

Thank you for this opportunity to speak with you today. I am Marissa Parisi, Executive Director of Hunger Free Vermont which is an outreach and advocacy organization working to end the injustice of hunger and malnutrition for all Vermonters. While we're based in Vermont, we work closely and collaboratively with our neighboring states in the region and with national partners to advance the work of ending hunger in our country.

Today I would like to share some particularly positive news about the success of Vermont's use of the Community Eligibility Provision which allows qualifying schools to provide universal (free) school meals to all children regardless of their families' incomes. Advancing universal school meals has been a key strategy for Hunger Free Vermont as we have continuously seen families struggle with food insecurity yet have incomes that don't qualify their children for participation in the free or reduced price meal program. It is also continually disheartening as advocates to see families who qualify for free school meals, but refuse to fill out an application because in our small rural communities you've likely grown up with the school secretary and don't want them to know you are struggling.

In our schools today, the lunch line is the only place we separate children by socioeconomic classes. Even though the USDA and schools have implemented safeguards such as pin numbers at check out, or in one small rural Vermont school you have a Popsicle stick with your name on it, to protect the children from knowing if they are "free," "reduced," or "pay," almost every food service director in schools will tell you that children know everything about the categorization system we grownups have in place. Because of this, the children on the lower end of the scale still experience the same shame and stigma we may have felt as children if we were publicly categorized in this way.

In our 20 year history, we have frequently found ourselves in the position of helping schools manage their financial plan in their school meal programs. Food services directors deal with the daily frustration of making school meal finances work, particularly because they see hungry children coming through their lines without money, and in that moment it doesn't matter to them if they are "reduced" or "pay" kids, they feed them anyway. This creates debt in the programs which takes a lot of resources to collect. It might take as many as 10 calls to collect ten dollars from a family.

I would like to take a moment to tell you about the financial picture of the Vermont family which causes this dynamic. Vermont's Joint Fiscal Office calculates the cost of living for a Vermont family of four every year which includes only very basic needs of housing, food, transportation, utilities, child and health care. The current estimate of the cost of living for a family of 4 is over \$4200 per month. If there are two, full-time workers in the home each making Vermont's minimum wage, the family is only taking home about half that. Just to break even, two workers in the family would need to make about \$13.50 per hour and still would not have money left over for savings or for things like clothing or things like the kids field trip costs. What our joint fiscal office did not include in this calculation is that many working families have educational debt, and a lot of it! It is not uncommon to encounter two educated parents who are paying \$1000 a month in student loans on top of their basic expenses. Also, depending on your housing situation and what you use for heat your expenses for fuel deliveries can be much higher than the average I've shared. The bottom line is, families in Vermont are stretched really thin. This is particularly true in our rural areas. And while many families refuse to talk about this, we see the grocery budget being stretched and eroded at many income levels to make ends meet.

When school personnel have to collect small debts from cash strapped families it is not only stressful for them, but it is stressful for the schools particularly the financial staff who often share with us how inefficient it is for them to spend their paid time tracking down unpaid meal debt. Debt in meal programs also prevents schools from growing their meal programs and using school meal time as a nutrition learning environment. It makes it much harder for a school to buy local foods or experiment with fruit and vegetable taste testing if you're always worried about whether or not you are going to make your bottom line. The current structure of how school meals are paid for is just not working.

It is for these reasons, Hunger Free Vermont began to work in partnership with our state legislature to appropriate funds to remove the reduced price category for breakfast in 2008 and lunch in 2012. In both phases of this school meal expansion we saw as much as 79% growth in meal participation among children in this category, and in some cases schools used this additional state money to create universal breakfast programs by utilizing Provision 2. Seeing the success of these state investments made it clear to all of us at Hunger Free Vermont that universal school meals is one of the best ways to help end childhood food insecurity, remove the stigma of school meal participation, ensure all children have the nourishment to be ready to learn at school, improve the school's finances, take some pressure off family finances, and welcome more farm and food education in to school. One program can do ALL of that!

The Community Eligibility Provision became available to Vermont schools during the 14-15 school year. In September 2014, 32 schools signed up to use the program in 8 of Vermont's 14 counties serving roughly 7,000 students. Schools ranged in size from 900 students to 55 students. Most of these schools fall between 40% to 55% directly certified students from other programs. Given the way CEP is calculated, the Hunger Free Vermont team encouraged schools with higher percentages to launch the program because by our calculation we felt we could say with some certainty that their programs would be self-sustaining. Hunger Free Vermont also committed to collecting data from these schools to help them better understand the benefits and outcomes of universal meals. A Masters in Public Health intern from Dartmouth College surveyed every school in Vermont that used CEP to start universal meals last year and our initial results are very encouraging:

- 93% of schools increased breakfast participation and 97% increased lunch participation
- 100% of schools report that their school meal program finances have improved using CEP. Some school boards set aside extra funds to cover any reimbursement gap that may exist at the end of the year and none of them had to use it.
- 100% of schools report savings of administrative time

Now I would like to read you some direct quotes about the results of year one of CEP in Vermont:

"We are no longer sending out bills for families. That was a major source of anxiety for children. It's the worst part of our job—it is gigantic not to have to deal with that."

Jay Slenker, Principal

Rutland Intermediate School (625 students)

"The Universal School Meals has made a positive impact in the school culture because every morning, almost all of the students in the school go to the cafeteria together to have breakfast. This is a positive social time as well as a time for the students to eat something healthy before the official school day

begins. The students have eaten and are ready to learn each morning. The students seem more focused and are not getting distracted because they are hungry. Families seem to really appreciate the Universal School Meals. The best thing about this program is that no student goes hungry and they are all provided healthy food choices for their meals. This is a wonderful program and I hope more schools will be able to participate in the future.”

Sheila Tremblay, teacher and parent
Brighton Elementary School (90 students)

“CEP has allowed the school to offer virtually limitless fruits and vegetables of many kinds. All are fresh, and we’ve been able to support more local farms and farmers. It’s amazing! Kids just serve themselves and take what they want. The fabulous part about it is they love it.”

James Taffel, Co-Principal
Barre City Elementary & Middle School (900 students)

“Students know if they have a bill, and they feel bad—you can see it. Universal meals makes for a lot happier environment. It gives kids the opportunity to be kids without the pressure of being financially strapped or stigmatized. Kids look a lot happier and tend to be socializing more.”

Jeff Lindgren, Principal
Eden Central School (140 students)

Providing universal school meals in Vermont has changed how a generation of children experience school meals and learn good eating habits. Going forward our recommendation is broad expansion of this program so that all school districts have the opportunity to offer universal school meals as part of the overall school budget. Suggestions for doing this could include increasing the reimbursement by adjusting the multiplier now used so that schools at the lower end of the eligibility scale can use the program. This could also include allowing all schools in the country to use CEP regardless of their direct certification rates with support from their towns, state funds, or businesses as financial partners. Currently our school budgets pay for tablets, textbooks, the school bus system, all regardless of family income and food should be the same. This has an incredibly positive impact on children, but it also ripples out widely to their families, their school culture, and the community at large. We urge you to recommend broad expansion of CEP and Vermont looks forward to bragging about being the first state in the nation to offer universal school meals to all children in our state.