

Food Security Coalition Open Letter to Legislators 9-1-20

Dear Legislators:

Thank you for investing federal Coronavirus Relief Funds to support people in Vermont struggling to put food on the table. We appreciate those investments made during the summer legislative session, and want you to know they have been used well. They are an important first step in what we know will be a long road ahead to support neighbors facing economic uncertainty, farmers, and our local food system, all of which are facing unprecedented challenges because of this pandemic.

We are pleased to share with you [this summary](#) of how the \$16.7 million you invested in summer meals for kids and the Vermont Foodbank's efforts has been used so far.

Schools across the state, food shelves like the Worcester Community Kitchen and Food Shelf, and farms like Laughing Child Farm in Pawlet share how this funding has made all the difference over the last few months.

Hunger in Vermont is continuing to rise, and is higher than at any point during the Great Recession. With the expiration of the federal unemployment insurance boost, people out of work are facing the cold season with even less money in their bank accounts to pay for basic needs like food, heat, and housing. Additionally, the federal Farmers to Families food box program, which has been bringing 1.6 million pounds of fresh food per month to Vermonters in need, is expected to end by November. Our neighbors facing hunger and Vermont's local farmers who have been relying on this support will be looking for somewhere to turn. As the Legislature develops the state budget for fiscal year 2021 and continues to monitor and appropriate federal Coronavirus Relief Funds, the Food Security Coalition is asking for your continued investment to address the rapid rise in food insecurity, to offset the high costs faced by food access programs, and to maintain critical markets for local farmers by supporting the purchasing and distribution of as much local food as possible to Vermonters who need it -- in their schools, childcare programs, and homes.

Specifically, we ask that you support the following:

1. All of the recommendations in [this report](#) from the Agency of Education about how to continue to support school nutrition programs with the remaining funds from the \$12 million appropriated to the summer meal program
2. The Vermont Foodbank's request for \$500,000 for [Vermonters Feeding Vermonters](#) for FY21 so that they can continue to support people facing hunger as well as local farmers by purchasing meat, dairy, eggs, and produce directly from Vermont farmers and producers at market rates in the coming year
3. The Governor's recommendation to level-fund the Farm to School & Early Childhood Grant program, as well as an additional \$100,000 in Coronavirus Relief funding added to this program to help early childhood providers and schools address specific needs for outdoor learning spaces and other new expenses required to adapt educational needs and meal programs due to COVID-19

Supporting School Nutrition Programs

Schools nutrition programs are continuing to shoulder large increased costs as they strive to serve children in need during the pandemic. Not only are the prices for food increasing, but schools must invest in new packaging and equipment in order to safely reach all students with quality meals both in classrooms and at home. A hybrid instructional model requires a hybrid

school meal delivery model, which requires additional labor, and many schools will continue to spend money on transportation in the remaining week before school starts and during the school year. We enthusiastically support AOE's recommendations, which would help cover these rising costs, and support the creative ways that schools are adapting programs so students in need can access nutritious food in a way that preserves equity and dignity - like maintaining the universal school meals model that all schools in Vermont adopted in the spring. Schools are planning and making purchases now. We want to underscore AOE's request that funding for schools moving to a universal school meals model in response to COVID-19 needs to be distributed as quickly as possible in order for schools to utilize this opportunity within federal deadlines that are rapidly approaching. Keeping the appropriated funds within the school meal programs is crucial to ensure that schools can meet their students' needs and help them have the food they need to learn and stay healthy.

Investing in Local Food through Vermonters Feeding Vermonters

As the Vermont Foodbank continues to distribute more food each month than ever before due to the pandemic, Vermonters Feeding Vermonters (VFV) has emerged as a critical tool to bridge the gap between skyrocketing food insecurity rates and market losses for local farmers and distributors. Thanks to the Coronavirus Relief Funds that you invested in the Vermont Foodbank, they were able to dramatically expand this program that purchases local food for people facing hunger. VFV now purchases local meat, dairy, and eggs, in addition to fresh produce and has grown by more than 360%. Please refer to [this flyer](#) for more details about how VFV works and has made a difference during the pandemic. This program has been critical in meeting the increased need and keeping the shelves stocked with fresh, nutritious food at local food shelves in every county in the state. That need will continue to grow in 2021 as temporary new programs like the Farmers to Families Food Box program and Everyone Eats wrap up in late 2020. \$500,000 will enable the Foodbank to continue to make these purchases in the second half of FY21 and support local producers and people facing hunger through the winter and spring.

Farm to School and Early Childhood Grants for Adapting Learning and Meal Models

The Vermont Farm to School and Early Childhood Grants program is ready to support schools and early childhood providers as they adapt their education models to provide more outdoor learning opportunities. Outdoor learning creates new opportunities to incorporate Farm to School curriculum and help students build lasting connections with locally grown food, composting, and more. This grants program is established and nimble. It is familiar to schools and early childhood providers, and it is poised to distribute grants before the end of the 2020 to schools and providers who are adapting their educational models and meal programs in response to COVID-19. The Vermont Agency of Agriculture Food and Markets has indicated that they have the capacity to distribute \$100,000 in grant funding before the end of the year, in addition to the annual appropriation for the Grants program that will be distributed throughout FY21.

We welcome the opportunity to discuss these requests in more detail. Thank you for your partnership in making sure that Vermonters are able to access the nutritious food they need to remain healthy, that schools, early childhood providers, and food shelves are able to support their communities safely, and that Vermont farms remain viable as we continue to respond to this ongoing crisis.

Attachments:

[August 2020 Report on initial impact of CRF\\$ to support food security](#)

[AOE Report on Act 136 Coronavirus Relief Funds for Summer Meal Delivery](#)
[Vermonters Feeding Vermonters Flyer](#)

Sincerely,

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