HUNGER FREE VERMONT

38 Eastwood Drive, Suite 100
South Burlington, VT 05403

P: (802) 865-0255
F: (802) 865-0266
HungerFreeVT.org

Mariana Lamaison Sears
3SquaresVT Awareness Day
February 5th, 2026
Senate Health and Welfare

My name is Mariana Lamaison Sears, I live in Essex Junction and I work for Hunger Free Vermont as the Community Engagement and Outreach Lead.

I am here to ask that you support the following three requests for fiscal year 2027:

- NOFA-VT, $500,000 in the Crop Cash (Plus) and Farm Share programs(more info here)
- Vermont Foodbank, request for $5 million (including $2 million to support their network of partners, $2 million for the Vermonters Feeding Vermonters local food purchasing program, and $1 million for Ready Response to ensure food access in disasters and emergencies more info here)
- Please fully fund the administrative costs needed for state fiscal year 2027 to counter federal funding changes and keep 3SquaresVT available and accessible to people in Vermont.

I included the three requests because combined they ensure Vermont stays on the road for achieving food Security for all in 2035, as stated in the Vermont Food Security Roadmap. Funding one request and not the other does not make sense because these programs are complementary to each other and fit all together as the pieces of a puzzle. Funding for all these programs is key.

In my role for Hunger Free Vermont, I have been leading a pilot outreach program called the Food Navigators for the past year. The program aims to bring information about 3SquaresVT and other food resources and programs to communities of immigrants and refugees, in their own languages, and by their own people. The five Food Navigators piloting the program are indeed all immigrants and between them all speak 9 languages, including: English, Spanish, Arabic, French, May May, Somali, Swahili, Pashto and Dari. They all live in Chittenden county and are deeply engaged in their communities, attending places of worship, schools, soccer clubs, etc! In their role as Food Navigators, they have been in touch with relatives, neighbors, friends, co workers and clients to inform about available resources and programs. They have also listened and learned of concerns, and collected the feedback that I am sharing.

Back in the fall, communities faced a great deal of uncertainty about 3SquaresVT, both due to federal eligibility changes and on top, from the government shutdown. In a fast-moving and challenging landscape, the state had to roll out changes quickly and information was evolving in real time. While the state worked to respond under difficult circumstances, people enrolled in 3SquaresVT often experienced unclear or conflicting notices, and long wait times for help—making an already stressful moment even harder to navigate. For families depending on these benefits to supplement their food budgets, uncertainty turned into anxiety. And that anxiety turned into fear when benefits were finally discontinued from many participants, impacting entire households. As an immigrant myself, I can testify that there is a huge amount of adjustment and constant recalculation that goes along with your daily life when things are simply fine and uneventful. I can only imagine a portion of what folks must have been feeling with so much collective uncertainty.

Navigators told us of the language and cultural barriers their community members had to face to visit local food shelves or community meal sites to get food once benefits were ended, yet this was what prevented them from

going hungry. Combined with the high prices for food and other basic necessities, communities of immigrants in Vermont were and are clearly experiencing severe food insecurity.

With knowledge and willingness, navigators supported individuals and families and brought them closer to solutions, to the available programs and resources we are asking you today to please continue to fund! Navigators have:

- accompanied first timers to local pantries and to farmers market to learn how to use Crop Cash coupons, helping SNAP participants stretch their benefits
- they have sat down to help sort out rules for those eligible to continue to access benefits
- they have taken first steps to fill out applications and make initial phone calls for individuals to access access programs like 3SquaresVT, Farm Share and others
- they have attended events to interpret and make relevant information accessible to everyone

These programs are providing members of immigrant communities access to food so they can live a healthy and meaningful life. Well fed people are enthusiastic to work, play, shop and participate in social, business and civic activities! In the beautiful and bountiful agricultural land we call Vermont, having people experience food insecurity is an outcome we should not allow.

We urge you to please support our request to fund:

- NOFA-VT, for $500,000 for local food access programs
- Vermont Foodbank, for $5 million
- The administrative costs needed for state fiscal year 2027 to counter federal funding changes and keep 3SquaresVT available and accessible to people in Vermont

Thank you so much for your attention and I am happy to answer any questions you might have!