*
2. *Improve soils, water, and resiliency of the working landscape in the face of climate change*
3. *Improve access to healthy local foods for all Vermonters*

A UVM study published in the *Journal of Agriculture, Food Systems, and Community Development* concludes that the most effective local food system resilience policy is not a disaster response plan but a long-term strategy for strengthening local food economies.<sup>5</sup> The Plan is an essential strategy of where the food system in Vermont is going. VEE was supported because of the groundwork established by the Plan and the Farm to Plate Network. The opportunities coming out of VEE dovetail into the Plan’s programmatic and advocacy goals toward that long-term vision.

## Current Prepared Meals Landscape

When the nation’s nutrition assistance programs and anti-hunger policy were created, it was assumed that the best way to feed hungry people was to encourage them to cook for themselves. This assumption is leaving many behind.<sup>6</sup> Life patterns have changed, and American meal habits have also changed. In 2010, the share of Americans’ food budget for “food away from home” surpassed the share for food at home for the first time.<sup>7</sup> This is a gap that a growing contingent of advocates and academics have attributed to many Americans no longer having the time, skills, resources, or physical ability to prepare recipes. Our awareness of this gap was elevated during the pandemic as programs such as VEE offered a significant amount of prepared meals.

There are currently sources for prepared meals in Vermont: Meals on Wheels, school meals, summer meal programs, and charitable programs such as soup kitchens, mutual aid groups, and interfaith community groups.

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<sup>5</sup> Whitehouse et al., “Experience of Vermont Local Food Businesses.”

<sup>6</sup> Caitlin Dewey, “More Americans Can Use Food Stamps for Restaurants, Prepared Meals,” *Stateline*, January 4, 2022, <https://www.pewtrusts.org/en/research-and-analysis/blogs/stateline/2022/01/04/more-americans-can-use-food-stamps-for-restaurants-prepared-meals>.

<sup>7</sup> *America’s Eating Habits: Food Away from Home*, Economic Information Bulletin no. 196, prepared by the U.S. Department of Agriculture, Economic Research Service (Washington, DC, September 2018), <https://www.ers.usda.gov/webdocs/publications/90228/eib-196.pdf>.

March 2022 marks 50 years since legislation establishing federal support for Meals on Wheels, the nation's premier nutrition program for older adults. The program continues to be funded through the Older Americans Act, and in 2021 Meals on Wheels America reported that Vermont served 285,397 congregate meals and delivered 827,821 directly to Vermonters' homes.<sup>8</sup>

According to a 2017 evaluation presented to the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services' Administration for Community Living, more than half of older Americans nationwide depend on soup kitchens, shelters, or other meal sites to obtain daily food. Because of this, many do not eat at all on a day when they are sick, the weather is terrible, or they do not have transportation. The evaluation further stated that the need for prepared meals is unmet through 3SquaresVT or food pantries because those programs only supply produce and ingredients to individuals.

Since the start of the pandemic, Vermont kids have had access to free breakfast and lunch at school regardless of their family's income. These school meals have been funded by federal waivers, followed by the one-year Universal School Meals Act passed by the Vermont legislature and signed by Governor Scott in 2022. Schools are reporting that the stigma around school meal programs has ceased, more students are eating at school, and students are more attentive and ready to learn because they are not hungry and worrying about when they will eat next.<sup>9</sup> Multiple studies confirm that a universal school meals model is one specific feasible intervention that significantly improves multiple student, school, and community outcomes.<sup>10</sup>

Since 1993, Hunger Free Vermont has collaborated with community partners across the state to make transformative and lasting change by addressing impactful social and economic policies in our communities, schools, and homes. It is working to end hunger in Vermont permanently.

The Vermont Foodbank serves food shelves around the state, while community action agencies help lower-income Vermonters meet their basic needs and become self-sufficient by navigating federal programs like WIC and SNAP, as well as local and regional programs.

While these programs exist, there is an opportunity to fill critical gaps in their offerings. The current prevalence of food insecurity remains similarly high compared to early points in the pandemic, driven by rising food prices, other household needs, and other long-term impacts.

- Pre-COVID: 1 in 10 Vermonters were experiencing food insecurity.
- March 2021: 1 in 3 Vermonters were experiencing food insecurity.
- July 2022: 2 in 5 Vermonters were experiencing food insecurity.

There is still an unmet need for easily accessible, low-barrier prepared meals.

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<sup>8</sup> "Vermont Fact Sheet," Meals on Wheels America, 2021, [https://vtdigger.org/press\\_release/meals-on-wheels-celebrates-50-years/](https://vtdigger.org/press_release/meals-on-wheels-celebrates-50-years/).

<sup>9</sup> "The Lunch Monitor: Increased 3SquaresVT Benefits and the Continued Importance of Universal School Meals," Food Connects, December 8, 2021, <https://www.foodconnects.org/news-2/tag/Universal+Meals>.

<sup>10</sup> "Learn More about Universal School Meals in Vermont," Hunger Free Vermont, accessed April 27, 2023, <https://www.universalschoolmealsvt.org/learn>.

## Current Restaurant Landscape

Determining the economic health of the restaurant sector is challenging, as we lack definitions and studies. A recent study of Vermont farms and food service businesses during COVID-19 adapted financial status categories created by Mark Cannella, director of agricultural business programs at UVM Extension, for use in the food service sector. The study's sample size was small (only eight restaurants were evaluated), but these definitions can still help us frame what characterizes a restaurant or foodservice business as thriving or viable moving forward.<sup>11</sup>

<b>Term</b>	<b>Definition</b>
Economically thriving	The operation exceeds minimum fair labor and wage standards for all owners and employees, provides benefits (e.g., health insurance), covers all costs, and generates a profit.
Economically viable	The operation has the capacity to pay all employees average industry wages, cover all costs, and generate a profit.
Sustainable	This operation does not meet the “economically viable” definition (above) but is sustainable due to the presence of built-up equity in savings, property, and owned assets, or is a nonprofit organization raising money through grants, donations, and other unearned income.
Vulnerable	The business is not “economically viable” and does not have sufficient sources of other income or built-up equity, earned or unearned.

The restaurant sector is a challenge even for the most gutsy of entrepreneurs. Creating and opening a restaurant is expensive, and often there are extensive loans to repay. A broken hot water heater or kitchen oven can impose an unbearable cost and force closure. Tight margins quickly disappear with volatile food prices. Fickle customers increasingly want more for less, and staffing is a challenge. The primary reason restaurants fail in their first few years is a lack of funds caused by unreliable cash flow.<sup>12</sup> A strong concept cannot alone create financial viability.

Vermont has a small and aging year-round population and a vibrant seasonal economy, which translates to a volatile market for restaurants. The Agency of Commerce and Community Development's Tourism Benchmark Study has found that 60% of the restaurant business in Vermont comes from the traveling public. In resort towns more reliant on outdoor recreation, like Stowe or Dover, this increases to 70%.

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<sup>11</sup> Whitehouse et al., “Experience of Vermont Local Food Businesses.”

<sup>12</sup> Jessica Elliott, “Why Do So Many Restaurants Fail? Here's What Not to Do,” *The Ascent*, August 5, 2022, <https://www.fool.com/the-ascent/small-business/articles/why-do-restaurants-fail/>.

The sector is crucial to the state’s economic future. In 2018, there was an estimated \$1.1 billion in sales at Vermont’s 1,413 eating and drinking locations. And in 2019, the 21,259 jobs at Vermont food service and drinking establishments made up a third of all food system jobs in the state.

The National Restaurant Association reports that increased food costs and staffing issues are the top challenges for the industry. We would identify the additional challenges of supply chain issues, a lack of technical assistance, and scarcity of networking programs. Economic stewardship is a legislative priority for the Vermont Chamber of Commerce, which has noted that many businesses that survived the pandemic are deeper in debt and less able to withstand economic turbulence.

The value of a particular sector in our state is also not solely measured in dollars and cents. Restaurants are employers, they drive tourism, and they can transform a food desert and a Main Street. They are an important third place, and during the pandemic, we saw all their worth coalesce. We need further research to assess the importance of the restaurant sector in supporting the resilience of the local food system.

## Current Farmer & Food Producer Landscape

Farmers and food producers are central to Vermont’s culture and economy. The Vermont branding is strong, with a reputation for high quality and authenticity. However, this sector is not universally thriving. It faces many challenges, including the loss of its dairy farms; 13 out of the 14 counties saw a decrease in dairy farms from 2009 to 2019.<sup>13</sup> Our aging farmers is another concern; according to the American Farmland Trust, the average age of a Vermont farmer is 57.<sup>14</sup> Climate change, high start-up costs for land and infrastructure, and staffing further complicate the pathway to success.

Increasing market opportunities for farms by developing diverse market channels, reducing distribution bottlenecks, and investing in value chain relationships between producer and buyer must be part of the solution. With additional support and incentives, restaurants could be a more important revenue source for farmers. Before the COVID-19 pandemic, restaurants accounted for 3% of all local food purchases in Vermont, with at least \$9.7 million flowing back to local food producers.<sup>15</sup> Vermont Fresh Network plays a valuable role in this type of matchmaking and professional development. However, the organization is underfunded and is only one entity covering the entire state.

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<sup>13</sup> Vermont Farm to Plate, “Vermont Food System Plan Product Brief: Dairy,” in *Vermont Agriculture and Food System Strategic Plan, 2021–2030*, February 2021, [https://www.vtfarmtoplate.com/sites/default/files/2022-03/vermont\\_food\\_system\\_plan\\_product\\_brief\\_dairy.pdf](https://www.vtfarmtoplate.com/sites/default/files/2022-03/vermont_food_system_plan_product_brief_dairy.pdf).

<sup>14</sup> Travis Marcotte, “The Future of Agriculture in Vermont: Land Transfers & New Farmers,” *UVM Food Feed* (blog), January 17, 2017, <https://learn.uvm.edu/foodsystemsblog/2017/01/17/future-of-agriculture-in-vermont/#:~:text=It's%20no%20secret%20that%20Vermont.of%20all%20land%20in%20production>.

<sup>15</sup> Vermont Farm to Plate, “Vermont Food System Plan Market Brief: Restaurants,” in *Vermont Agriculture and Food System Strategic Plan, 2021–2030*, February 2021, [https://www.vtfarmtoplate.com/sites/default/files/2022-03/vermont\\_food\\_system\\_plan\\_market\\_brief\\_restaurants.pdf](https://www.vtfarmtoplate.com/sites/default/files/2022-03/vermont_food_system_plan_market_brief_restaurants.pdf).

Following are five examples of successful pre-pandemic programs that create collaborations between the supplemental food system and farmers by facilitating the purchase of fruits and vegetables:

1. A partnership between the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) and the Northeast Organic Farming Association of Vermont (NOFA-VT) brought to life the successful Crop Cash program, in which 3SquaresVT recipients (Vermont's Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program, or SNAP) can receive extra money to spend on fruits and vegetables at Vermont farmers' markets.
2. The Vermont Foodbank created the successful Vermonters Feeding Vermonters program, which makes direct purchases from local farmers for distribution.
3. The lauded Farmacy programs of Vermont Farmers Food Center in Rutland and ACORN in Addison County focus on the nutritional and dietary needs of at-risk community members.
4. The Farm Share Program, administered through NOFA-VT, offers subsidized CSA shares to over 500 Vermont families. In 2022, the program fully compensated more than 50 farms.
5. The Vermont legislature passed a local foods purchasing initiative for public schools in 2021.

The business support infrastructure for farmers and food producers through varied advocacy and support organizations is robust. Example organizations are Vermont Farm to Plate, Vermont Fresh Network, (NOFA-VT), Center for an Agricultural Economy, Intervale Center, Vermont Farmers Food Center, the Vermont Housing and Conservation Board, and Farm to Institution New England. Offerings include technical assistance programs such as Working Lands Enterprise Initiative and the Farm and Forest Viability Program.

## Recommendation and Opportunities

### Recommendation for a Prepared Meals Advocate

We recommend creating a full-time Prepared Meals Advocate position within an existing statewide entity whose primary mission will be to organize and work with businesses, specifically restaurants. Suggestions for a statewide entity to permanently house this position would be Vermont Fresh Network, Vermont Sustainable Jobs Fund, Vermont Businesses for Social Responsibility, or Vermont Independent Restaurants. Centering work in a restaurant-focused entity is strategic, as it frames the conversation clearly in an economic resilience lane and invites cross-sector collaboration more prominently. The goal of this position and the programmatic work to follow is to sustain and further the role of restaurants and food producers in the Vermont food security conversation. The advocate's work would be centered on supporting restaurants and food producers' essential role in promoting and sustaining economic resilience in our state.

A Prepared Meals Advocate will discuss and investigate opportunities, explore pilot programs, and unlock new funding sources to support and expand prepared meals programming in support of Vermont restaurants and food businesses. The advocate will coordinate a diverse network of stakeholders toward sustainable statewide efforts and all levels of policy work. Ultimately, this work will strengthen collaborative connections among the hospitality sector, small farming businesses, local food product entrepreneurs, anti-hunger advocates, private technology businesses, nonprofit organizations, and local communities.

## Opportunities to Pursue Strategic Initiatives



### 1. Amplify restaurant support for state and federal advocacy around meal programs.

Government support and policies are crucial for improving our food system to better use current infrastructure and existing food chain supplies and provide more equitable meal access to food-insecure communities. In coalition with the work of existing state and federal advocacy organizations, restaurants can be new and influential advocates. Following are examples of current advocacy worthy of support:

- a. Two priority recommendations of the Vermont Farm Bill Nutrition Coalition are of particular interest to restaurants: (1) Priority 1: Maintain or increase funding for all programs, and protect them from changes to their funding structure; (2) Priority 3, subpoint: Expand eligibility for the Restaurant Meals Program (RMP) to ensure SNAP household members receiving benefits with an older adult, unhoused person, or person living with disabilities are eligible for RMP benefits.
- b. Meals on Wheels America recommends increasing federal funding for the Older Americans Act Nutrition Program and other funding sources, including federal block grants and home- and community-based services.
- c. The Hunger Free Vermont, the Vermont Foodbank, the Vermont Association of Area Agencies on Aging (V4A), and others are advancing increased funding for critical nutrition programs, such as bill H.109, which would increase funding and sustainability of the Meals on Wheels program.



### 2. Explore a statewide Dine Out Program (DOP) for older Vermonters.

A statewide DOP for older Vermonters, in partnership with the five partner agencies of the V4A, has the potential to augment both the Meals on Wheels prepared meals program and successful congregate meal programs. Working in partnership with community organizations and following the strict nutritional





guidelines and eligibility criteria required under the Older Americans Act, restaurants could function as congregate meal dining sites. The possible benefits of a DOP in Vermont include increased donation levels (as other states have experienced), support for challenging staffing and infrastructure issues (through utilization of restaurant capacity), an increased community presence, more hours and days for meal service, and hopefully an influx of new interest by older Vermonters in V4A programming.



**3. Engage restaurants in Food Is Medicine movement: actions to integrate food and nutrition into health care.**

There is a growing movement and increased focus on integrating food and nutrition into health care as prevention and prescriptions for diet-related chronic disease and addressing social determinants of health, such as access to nutritious foods and physical activity opportunities. A handful of states are starting to offer programs that meet these social determinants as part of health care or in lieu of traditional medical services. Medically tailored meals, prescriptions for produce, and other such programs fall within this category. This will be an area of policy in which the knowledge and experience of VEE will serve Vermont well.



**4. Pilot a Dining Dollars program modeled after Crop Cash.**

This grant-funded pilot program would offer 3SquaresVT-eligible Vermonters an increase in benefit dollars when they access prepared meals directly from restaurants with Dining Dollars. The Dining Dollars would be distributed at Crop Cash-participating farmers' markets in a pilot area to scale up to a statewide program. Swiping your EBT card would unlock the ability to double the dollars (triple factoring in Crop Cash).



**5. Support the creation of local purchasing incentives for restaurants.**

A recommendation from the Plan is to investigate local food purchasing incentives. If modeled after the Local Foods Purchasing Incentive for Vermont schools, restaurants would be awarded financial incentives to serve more fresh Vermont food on their menus.



**6. Explore the feasibility of a Restaurant Meals Program (RMP) through 3SquaresVT (SNAP).**

The RMP is a state option in the federal Food Stamp Act that would allow





SNAP-eligible Vermonters who are 60+, disabled, or homeless greater access to low-cost, culturally appropriate prepared meals that would otherwise be out of reach. Access would be granted at participating restaurants using their EBT card.



**7. Develop a distribution plan for sharing the VEE experience and learnings.**

Telling the VEE story through assets created by SEVCA: VEE toolbox and documentary as well as creating a presentation for conferences both inside and outside Vermont will reinforce learning and emphasize the benefits of innovation and systemic approaches. This will also build community, help establish more partnerships and further funding opportunities, and amplify the work to a national scale.

## Conclusion

To build a thriving Vermont, we must think conscientiously about our interconnectedness and continue flexible new paradigm thinking. This Indigenous wisdom shared by Robin Wall Kimmerer, author of *Braiding Sweetgrass*, inspires us to view reciprocity as every sector in our state saying to one another, “I need you.” That is the language of thriving and flourishing.

VEE has lived up to this flexible, reciprocal kind of thinking. Forged in the crisis of COVID-19, it brought together restaurants, farmers and food producers, community advocates, and eaters to build a program that everyone could embrace and that helped vulnerable businesses and residents weather the difficulties of the pandemic. The lessons of VEE can be carried through to longer-term initiatives in which restaurant meals with local ingredients continue to be integrated into Vermont’s food assistance landscape. We need visionary leaders committed to investing in all three pillars of VEE in order to capitalize on a crucial opportunity to continue supporting the hospitality and agriculture sectors, which play such an important role in the state economy. And at the same time, we can fill an ongoing need faced by many food-insecure Vermonters, giving them the opportunity to dine with dignity.

## Appendix A: Further Exploration of Two Key Program Opportunities

We chose the following two opportunities to research further for several reasons: existing funding and funding mechanisms that have the potential to increase, the opportunities exist as programs elsewhere and have a record of success where they exist. Our research involved a literature review where possible, conversations with VEE task force members, and conversations with current program staff teams. With both of these programs, vetting the political will and capacity in our state is the important next step.

### Opportunity 1: Establish a SNAP Restaurant Meals Program (RMP) in Vermont

#### Overview of the Opportunity

The RMP is a *state option* in the federal Food Stamp Act to allow certain SNAP clients, who might not be able to prepare meals for themselves or who do not have permanent housing for storing and preparing food, to be able to buy prepared meals at participating restaurants using their EBT card.<sup>16</sup> 3SquaresVT is Vermont's name for the federal Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP). If Vermont were to exercise this option, it would allow 3SquaresVT users who are 60+, disabled, or homeless access to low-cost, culturally appropriate prepared meals that would otherwise be out of reach.

Under the Food Stamp Act, each state can choose how many restaurants and select criteria for participation in the state's RMP. There is no set reimbursement rate for the prepared meal. We suggest that the requirements for VEE be used for the RMP, specifically the provisions that participating restaurants be locally owned and that they commit to purchasing 10% of their ingredients from local food producers.

#### Benefits of the Opportunity

Establishing a 3SquaresVT RMP in Vermont would ensure that the unique successes of VEE would continue to serve Vermont's eaters, restaurants, and farmers and food producers. It would keep restaurants in collaboration with eaters and local food producers at the nexus between food security and economic resilience; continue the strong multiplier effect generated by this multi-sector approach; and provide a revenue stream (USDA SNAP funds) in support of Vermont's small businesses.

In 2020, 68,485 people received benefits from 3SquaresVT. Overall, 40% of eligible Vermonters are not receiving benefits, which signals room to expand enrollment numbers and leverage more federal dollars by expanding offerings. In a recent survey administered by the Vermont Farm Bill

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<sup>16</sup> USDA, "Restaurant Meals Program," accessed May 4, 2023, <https://www.fns.usda.gov/snap/retailer/restaurant-meals-program>.

Nutrition Coalition, the prohibition on hot food items was named as a significant barrier to food security, especially those who are not housed, do not have access to kitchens, or work during charitable food or other congregate meal times, as well as Vermonters whose work schedule impedes meal preparation. The state staff of the Rhode Island and Michigan RMPs shared that the provision of this additional program resulted in increased SNAP enrollment in their state.

A 3SquaresVT RMP in Vermont could provide the following benefits:

1. Help address the food security needs of Vermont eaters who don't have the means to prepare or store food, addressing a critical gap in Vermont's current food security programs.
2. Increase the number of eligible Vermonters signing up for 3SquaresVT benefits.
3. Ensure that more culturally appropriate food options are available to Vermont eaters in need if diverse restaurants are prioritized in the onboarding process.
4. Provide an additional and diversified revenue source to support the stabilization of Vermont's restaurant industry.
5. Give an incentive for restaurants to purchase local ingredients.
6. Help advance the broader food systems goals identified in the Plan.

## Measuring Impact

Once the RMP is active, we need to establish metrics that will allow us to assess and measure its success. We suggest the following metrics for measuring the initiative's success after its first full year of operation:

1. Set a use rate goal in terms of percentage of eligible Vermonters.
2. Most Vermont eaters who participate in the program indicate that it has improved their food security.
3. The RMP has at least 100 locally owned restaurants enrolled in the program.
4. Of those 100 restaurants, at least 35 serve culturally diverse cuisines or dishes.<sup>17</sup>
5. Most restaurants participating in the program indicate that it has helped stabilize their business.
6. Participating restaurants maintain or increase the number of people they employ.
7. Participating restaurants purchase not less than 10% of the ingredients used to prepare RMP meals from Vermont farmers and food producers.
8. When measured against the goals established in the Vermont Agriculture and Food System Strategic Plan, the RMP's impact is on track.

In order to measure our success, the RMP will collect the following data on an annual basis:

- The overall percentage of eligible Vermonters using 3SquaresVT benefits.
- The number of Vermonters who are eligible for the RMP.
- The number of eligible Vermonters who participate in the RMP.
- The average and total number of meals purchased through the RMP.
- The percentage of sales that RMP sales represent for each participating restaurant.
- The number of employees at participating restaurants.

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<sup>17</sup> The details of how to define "culturally diverse" will be established if we move forward with this initiative.

- The number of participating restaurants that qualify as culturally diverse.
- A qualitative survey of eaters' experience of the program.
- A qualitative survey of restaurant owners' experience of the program.
- Growth in the percentage of local food purchasing by local restaurants tracked by local food distributors.

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### **An example of how an RMP could help achieve the Plan's goals:**

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- If 26% of all 60+ 3SquaresVT eligible Vermonters (17,910) participate in the RMP and use their EBT card at a participating restaurant twice per week each month by purchasing a \$10 meal, Vermont would see increased spending of \$4,842,864 at the state's restaurants.
  - This would help the state to meet its goal of a \$3 billion increase in food system economic output by 2030.
  - This additional revenue stream would ensure more stability in the restaurant job sector, potentially helping Farm to Plate meet its objective of 5,000 net new food sector jobs by 2030.
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## **Process for Implementation**

Under current federal regulations, states have the option to implement an RMP. In order to do so, the state must do the following:

- The Vermont Department for Children and Families (DCF), Economic Services Division, the department that oversees the state's SNAP program (3SquaresVT), must notify the U.S. Department of Agriculture that it plans to exercise the option to run an RMP via an amendment to its state plan. The amendment must include the following:
  - Program procedures
  - An implementation timeline and date
  - A draft memorandum of understanding for use in contracting with participating restaurants
- Once the amendment is approved, restaurants that want to participate must receive USDA approval. They must complete a Food and Nutrition Service 252-2 application, which requires the following:
  - A copy of a government-issued photo identification card and a copy of a Social Security number for all owners/partners or all officers of private corporations
  - A copy of the contract with the DCF
  - A copy of a valid business license
- In addition to any state-imposed requirements, all participating restaurants must adhere to the following requirements:
  - Must offer meals at concessional pricing
  - Must serve an area with an eligible population
  - Must be fully accessible to the disabled

- Must have more than 50% total sales in food
- May not be set up exclusively for carry-out
- May not be operating as a bar/tavern

## Potential Funding Streams

Once Vermont exercises its state option to have an RMP, the program has a federal funding source, the U.S. Department of Agriculture. Technical assistance, food access grants, and marketing grants will need to be found to cover the purchase costs of additional Point of Sale (POS) for restaurants if required, as well as marketing.

## Feasibility

**Momentum:** Vermont would be the eighth state to establish an RMP and could use the success of VEE to lead the way by partnering with locally owned restaurants and including an attestation for local food purchasing. In most states, the program legislation has passed largely along party lines, with a few exceptions: California passed its bill unanimously, and in Illinois, Senate Republican leader Dan McConchie spoke in favor of the program, citing the personal difficulty he faces preparing meals in a wheelchair.<sup>18</sup> Other states have faced challenges and opposition in building support for the RMP. The concerns are largely threefold: that the ability to have nonprescribed purchases might result in less healthy food, that limited resources would be too quickly used because of a restaurant meal price tag, and that fast-food chains could dominate the list of restaurants participating in the program.

**Partnership & Capacity:** Launching this program will require capacity in research, policy development, program development, and stakeholder outreach. The Prepared Meals Advocate position recommended in this report would be well-positioned to support state agencies and other key players in carrying forward this work. As a pilot program, VEE gives us proof of concept and a wealth of both restaurant and distribution relationships. Initial discussions with the Vermont Chamber of Commerce and the Agency of Commerce and Community Development show support for programs such as these, which a deeper dive into the economic benefits would only serve to strengthen.

**Access:** For current RMP-eligible 3SquaresVT recipients, there is nothing more they would need to do to access the benefit. Therefore, the RMP mirrors the dignity offered in VEE. There is no secondary card or process for obtaining meals, as current eligible 3SquaresVT recipients would automatically have reprogrammed EBT cards. However, homelessness is not a current qualifying question of 3SquaresVT. Other states, like Michigan, have used a blank address field on the form to follow up in order to determine status. The caseworker will ask if they are homeless or forgot to provide an address. Michigan's application also includes a check box indicating homelessness, but this is not a fail-safe, as neither is a required field to process the application.

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<sup>18</sup> Dewey, "More Americans Can Use Food Stamps."

**Onboarding:** Learning from other states, implementation of this program requires concentrated effort and community engagement. However, harnessing the strength of the current partnership with locally owned restaurants and using the VEE definition of applicable restaurants would work to streamline the process. Thus, Vermont would have the opportunity to lead the nation in onboarding local restaurants using local ingredients.

The *Vermont Agriculture and Food System Strategic Plan* identifies what is needed within the state's food systems and how success may be achieved and measured. The following proposed opportunities directly or indirectly support the goals described in the Plan. For those goals directly supported by the initiatives, which are listed here, the Plan's specified "example indicator" would be used as a measurement of the impact of the implemented initiatives, thereby demonstrating how it supports the desired outcomes of the Plan and how it aligns with its stated goals, objectives, and priority strategies.

- **Strategic Goal #1:** Food system economic output, employment, and establishments in Vermont will increase.  
Within this goal, the objectives an RMP will advance are as follows:
  - Food system economic output will increase by \$3 billion (a 26.5% increase) by 2030.
  - There will be 5,000 net new food sector jobs by 2030.
  - There will be 350 net new farm and food establishments in Vermont by 2030.
  
- **Strategic Goal #2:** Demand for Vermont food will increase.  
Within this goal, the objective an RMP will advance is as follows:
  - By 2030, Vermont food products will be 25% of all in-state food purchases.
  
- **Strategic Goal #3:** Vermont's production portfolio is more diverse, as farm and food businesses of all types will increase their economic viability.  
Within this goal, the objectives an RMP will advance are as follows:
  - Aggregate sales of Vermont products will increase by \$100 million.
  - Sales of certified organic Vermont products will increase by 20%.
  - The amount of financial capital made available annually to farm and food businesses will increase.
  
- **Strategic Goal #10:** The amount of Vermont-grown food that fulfills the dietary and cultural needs of people in Vermont will increase.  
Within this goal, the objectives an RMP will advance are as follows:
  - Vermont will produce an increasing amount of food that fulfills the nutritional needs of people in Vermont.
  - Diverse cultural groups in Vermont will increasingly report that their food needs are met by Vermont producers.
  
- **Strategic Goal #11:** All people in Vermont increasingly have the financial resources to access local food, including through programs that provide support for purchasing local

food.

Within this goal, the objectives an RMP will advance are as follows:

- At least 98% of Vermonters will report buying food directly from farmers or buying local food at a retail store or restaurant within the last year.
  - Funding for supplemental support programs that provide access to local food (3SquaresVT, Health Care Share, etc.) will increase.
  - An increasing percentage of those eligible for supplemental support programs in the state will be enrolled.
- **Strategic Goal #12:** All people in Vermont can access locations where local food is sold, served, or provided.
  - **Strategic Goal #14:** Vermont's food system is resilient and able to provide adequate and accessible healthy local food in the face of emergencies, including climate-related natural disasters.

## Opportunity 2: Establish a Statewide AAA Dine Out Program (DOP) for Older Vermonters

### Overview of the Opportunity

In fifteen states, including Vermont, older American nutrition providers offer restaurant meals through their Older Americans Act (OAA) Nutrition Program. The OAA Nutrition Program provides federal funding to the Vermont Association of Area Agencies on Aging to provide Vermonters aged 60 and older with services to support their independence and their experience of high-quality life. Among these services, OAA funds congregate meals and nutrition programs that prepare and deliver meals to a participant's home. We propose a statewide DOP, in partnership with all five Vermont Area Agencies on Aging (AAAs). Currently one of Vermont's five AAAs has implemented such a program. With the proposed Prepared Meal Advocate, a collaboration would be forged with restaurants offering affordable, nutritious meals to eligible eaters at participating restaurants from the VEE network. The restaurants would serve as new congregate meal sites, utilizing the same funding sources as the current congregate meal sites. The restaurants involved in the DOP would offer dietitian-approved meals to meet one-third of the Dietary Reference Intakes and comply with the Dietary Guidelines for Americans. The DOP could utilize a meal card or app that operates independently of a restaurant's current POS system. The system would allow an AAA to remotely load approved meals on a registered participant's account, allowing restaurants and AAAs to track meals purchased and eliminate much of the required administrative time. To qualify for participation, restaurants would need to be locally owned and commit to purchasing at least 10% of their ingredients locally.

At Age Well, an agency serving Northwestern Vermont, a Restaurant Ticket Program (RTP) has been operating for the last 20 years. The RTP allows older adults to enjoy a nutritious meal and an outing to a local restaurant at a discounted rate. Under the existing program, the eligible participant signs

up with Age Well, a \$5 donation is requested, and they then receive a physical restaurant voucher to present at a participating establishment. At the end of the month, an Age Well staff person collects the tickets from each participating restaurant, verifies the count with restaurant management, and issues payment.

In southern Maine, a program called As You Like It is operated through the SeniorDine technology. This program allows individuals 60 and older to enjoy a meal from an As You Like It menu at 15 local restaurants. Meals are funded through OAA and a suggested donation of \$8. A diner loads their SeniorDine card or app with 10 meals at a time and purchases meals directly from the restaurants.

The nutrition program of the OAA is underfunded, and a DOP would not mean an increase to the current budget for congregate meals. It would be an available program for an AAA to access if it is a good fit in the community.

### **Benefits of the Opportunity**

Creating a statewide AAA DOP would allow the state to continue utilizing the network of local VEE-participating restaurants to serve the needs of older Vermont eaters and further integrate local purchasing habits and business practices within the restaurant sector.

The benefits of establishing an AAA DOP include the following:

1. Offering additional sites for congregate meals for older Vermonters maintains the benefits of other congregate meal programs and may alleviate some of the social stigmas.
2. The potential to increase participation rates in congregate meal programs by older Vermonters helps to address the food security needs of a population for which prepared meals are essential and alleviate some of the burdens on the charitable food system.
3. Due to a higher perceived value, there is potential to increase the donation rate on the part of participating individuals and to alleviate any staffing issues at current meal sites.
4. The number of culturally appropriate food options can be expanded when the diversity of cuisines is prioritized in restaurant onboarding.
5. It provides an additional revenue source for Vermont's restaurant industry.
6. An increased incentive for restaurants to purchase local ingredients supports Vermont agriculture.
7. Deploying a digital platform would make the program accessible to more eligible eaters, make restaurant reimbursement faster and easier, lessen the administrative burden of program operation, and simplify the integrity and efficiency of the data collection mandated by the state and federal governments.

Our nation faces a looming crisis in serving a rapidly growing aging population with chronically under-resourced OAA programs. In Vermont, it is estimated that by 2030, 30% of our population will be over 60. And yet increasing empirical evidence points to what we have always known: adequate food, nutrition, and opportunities for social engagement and connection are critical to older adults' overall health and well-being. For potentially two reasons, congregate meal



participation rates have been declining nationwide: (1) many adults aged 60 and older, who are eligible for these meals, don't always see themselves as "senior" and are thus not looking to congregate meal sites serving older adults to have their nutrition security and social needs met, and (2) meals at current congregate meal sites can have an undeserving stigma associated with them. National Association of Area Agencies on Aging members report "increasing disinterest among Baby Boomers in traditional congregate meals programs, as stigma and misperceptions about these programs can stymie turnout. Congregate programs in particular often serve as the 'first door' through which older adults access a wider range of services down the line. It's essential that these community-based nutrition programs remain fresh, engaging and effective."<sup>19</sup>

A DOP without those stigmas attached can offer a program that builds a much-needed connection with those at the beginning of the aging continuum. Other states that have implemented restaurant-based meal programs have seen an increase in attendance.

## Measuring Impact

We suggest the following metrics for measuring the initiative's success after its first full year of operation:

1. Increased participation rate.
2. The AAAs see an overall increase in participation in their nutrition programs.
3. Survey eaters who participate in the program and look for indicators that it has improved their food security and overall well-being.
4. The program has at least 50 locally owned restaurants enrolled.
5. There is at least one restaurant in each AAA area that serves culturally diverse cuisines or dishes.<sup>20</sup>
6. Most restaurants participating in the program indicate that it has helped stabilize their business.
7. Participating restaurants purchase at least 10% of the ingredients used to prepare these meals from Vermont farmers and food producers.
8. This program will advance the goals established in the Plan.

To measure success, we will need to collect the following data related to the DOP annually:

- The number of individuals eligible to receive a congregate meal at a AAA support meal site
- The number of individuals who participated in the DOP, and what percentage of eligible individuals this represents
- The average number of meals that eligible individuals ate through the DOP
- The number of eligible individuals who participated in other nutrition assistance programs provided by AAAs, and what percentage of eligible individuals these participation rates represent
- The number of new individuals enrolled in AAA nutrition assistance programs

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<sup>19</sup> "[Keeping It Fresh: How Congregate Meals Are Evolving for Today's New Older Adults.](#)" *Nfesh* (blog). National Foundation to End Senior Hunger, June 6, 2019.

<sup>20</sup> The details of how to define "culturally diverse" will be defined if we move forward with this initiative.

- The number of meals that were ordered through the DOP that were culturally diverse<sup>21</sup>
- The average donation per individual/meal for the DOP
- The percentage of participating eaters who report improved their food security or overall well-being because of involvement in the program
- The number of dollars in sales restaurants do through the DOP
- The percentage of meal sales the DOP represents for each restaurant
- The number of individuals each participating restaurant employs
- The percentage of participating restaurant owners who report the program is a component of stabilizing their business

The requirement that participating restaurants purchase at least 10% of their ingredients for DOP meals from Vermont farmers or food producers to qualify to participate will allow us to extrapolate the program's financial impact on Vermont farmers and food producers.

### Ongoing Costs for Program Operation

The ongoing expenses of the proposed DOP program total **\$12.70/meal**:

- \$10 per-meal reimbursement to participating restaurants
- \$2.50 per-meal administrative fee to AAA (mirroring VEE's admin cost model)
- \$0.20 per-meal transaction fee for the electronic distribution model

In testimony on the week of January 23, 2023, to the House Committee on Human Services, director Angela Smith-Dieng shared that the reimbursement rate for all meals (Meals on Wheels and congregate) was \$5.44/meal for FY22. However, the current congregate meal program's average cost is \$11.97/meal.

In addition to providing a consistent and effective tool that is easy for the older Vermonter to enroll in and use, technology can be leveraged to maximize the funds budgeted for congregate meals by decreasing overall administrative costs. SeniorDine and VEE Localvore app technology are examples of such digital platforms.

In other states, restaurant meal programs have been shown to decrease congregate meal program costs by reducing staffing costs and indirect costs.

### Ongoing Funding Streams

To cover the \$12.70/meal cost, the following funding streams are available:

- \$5.44 reimbursement per eligible congregate meal from the OAA Nutrition Services Incentive Program
- \$5.00 contribution/donation by the participant toward the meal<sup>22</sup>
- **\$2.26** that will need to be fundraised from other sources

<sup>21</sup> Again, how we define "cultural diversity" will be established if we move forward with this initiative.

<sup>22</sup> This is an increase from the current \$3 donation suggested per meal because our research shows the perceived value will be greater for the DOP. Maine and Connecticut have both shared that their donation rate is higher with the restaurant meals and therefore could be an asset to the portfolio of offerings for the AAAs.

## Potential Funding Streams

Grant funds would need to cover the expenses associated with the eight-month start-up period to launch this program. Example grants for the initial start-up of the program:

- HHS, Administration for Community Living, Innovations in Nutrition Programs and Services Replication Grants (\$55,000–\$150,000). For example, Waupaca County, WI: Project will develop a restaurant partnership to operate a congregate dining model for older adults. Projected outcomes include improved nutritional status, food security, and overall satisfaction compared to traditional congregate services and decreased loneliness and isolation.
- USDA, Community Food Projects Competitive Grant Program (CFPCGP). The CFPCGP is intended to bring together stakeholders from distinct parts of the food system and to foster an understanding of national food security trends and how they might improve local food systems.
- USDA, Local Food Promotion Program. These grants can be used for the planning stages of establishing or expanding a local and regional food business enterprise or to improve or expand a food business that supports locally and regionally produced agricultural products and food system infrastructure by performing feasibility studies, market research, training, and technical assistance for the business enterprise and for producers working with the business enterprise. A 25% match is required.
- Local & specific grants: Community Resilience Grant (\$150,000). Addresses health disparities in Windham County in accordance with the social determinants of health.
- Vermont Community Foundation Spark Connecting Community Grants (\$5,000). The grants put building and nurturing community front and center. Support grassroots work that builds social capital—the connective tissue of our communities.

## Feasibility

From our research of Connecticut, Illinois, Vermont, and Maine programs, coalitions and implementation grants are essential for success. It will be critical to discover the level of interest from the AAAs and work in partnership with them to identify how the DOP can augment, not supplant, their existing programs. Knowing a track record of success from similar programs nationwide is affirming. For example, the SeniorDine digital platform is currently being used in 15 states, with 40 nutrition providers in partnership with 152 restaurants, grocery stores, and food trucks. SeniorDine is the technology nutrition providers like AAAs can use to expand services to restaurants. It offers a turnkey service delivery model that utilizes local restaurants to provide nutritious meals to seniors at a discounted rate. Using custom debit cards, congregate meal funding, and community donations, senior service organizations can offer seniors the option to dine at their favorite participating restaurants, all tracked and managed by ServTracker. Local AAAs that are interested in developing a DOP will likely need additional capacity and resources. The Prepared Meals Advocate position recommended in this report could help AAAs research, source funding, build relationships with restaurants, and otherwise achieve their goals in launching a DOP.

The *Vermont Agriculture and Food System Strategic Plan* identifies what is needed within the state's food systems and how success may be achieved and measured. The following proposed opportunities directly or indirectly support the goals described in the Plan. For those goals directly supported by the initiatives, which are listed here, the Plan's specified "example indicator" would be used as a measurement of the impact of the implemented initiatives, thereby demonstrating how it supports the desired outcomes of the Plan and how it aligns with its stated goals, objectives, and priority strategies.

- **Strategic Goal #1:** Food system economic output, employment, and establishments in Vermont will increase.  
Within this goal, the objectives an RMP & DOP will advance are as follows:
  - Food system economic output will increase by \$3 billion (a 26.5% increase) by 2030.
  - There will be 5,000 net new food sector jobs by 2030.
  - There will be 350 net new farm and food establishments in Vermont by 2030.
  
- **Strategic Goal #2:** Demand for Vermont food will increase.  
Within this goal, the objective an RMP & DOP will advance is as follows:
  - By 2030, Vermont food products will be 25% of all in-state food purchases.
  
- **Strategic Goal #3:** Vermont's production portfolio is more diverse, as farm and food businesses of all types will increase their economic viability.  
Within this goal, the objectives an RMP & DOP will advance are as follows:
  - Aggregate sales of Vermont products will increase by \$100 million.
  - Sales of certified organic Vermont products will increase by 20%.
  - The amount of financial capital made available annual to farm and food businesses will increase.
  
- **Strategic Goal #10:** The Amount of Vermont-grown food that fulfills the dietary and cultural needs of people in Vermont will increase.  
Within this goal, the objectives an RMP & DOP will advance are as follows:
  - Vermont will produce an increasing amount of food that fulfills the nutritional needs of people in Vermont.
  - Diverse cultural groups in Vermont will increasingly report that their food needs are met by Vermont producers.
  
- **Strategic Goal #11:** All people in Vermont increasingly have the financial resources to access local food, including through programs that provide support for purchasing local food.  
Within this goal, the objectives an RMP & DOP will advance are as follows:
  - At least 98% of Vermonters will report buying food directly from farmers or buying local food at a retail store or restaurant within the last year.
  - Funding for supplemental support programs that provide access to local food (including 3SquaresVT, Health Care Share, etc.) will increase.

- An increasing percentage of those eligible for supplemental support programs in the state will be enrolled.
- **Strategic Goal #12:** All people in Vermont are able to access locations in which local food is sold, served, or provided.
- **Strategic Goal #14:** Vermont's food system is resilient and able to provide adequate and accessible healthy local food in the face of emergencies, including climate-related natural disasters.

## Appendix B: Resources and References

### Interviewees: In-State

Age Well: *Chris Moldovan, nutrition & wellness director*

Bi-State PCA: *Kristen Bigelow-Talbert, senior program manager, and Helen Labum, former executive director*

Brattleboro Development Credit Corporation: *Jennifer Stromsten, director of programs*

Capstone Community Action: *Sue Minter, executive director, and Casey Engels, Everyone Eats hub program manager*

Farm to Plate: *Becka Warren, project manager*

Food Connects: *Richard Berkfield, executive director*

Healthy Roots Collaborative: *Christine Porcaro, farm & food business coordinator*

Helianth Partners: *Michelle Klieger, agricultural economist*

Hunger Free Vermont: *Ivy Enoch, food security advocacy manager*

Intervale Center: *Mandy Fischer, program director, and Emma Gonzalez, Everyone Eats hub community outreach & distribution manager*

Mama Sezz: *Lisa Lormier, founder & CEO*

NOFA-Vermont: *Johanna Doren, local food access coordinator*

Public Assets: *Steph Yu, executive director, and Julie Lowell, policy analyst*

Putney Food Shelf: *Paul Renouf, board of directors*

Sustainable Economies Consulting, LLC: *Elizabeth Schuster, environmental economist*

U.S. Department of Agriculture: *Sarah Waring, state director for Vermont and New Hampshire*

Vermont Agency of Commerce and Community Development: *Gary Halloway, downtown program coordinator*

Vermont Agency of Human Services: *Sue Graff, field services director*

Vermont Chamber of Commerce: *Amy Spear, vice president of tourism*

Vermont Department for Children and Families, Economic Services Division: *Leslie Wisdom, food and nutrition program*

Vermont Department of Disabilities, Aging and Independent Living: *Mary Woodruff, nutritionist and health promotion specialist*

Vermont Division of Emergency Management: *Ben Rose, recovery & mitigation section chief*

Vermont Foodbank: *John Sayles, CEO, and Carrie Stahler, government & public affairs officer, and Tatiana Abatemarco, food security innovation lab lead*

Vermont Fresh Network: *Tara Pereira, executive director*  
Vermont Sustainable Jobs Fund: *Ellen Kahler, executive director*

## Interviewees: Out of State

AgeGuide Northeastern Illinois: *Kara Corsiglia, nutrition innovation specialist*  
Catholic Charities, Kankakee, IL: *Brandon Barrows, nutrition program manager*  
Cattmatt Software Solutions: *Lisa LaBonte, technology consultant*  
Connecticut Senior Dines Program: *Yadira Perez, senior dines coordinator*  
Michigan RMP Team: *Katie Zeiter, Andee Bowden & Edwin Bishop, department of Health & Human Services, special projects*  
New York State RMP Team: *Susan Zimet, NYS Food and Anti-Hunger policy coordinator, and Mark McMullen*  
Southern Maine Agency on Aging: *Renee Longarini, deputy director*  
Wallace Center: *Ellie Bomstein & Elizabeth Atwell, Food Systems Leadership project managers*

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## About the Author

### **Stephanie Bonin, Political Strategist and Community Organizer**

Stephanie lives in southern Vermont, where rhubarb in the spring and apples in the fall are thrilling. She adores cooking meals for her family and friends. She is a successful entrepreneur, creating and owning four restaurants in Denver, CO, & Brattleboro, VT. Stephanie is a graduate of Green Corps—a field school for environmental organizing—and a former advocate and lobbyist for Environment Colorado, advocating for positive, progressive change is in her past, present, and future. She most recently was the executive director for the Downtown Brattleboro Alliance, leading the first Everyone Eats hub in Vermont.

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#### **Beth Rodin, Community Development Project Manager: Community Development Resources Group**

Beth lives in Southern California with her husband and two young boys. She has over 20 years of community development experience, encompassing project management platform development; affordable housing development; small business incubation and support; community organizing; community-led infrastructure project development, including tree-planting initiatives, community



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### **Jean Hamilton**

Jean lives in central Vermont, where she enjoys sharing time with her family and neighbors, eating delicious local foods, and exploring this beautiful earth. She has dedicated her career to building sustainable food systems and resilient communities, with a focus on farm and food business viability, fundraising and grants management, and weaving community connections.

**Donna Brutkoski & Jamie Thaman** provided editorial support.

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