

Good afternoon. Thank you for this opportunity to speak with you today. My name is Faye Conte, and I am the Advocacy and Education Director at Hunger Free Vermont. We are a statewide outreach and advocacy organization dedicated to ending the injustice of hunger and malnutrition for all Vermonters and work in close collaboration with our partners in New England and around the country. I would first like to thank you all for the good work you are doing as a Commission, and for taking the time to travel around the country and listen to the public about what they see on the ground as millions of Americans struggle to put healthy food on their tables.

Hunger is one of the most universal challenges facing our nation. It appears in nearly every community in the United States, rural and urban. Individuals and families of all shapes and sizes struggle to afford enough food. Access to higher education, owning a home, or even having a job, do not protect you from food insecurity. There is no subset of our population, whether it be children, those who are working, veterans, or the elderly, who are safe from hunger. Today, I would like to take some time to talk about the seniors who face hunger in Vermont and throughout the country.

Too many of our elders face an uncertain future in which they may not be able to afford the nutritious food so greatly needed to maintain their health and independence as they age. As we all know, the senior population is growing exponentially as the Baby Boom generation enters into retirement age. In Vermont, seniors are the fastest growing population group; the population of Vermonters aged 60 and over is expected to grow by about 50% between 2010 and 2020. At the same time, the population of Vermonters aged 0-59 is expected to decrease by nearly 6%. As the number of seniors in our state increases, the percentage of these seniors who go hungry is also growing. In fact, senior hunger is rising more rapidly than any other population in Vermont, and is rising faster than the poverty rate as well. Post-recession, from 2012-2013, hunger decreased for children and for Vermonters as a whole, but senior hunger grew.

The seniors that I have worked with are proud, self-reliant, and incredibly generous. Most who are struggling do not want to ask for help; they have provided for their families their entire adult lives and feel ashamed that they can no longer do so. Many of our older seniors remember the Great Depression, and compare their situation to their childhood, concluding that they aren't that really aren't that bad off. In Bennington, Vermont, we met a veteran of World War II who serves as a volunteer driver for the Meals on Wheels program. As a volunteer, he receives a free hot lunch from the senior center after he finishes deliveries. This man himself is low-income, and before becoming a volunteer was surviving off of one sandwich a day. He shared that he had signed up to volunteer so he could help those in need in his community. He realized, through his deliveries, that he was in fact, one of those in need. He had assumed that if his budget was so tight that he was limited to one sandwich per day, that others were in the same boat and that those who were in need had even less than he. He told us how grateful he is for that extra meal on delivery days, and the difference it makes in his day. A World War II Veteran should not have to deliver Meals on Wheels in exchange for a hot lunch in order to meet his food needs. The SNAP benefits that he, and many other seniors get, is not enough to put nutritious food on the table three times a day for an entire month. Based on the Thrifty Food Plan, the benefit amounts that Vermonters receive in SNAP often run out mid-month, and certainly do not provide enough for a nutritious diet. As was mentioned earlier today, the benefit amounts are not even designed to meet the nutrition guidelines.

Younger seniors, those in their 60's and 70's, are also struggling with food insecurity. These seniors have not recovered from the recession. Many were forced into early retirement from their careers, lost their savings, their retirement income, and often their homes. Unable to afford retirement, they are now trying to piece together part-time jobs, but it's extremely difficult to re-enter the workforce this late in life. Their children and grandchildren have not recovered either, and together, they shoulder debt and remain stuck in a multi-generational cycle of poverty and hunger. These seniors have different needs than our older seniors who are retired and benefit from nutrition programs like Meals on Wheels and Congregate Meals. They are not homebound, and are not able to spend an afternoon at a senior center. These seniors are eating their meals at home, and need adequate SNAP benefits so that they can afford groceries. Instead, they are visiting the food shelf at the end of the month, cutting back on expensive fruits and vegetables, and struggle every winter to afford to both heat their homes and put food on the table.

Food insecurity is devastating to an elderly person's health and wellbeing, whether they are 60 or 80. Data from the National Health and Nutrition Examination Survey study show that food insecurity creates the same limitations on mobility and ability as a 14-year age difference. Not only does hunger impact daily life, but seniors who do not have access to nutritious meals are more susceptible to fall ill or injure themselves and end up in the hospital, and then take longer to recover. When budgets are tight, seniors must choose between paying for medication and buying food. We hear from local Emergency Responders about the calls they respond to because a senior has cut their medication dosage to try and stretch their medication or didn't take their medication with food as directed. The senior they treat then spends time in the hospital simply because they couldn't afford both medicine and food.

In a time when we are all struggling to pay for the rising cost of health care, we need to invest in programs that help keep our seniors healthy and out of the hospital. Federal nutrition programs like SNAP, Meals on Wheels, and Congregate Meals do just that. The cost of one year of Meals on Wheels for a senior is equal to that of one night in intensive care. Food is medicine, and is one of the most cost-effective ways to keep people healthy and able to contribute to our society and our economy.

Senior Centers and other organizations that serve Meals on Wheels and Congregate Meals throughout Vermont operate on show string budgets and rely on volunteers like the veteran I spoke of earlier. It takes a lot of hands to cook, package and deliver meals to the dairy farms and houses at the end of long dirt roads in our rural state. These organizations have seen their federal, state, and private funding diminish over the years, while the demand for their services continue to grow. They have filled the gaps with generous volunteers, but are losing the ability to do so. With more double income families and fewer people able to retire at 60, there are less people available to cook and deliver meals in the middle of the workday. In the end, organizations are relying on other seniors who may need services themselves to deliver meals, like the Veteran in Bennington. I delivered meals with a recent retiree last spring who said she has had to spend over \$1,000 in car repairs due to the wear and tear of driving around the back roads for the last six months. She also slipped on the ice while delivering meals in the winter and broke her arm, calling out for the senior she was serving to call 9-1-1. She shared that she loves giving back to her community in this way, but worries that she may not be able to shoulder the physical and financial cost of volunteering for much longer. As senior centers and senior organizations begin to serve both the Greatest Generation, the Baby Boomers, and everyone in between, they need to both evolve and expand their services, and they cannot do so with such limited funding.

We are doing a disservice to our parents and grandparents by not investing in their health by ensuring they have enough nutritious food. I urge the Commission to recommend strong investments in SNAP, Meals on Wheels, Congregate Meals, and the organizations that support seniors' access to these important program. We can care for our elders, allow them to age with dignity and grace, while also decreasing health care costs throughout the country. Thank you.