



Creating a food secure future for **ALL VERMONT'S CHILDREN BY 2035.**

**Strategies for Government,
Communities, and Funders**

**A detailing of Objectives G1, G2, G5, G7, G8, C2 & C3
of the Vermont Food Security Roadmap to 2035**

Authors

HUNGER FREE VERMONT

Keely Agan - Lead Author

Child Nutrition Policy Lead
kagan@hungerfreevt.org

Tim Morgan

Deputy Program Director
tmorgan@hungerfreevt.org

Erica Morrell

Meal Programs Specialist
emorrell@hungerfreevt.org

Katy Davis

Director of Training and Education

Anore Horton

Executive Director
ahorton@hungerfreevt.org

VERMONT FOODBANK

John Sayles

Chief Executive Officer
jsayles@vtfoodbank.org

Chris Meehan

Chief Community Impact Officer
cmeehan@vtfoodbank.org

Emily Cohen

Director - Community Resources
ecohen@vtfoodbank.org

Moxie Mehegan

Senior Manager of Food Access Programs
mmehegan@vtfoodbank.org

Sarah Keblin

Chief Philanthropy Officer
skeblin@vtfoodbank.org

FEEDING CHAMPLAIN VALLEY

Rob Meehan

Director
rmeehan@cvoeo.org

Emmet Mosely

Food Hub Supervisor-Addison County
emosely@cvoeo.org

A NOTE FROM HUNGER FREE VERMONT'S EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR

In March of 2023, Evan Delgado of The Turrell Fund and Beth Rusnock of National Life Group Foundation convened myself, Vermont Foodbank's John Sayles, and Feeding Champlain Valley's (then still Feeding Chittenden's) Rob Meehan to talk about "ending childhood hunger in Vermont." Thus began a unique series of conversations over two years amongst a group of funders (soon joined by Holly Morehouse of the Vermont Community Foundation) and a group of nonprofits that had been partnering on anti-hunger projects for decades.

The vision that emerged from these conversations was shaped by the long shadow of the COVID-19 pandemic, the historic creation of Vermont's state-subsidized and permanent Universal School Meals Program and child care transformation bill, the parallel creation of [the Vermont Food Security Roadmap to 2035](#), and back-to-back summers of catastrophic flooding that required our organizations to drop everything and respond. Our conversations were deeply informed by all of these concurrent events and the lessons we learned from them:

- Lessons about ending hunger that were learned—and then unlearned—during the pandemic: that it is entirely possible to quickly end hunger, that it is the government's responsibility to do so, and that feeding children is actually one of the most essential functions of our public education and public/private childcare systems.
- Lessons about the power, efficiency, and humanity of universal programs, and their many additional benefits beyond merely keeping children from going hungry at school, and families from going hungry at home.
- Lessons about who are the true experts—those who are most directly engaged with and affected by assistance programs, those who operate them, and those for whom they don't work.
- Lessons about how it is possible for federal and state programs to work well when they are properly supported and resourced.
- Lessons about how it is impossible to end hunger for children without ending hunger for whole communities—and how experiencing hunger and witnessing it around you impacts children's emotional and physical wellbeing for a lifetime.
- Lessons about how we cannot separate ending hunger in a deeply rural state like Vermont from the need to create a thriving and climate resilient farm economy.
- Lessons about how much progress we have made in creating food security in Vermont, and what the gaps are.

The great news is that every strategy described in this document is totally doable! We have learned these lessons. We have forged powerful and overlapping coalitions committed to creating true food security for everyone in Vermont, and to ensuring that every child growing up in Vermont will thrive. Yes, ending childhood hunger permanently in every corner of Vermont will take courage, dedication, collaboration, time, political will, and resources—but it absolutely can be done.

Creating a Food Secure Future for All Vermont's Children is the result of a two-year process, working with an extensive group of committed partners who together hold a vast collective wealth of expertise. This set of strategies, embedded within the Vermont Food Security Roadmap to 2035, is what we are saying collaboratively must be done to bring a permanent, dignified, and equitable end to child hunger in Vermont in the next 10 years. We have identified the scope and scale of childhood hunger in Vermont, assessed the barriers to food access, and developed a range of strategies to ensure that every child in Vermont has a food secure future. In accordance with our missions, our analysis of current available data, and the findings from our 2024 stakeholder process, we are already in action addressing the needs of Vermont's most vulnerable children, families, and childcare providers.

We are profoundly grateful to all who contributed their time, energy, and brilliance to the creation of these strategies, and we are confident that they lay the path to creating food security for all Vermont's children. We invite you to walk it with us.

A handwritten signature in black ink, reading "Anore Horton". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a large initial "A" and "H".

Anore Horton, Executive Director
Hunger Free Vermont

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Pathways to Creating a Food Security Future for All Vermont's Children by 2035

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Hunger Free Vermont, Vermont Foodbank, Feeding Champlain Valley, the Vermont Early Childhood Advocacy Alliance, and a number of other anti-hunger partners and child nutrition professionals have worked together to map this series of strategic pathways that together lead to the creation of a food secure future for All Vermont's Children. These strategies vary in scale and complexity. When implemented together, they create the conditions for true food security in every Vermont family raising children, and in every education and care setting where children learn, develop, and play. These strategies reflect the input of a broad and diverse range of stakeholders and experts, and are rooted in a careful analysis of Vermont and national data – as well as in a practical understanding of the real conditions experienced by families, service providers, and state agency staff. They are deliberately integrated into the Vermont Food Security Roadmap to 2035, and meant to be carried out as part of that larger project.

The range of strategies revealed through a year of informational interviews and careful validation of ideas with multiple stakeholders calls for a series of interconnected actions – some short-term and many longer-term, some to change policy, and some to create and bolster community opportunities. This document is not a report, but rather a flexible tool to guide collective action. A critical next task for the lead project partners and committed stakeholders is to collaboratively develop the vision, principles, message frames, and branding that will make it possible for us to build a flexible coalition inspired to take the actions required to fulfill these strategies.

With this context in mind, it is also important to acknowledge the challenging political climate and escalating attacks on basic needs support programs, including food access programs, as we are publishing this document in November of 2025. In this challenging context, it is more important than ever to elevate the importance of federal child nutrition programs such as the National School Lunch Program, the School Breakfast Program, and the Child and Adult Care Food Program as critical supports for child food security.

Two Thirds of Vermont Children Are At Risk of Hunger

We envision a future where every child—and every family raising children—is food secure. For many children in Vermont, food security is out of reach, putting their development and future at risk.

In 2025, approximately 79,000 Vermont children, about $\frac{2}{3}$ of all kids in the state, are at risk of hunger because they live in households not able to afford all their basic needs. Of these children, more than 40,000 (approximately $\frac{1}{3}$) live in households over the income limit to qualify for SNAP (3SquaresVT), and approximately 14,000 also do not qualify for Dr Dynasaur (Vermont's expanded Medicaid program for children). This means our strategies must include the critical work of connecting children and families to these essential federal programs, and they must also go beyond them.

As the cost of many fundamental basic needs have increased in the state and nation-wide, incomes are not keeping pace and the number of families and kids at risk of hunger is rising. However, clear and sustained government intervention in Vermont is addressing these costs and other barriers to food access for families, and laying foundations that we can build on.

Strategies to Ensure a Food Secure Future for All Vermont Kids

In collaboration with nearly 100 stakeholders, we have identified the following 14 strategies as central levers for creating a food secure future for All Vermont's Children. Committed action toward fulfilling these initiatives will immediately help build a better future for Vermont children; one where kids have the food they need to live, learn, and play in their home and care or education setting, and where families are freed from the terrible stress of worrying about how to adequately nourish their children.

I. Strategies for ensuring food security for children at home

1. Expand efforts to reach Vermont's lowest-income families with dignified and convenient access to food through the charitable food system.
2. Connect more low-income families with 3SquaresVT by ensuring every eligible family in Vermont has the information and support they need to enroll.
3. Pass legislation to improve the adequacy of Reach Up payments to the lowest income single parent households.
4. Expand Non-congregate Summer Meals.
5. Build a successful, permanent Summer EBT program.
6. Leverage Healthcare to Recognize and Alleviate Food Insecurity.

II. Strategies for ensuring food security for children at home

1. Continue and expand Vermont's Universal School Meals Program.
2. Make CACFP fully functional for Early Childhood Education programs.
3. Expand afterschool and summer meals.
4. Build robust training and education for Child Nutrition Programs.
5. Invest in the Child Nutrition Program workforce.
6. Eliminate structural barriers to school meal programs.
7. Provide accessible, culturally, and religiously responsive meals in Child Nutrition Programs.
8. Invest in Farm to School & Early Childhood.

We Are Already Taking Action

Child hunger is an emergency every day for the Vermont families experiencing it. Building on an ongoing commitment to address this reality, Hunger Free Vermont, Vermont Foodbank, and Feeding Champlain Valley worked together during the final months of 2024 through January of 2025 to analyze all of the qualitative and quantitative information we gathered through our stakeholder engagement process, combined with a careful review of state and national data. From this, priority needs and opportunities for action emerged, leading us to assemble a set of first steps aligned with these strategies. We "truth-tested" these action priorities with the most affected groups and organizations in our state, and we have now begun to advance them.

2025 Priorities that Emerged from the Process of Creating this Plan

- Provide immediate Technical Assistance & Outreach Pathways to expand summer and afterschool meal programming. (Strategies I.4 & II.3)
- Enact State supplemental payments to the organizations that serve as sponsors for family daycare homes to use the federal Child and Adult Care Food Program (CACFP) to provide free meals. (Strategy II.2)
- Pass legislation to improve the adequacy of Reach Up payments to the lowest-income single parent households. (Strategy I.3)
- Work with the Child Development Division (CDD), the Child Nutrition Department at the Agency of Education (AOE), the Department of Health, and other relevant State agency departments and divisions to change the approach to licensing and onboarding new childcare and early learning providers so that the federal Child and Adult Care Food Program (CACFP) is included as an opportunity throughout the process. (Strategy II.2)
- Expand pilot efforts to reach Vermont's lowest-income families with dignified and convenient access to the culturally appropriate foods they need and want through the charitable food system. (Strategy I.1)
- Vermont Foodbank will host a series of community conversations to better understand the needs of school communities and identify more sustainable food security solutions. Insights from these conversations will inform strategies to direct resources more effectively, foster innovative partnerships with schools and community organizations, and strengthen local partners' capacity to address food insecurity. (Strategy I.1)
- Build partnerships with State agencies and coalition members to collect and compile the right data in usable forms. Build agreement for what kind of data we need, determine whether or not it is currently available, and build a process for regularly compiling and analyzing it. (Supports all strategies)
- Bring additional inspired partners and funders into this developing coalition, establish our vision, principles, and key message frames, and publicly launch a multi-year and multi-strategy "campaign." (Supports all strategies)

As with all of the strategies described in this report, the initiatives that we are prioritizing and currently working on vary in complexity and scale. Some initiatives may succeed with quick legislative action, while others will take several years of collaboration among many organizations. Nonprofit organizations and state agencies will have to work together and commit additional staff time and other resources to achieve these priorities and all of the strategies presented in this Strategic Plan.

The Strategies with Creating a Food Secure Future for All Vermont's Children are Nested Within the Vermont Food Security Roadmap

[The Vermont Food Security Roadmap](#) to 2035 is the result of a two-year collaborative process involving over 600 Vermonters. The Roadmap lays out the goals, objectives, and strategies that, if enacted, will create food security for everyone in Vermont, along with a thriving and climate-resilient agricultural sector, by 2035. Hunger Free Vermont and Vermont Foodbank are two of the organizations on the Steering Committee, and we helped to write and launch this inspiring Roadmap.

Fulfilling the Vermont Food Security Roadmap and Creating a Food Secure Future for All Vermont's Children will both require sustained effort over time, and are deeply intertwined. Creating a Strategic Plan to Create a Food Secure Future for All Vermont's Children – and then the building of coalitions to carry out these strategies – is one of the first, critical actions emerging to fulfill the vision of the Roadmap. Each of the 14 strategies detailed in this Strategic Plan is deliberately aligned with one or more of the broader objectives of the Vermont Food Security Roadmap.

Roadmap objective G5.3 (p. 25), for example, focuses on ensuring children in Vermont have access to free, nutritionally and culturally appropriate meals in any/all communal places of care and education – including, but not limited to, child care, early childhood education, school, after school, and summer programs. This strategy encompasses two of the gaps we have identified where children in Vermont are experiencing hunger: in childcare programs that do not provide meals, and in the “third spaces” of after school and summer.

There are many other Roadmap objectives that, if advanced, will speed the elimination of childhood hunger at home. This is particularly true of families with children that do not have enough income and other supports necessary to meet all of their basic needs and are continuously at risk of experiencing hunger. Here, many different and coordinated actions are needed, as they are named in the Roadmap:

Objective G1 (pp 16-17) The State guarantees Vermonters have the necessary financial resources to meet their basic needs.

Objective G2 (pp 18-19) Access 100% of federal funding available for Vermonters by completing a streamlined, accessible enrollment system.

Objective G5 (pp 24-25) Ensure consistent, dignified access to nourishing, adequate, culturally responsive food, today and in the future.

Objective G7 (pp 28-29) Make impactful investments in transportation in rural and urban Vermont.

Objective G8 (pp 30-31) Utilize the healthcare system to identify and alleviate food insecurity.

Objective C2 (pp 42-43) Expand local collaboration for effective delivery of daily and emergency food security resources.

Objective C3 (pp 44-45) Improve local food access while working on full food security in Vermont.

Understanding that *Creating a Food Secure Future for All Vermont's Children* is nested within the Vermont Food Security Roadmap to 2035—and that fulfilling on one requires fulfilling on the other—is essential for us to achieve success. We are launching the next breakthrough 10-year vision that will transform the State of Vermont so that all who live here can thrive—alongside and within Vermont's farms, businesses, and communities.

Acknowledging our stakeholders and process

Over 10 months in 2024, Hunger Free Vermont led a stakeholder engagement process to gather the most current data regarding childhood and family hunger in Vermont and the state of meal provision in childcare and education settings. We collected and “truth-tested” strategic, systemic, and actionable solutions to childhood hunger where it exists in homes and in the places where children spend their days. This has involved focus groups with 30 childcare providers of all sizes from all regions of the state, and informational interviews with over 25 organizational and institutional stakeholders, including:

The Vermont Foodbank (Collaborator)

Feeding Champlain Valley (Collaborator)

The Vermont Early Childhood Advocacy Alliance (Strategic Partner)

Let’s Grow Kids

The Vermont Parent-Child Center Network

The Vermont Farm to School & Early Childhood Network

Vermont Afterschool

Building Bright Futures

The Vermont Association for the Education of Young Children

CACFP Sponsor Organizations

First Children’s Finance

Public Assets Institute

Voices for Vermont’s Children

Child Development Division of VT Agency of Human Services

Economic Services Division of VT Agency of Human Services

WIC Department of VT Department of Health

Child Nutrition Department of VT Agency of Education

In addition, throughout 2023 and 2024, Vermont Foodbank undertook a community engagement process consisting of 81 Community Conversations with 250 participants in three key regions of the state. The high-level challenges and themes related to childhood food security that came out of that engagement include: 1) Transportation Barriers: 2) Affordability and Financial Strain 3) Stigma and Social Barriers 4) Food Quality and Variety, and, 5) Operational and Infrastructure Limitations. These priorities align with feedback provided through Hunger Free Vermont’s 2024 focus groups and informational interviews, and are integrated into the 14 strategies presented in this Strategic Plan.

Pathways to creating a food secure future for all Vermont's children

The set of effective strategies that emerged from our stakeholder engagement process can be understood as aligning along two parallel pathways. One, we can ensure youth food security by growing, improving, and expanding upon existing child nutrition and food access programs to serve more meals to more children. Two, we must engage in innovative and novel approaches to make food more accessible, including removing barriers to what is already available.

PROGRAMMATIC EXPANSIONS TO FEED MORE KIDS

- Universal approaches to meal programs.
- Expand efforts to reach Vermont's lowest-income families with dignified and convenient access to food through the charitable food system.
- Expand afterschool and summer meals.
- Make CACFP fully functional for early childhood education programs.
- Eliminate structural barriers to school meal programs.
- Pass legislation to improve the adequacy of Reach-Up payments to the lowest-income single parent households.
- Build a successful, permanent Summer EBT program.

INNOVATIONS TO MAKE FOOD MORE ACCESSIBLE

- Connect more low-income families with 3SquaresVT.
- Expand non-congregate summer meals.
- Expand food access through healthcare.
- Build robust training and education for child nutrition programs.
- Invest in the child nutrition program workforce and professional development networks.
- Provide accessible and culturally responsive meals in child nutrition programs.
- Invest in farm to school and early childhood.



Funders as Key Stakeholders in the Creation and Fulfillment of a Food Secure Future for All Vermont's Children

Although we firmly believe that it is the responsibility of government to ensure that state systems and local communities have the resources and support they need to create permanent and dignified food security for everyone, right now, we are far from realizing this fundamental right. In the current context, private philanthropy has a key role to play in partnering with advocates, experts, direct service providers, and communities to resource the creative strategies that can mitigate hunger today and chart the path to a permanent end to hunger in the future.

A similar collaborative process created Let's Grow Kids and supported a 10-year plan that transformed the entire childcare and early childhood education system in Vermont and made childcare affordable for a majority of Vermont families for the first time. We have come together with some of the same funders now to affirm that the next basic need that must be tackled to create a sustainable and thriving future for Vermont is food security. The Vermont Food Security Roadmap to 2035 and nested within it, Creating a Food-Secure Future for All Vermont's Children, is the next visionary 10-year effort we need now.

Creating a Food Secure Future for All Vermont's Children is a collaboration between a nascent group of funders and a collective of community service providers, professional associations, government agencies, and advocates. Together we are exploring new ways of partnering to advance these strategies, and new ways to fund collaborative work.



The Turrell Fund, National Life Group Foundation, and the Vermont Community Foundation are working together to support the early stages of this project, design and implement a funding “container” suitable for a long-term collaborative effort led by multiple organizations, and inspire other funders to join in the noble and critical work of making sure that no child goes hungry. Consider this document your invitation to join us!

Understanding Child Hunger & Food Security in Vermont



WE ENVISION A FUTURE WHERE EVERY CHILD-AND EVERY FAMILY RAISING CHILDREN-IS FOOD SECURE. According to the United Nations, “food security exists when all people, at all times, have physical, social, and economic access to sufficient, safe and nutritious food preferences for an active and healthy life.”¹ For many children in Vermont, food security is out of reach, putting their development and future at risk.

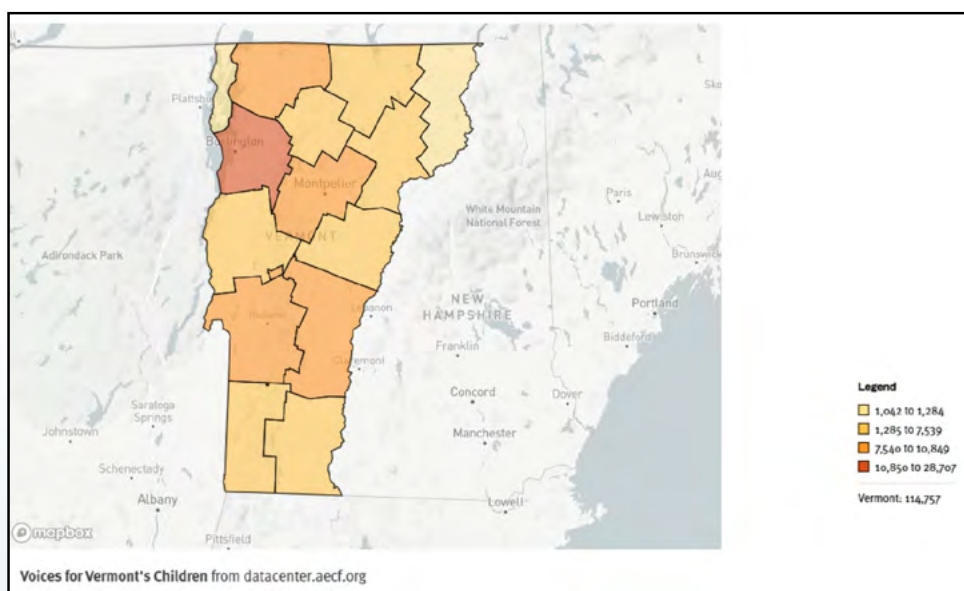
Understanding the conditions of food security for children in the state, those who remain at risk of hunger, the progress we have made in addressing this risk, and the perilous moment we are in are essential to executing these strategies effectively over the next decade.

Food and financial security among households with children in the United States is declining. In the wake of the pandemic and dramatic food inflation over the last half-decade, more families are struggling to make ends meet and to have enough of the right food to support a healthy life. According to the American Academy of Pediatrics and the Food Research & Action Center, “Food insecurity—even marginal food insecurity—is detrimental to children’s health, development, and well-being.”²

This section details the risk of hunger currently faced by Vermont children, the progress we have already made in addressing it, and the positive effect of government-led and coordinated intervention.

Children and Teens in Vermont

The US Census Bureau estimates that there are 127,140 children in Vermont, approximately 22% of Vermont Children are below school age (younger than 5), 41% between 5 and 12 years old, and 36% are teens between 13 and 18 years old.³ The map depicts the distribution of children in Vermont by county.



CHILDREN AT RISK OF HUNGER IN VERMONT

In research, the risk of hunger in the United States is most directly measured as *Food Insecurity*, defined by USDA as being “unable to procure adequate food because of insufficient money or other resources.”⁴ Measurements of food insecurity are based on a set survey questionnaire that was developed by the Census Bureau and USDA. Historically, this measurement has been taken annually by the Census Bureau as a supplement of the Current Population Survey and the survey module is used by academic and other independent researchers. This measurement demonstrates the choices that households are consciously making to curtail or change food purchasing due to a lack of resources and helps us identify the families most at risk of hunger in the state.

In Vermont, the most recent food insecurity surveys were conducted by researchers at the University of Vermont. Their last survey, conducted in 2022, found that **40% of people in Vermont experienced food insecurity in the preceding year, with families with children far more likely to be food insecure.**⁵

Updated 2024 survey data from UVM researchers shows that in Vermont, households at risk of hunger are more likely to be headed by younger people and women, have lower incomes, include children, include someone with a disability, be LGBTQ+, and/or lack a car.⁶ Fifty-seven percent of households at risk of hunger were enrolled in SNAP (3SquaresVT), while forty-three percent were not.⁷

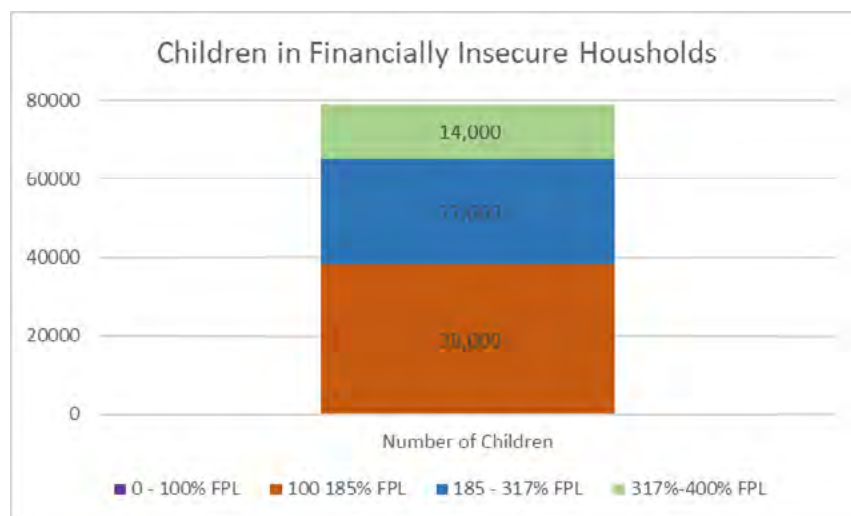
Many Vermont families at risk of hunger are not eligible for federal nutrition assistance, such as SNAP and other food access programs, because their incomes are too high. Food insecurity surveys, while important, are unable to fully demonstrate the ability of households with children to afford meeting their most basic needs, including food because they focus on only one need rather than the whole picture.

Poverty & Basic Needs

The Federal Poverty Level (FPL) is used to determine income eligibility for many government programs. Families that make at or below 185% of the FPL are income-eligible for 3SquaresVT (known as SNAP nationally), WIC, and Free and Reduced-Price Meals in the federal child nutrition programs. Children are eligible for Dr Dynasaur (Medicaid/CHIP) in Vermont at 317% of FPL.

Research that has sought to measure the financial conditions necessary to meet basic needs from the Economic Policy Institute, Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT), and others has found that families with children need to earn far more than these thresholds to be able to afford meeting all their basic needs. On average, families with kids need to earn **400% of the Federal Poverty Level** or \$128,600 annually (in 2025 dollars) for the most common household compositions in order to make a living wage in Vermont.

In 2025, approximately **79,000 Vermont children, about ⅓ of all kids in the state, are at risk of hunger because they live in households not able to afford all their basic needs**, with incomes below 400% of the FPL. Of these children, **more than 40,000 (51%)** live in households over the income limit to qualify for 3SquaresVT, and approximately **14,000 (18%)** also do not qualify for Dr Dynasaur.



As the cost of many fundamental basic needs have increased in the state and nation-wide, incomes are not keeping pace and the number of families and kids at risk of hunger is rising. However, clear and sustained government intervention in Vermont is addressing these costs and other barriers to food access for families, and laying foundations that we can build on.

COORDINATED AND SUSTAINED INTERVENTION CAN ELIMINATE CHILD HUNGER

During the Covid-19 pandemic, many federal assistance programs were expanded, including school meals programs, child tax credits, SNAP, and Medicaid. Research from the Census Bureau and USDA showed that these expansions prevented millions of families with children from experiencing food insecurity and poverty in the US. As those programs expired and the nation experienced a period of steep food inflation, USDA's analysis found that the number of households with children nationwide experiencing food insecurity increased 41% from 2021 to 2023, and child poverty skyrocketed after hitting an historic low in 2021.^{8,9}

The additional interventions in-place during the pandemic clearly demonstrate that robust and accessible assistance programs are deeply effective at reducing child hunger. It is clear that a robust and far-reaching plan to address food security for children is clearly needed.

We have already taken some decisive and deeply impactful action to address the risk of hunger for children in Vermont. The state is directly addressing the cost of living for families with kids with the Vermont Child Tax Credit and major expansion of the Child Care Financial Assistance Program (CCFAP). These interventions are dealing with other major costs for families, and allowing the income earned to meet other needs, including food.

Vermont has long been a leader in feeding kids in congregate settings, too, and we continue to see powerful intervention and innovation here. Vermont's Universal School Meals Program has ensured that no public school child has had to pay for school breakfast or lunch since March 2020, and we are already seeing the benefits of this program. New research evaluating the outcomes of universal school meals legislation in states has found that states implementing the policy have lower rates of food insecurity among families with kids, especially among families qualified for free or reduced-price meals.¹⁰ The federal child nutrition programs that feed kids at school, in early childhood settings, after school, and over the summer still have significant room for growth.

HOW VERMONT CHILDREN ARE GETTING FED

Feeding Kids Where They Learn & Play

There are four federal Child Nutrition programs that feed kids in the settings where they learn and play. The National School Lunch and School Breakfast Programs (NSLP and SBP, respectively) feed kids at school, the Child and Adult Care Food Program (CACFP) feeds kids in early childhood programs and afterschool programs, and the Summer Food Service Program (SFSP) feeds kids over the summer. Collectively, these programs provided 18 million meals to children in the state in the 2024 federal fiscal year.

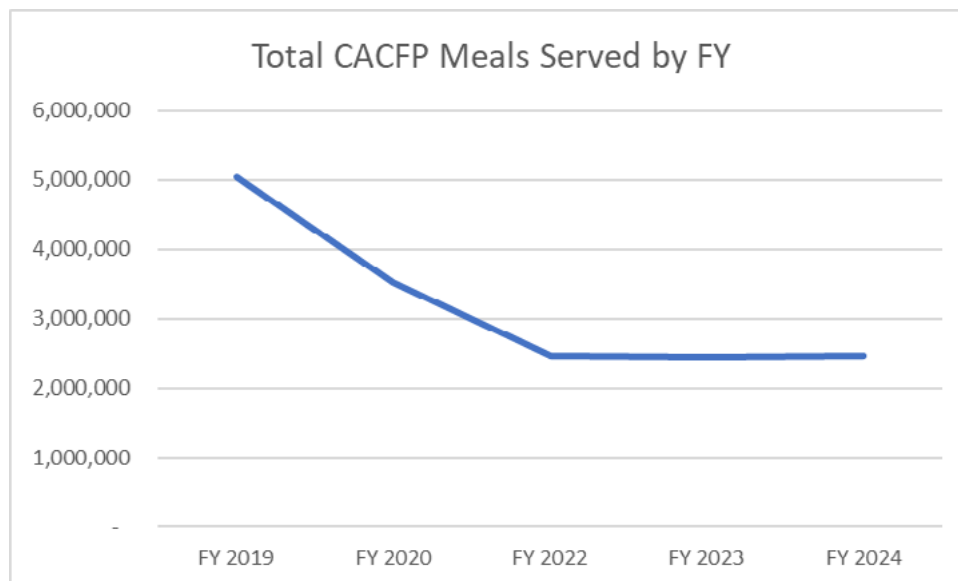
Program	Meals Served	Average Daily Participation ¹¹
School Lunch (NSLP)	8.91 million	51,784
School Breakfast (SBP)	5.65 million	32,423
Summer Meals (SFSP)	1.06 million	10,747
Early Childhood Meals (CACFP)	2.20 million	3,116
Afterschool Meals (CACFP)	264,000	1,509

In Vermont, all public schools participate in the federal school meal programs, as well as many independent schools, and all public school students receive meals free of charge at school because of Vermont's Universal School Meals law. Since implementing Universal School Meals, schools are serving 2.5 million more meals to kids annually.

The Summer Food Service Program (SFSP) serves free meals to kids 0-18 at approx. 175 sites throughout the state over the summer, when school is out of session, and at many summer camps for enrolled kids. Locations must be "area eligible" to participate in this program, meaning they are in areas with high concentrations of low-income children. This program historically fed only kids on site like other CN programs, but the program can now provide to-go meals and multi-day 'meal kits' in rural locations. This new program option has helped to dramatically increase the reach of the program, which has grown from serving 450,000 meals in 2019 to more than one million in 2024.

Afterschool Meals through CACFP use similar site eligibility rules to SFSP, but the program lags far behind, with only about one third of the total locations, and far fewer children served. The program has some additional requirements that sites must meet, and along with meals in early childhood settings, there are struggles with the administrative burden of CACFP.

The Child and Adult Care Food Program has seen declines in participation in Vermont and Nationwide. Approximately half of child care programs were participating in the CACFP before the COVID-19 pandemic in Vermont, but *as of January 2024, less than 36% of all licensed child care programs in the state were participating in the CACFP.* The number of meals served with CACFP in Vermont has also decreased significantly since 2019. In 2024, less than half of the total number of meals were served compared to 2019.



The most recent data shows that there are 900 licensed and registered child care providers in Vermont, with a licensed capacity of 22,965 children. Of those 900 programs, only 319—with a capacity of 6,719 children—participate in CACFP. If all 900 programs participated, 16,246 more children would have consistent access to nutritious, developmentally appropriate meals during the child care day. According to a national study about CACFP participation from the USDA, participation has been drastically decreasing over the past two decades, especially with Family Day Care Homes.¹² There are a variety of reasons for this decline, including program closures, reimbursements not adequately covering meal program costs, and administrative/paperwork barriers. Refer to Appendix A of this report for additional detail about CACFP participation, successes, and barriers at a statewide level.

Despite the challenges of meal programming in early childhood education settings, CACFP remains the most equitable way for children to access nutrition in child care. We must come up with creative solutions to support more early childhood education programs in participating in the program and identify workable solutions when CACFP is not a viable option.

Feeding Kids at Home

There are multiple food access programs available for families with children to help buy food, including 3SquaresVT (known federally as SNAP), WIC, and Summer EBT. There are also other programs that address other basic needs, and many Vermonters also utilize the charitable food system to supplement their food budget. The remainder of this section outlines the reach of the three food assistance programs.

3SquaresVT (SNAP) is the largest food assistance program in the state and the nation, including for children. In Vermont, 64,000 people participate in 3SquaresVT, receiving a food benefit every month to use at participating grocery stores, convenience stores, and farmers markets. Vermonters with incomes below 185% of the Federal Poverty Level can qualify to receive a benefit, but many more people are income eligible than participate in the program. In September 2025, 18,531 children, living in 9,216 households, received 3SquaresVT benefits, with an average household benefit of \$559.¹³ Households with kids receive approximately \$5.2 million in 3SquaresVT benefits each month.

The Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program for Women, Infants, and Children, commonly known as WIC, is administered in Vermont by the Department of Health. WIC serves infants, children up to age 5, and women who are pregnant, postpartum, or breastfeeding, and it combines a food benefit with health services. According to the Vermont Department of Health, there are 10,521 participants in WIC as of October 2025 and approximately 38% of infants and 33% of children in Vermont participate in the program.¹⁴ For chestfeeding parents, the average monthly WIC benefit is \$11 for fresh fruits and vegetables, and \$4-\$8 for fully-chestfeeding infants. For children, the average benefit is \$9 per child for ages 1-4, plus a cash-value voucher of \$26 per month for fruit and vegetables, according to the USDA. WIC is limited in its reach by many barriers, including limited information access & services.

Summer EBT is a very new program, started in 2024, that helps families buy groceries during the summer months when school is not in session and school meals aren't available. Children eligible for free or reduced-price meals in the state qualify for the program. Currently, families that qualify receive \$120 per eligible child. Approximately 20,000 households with 35,000 children receive \$4 million of benefits each year.¹⁵

WHY WE MUST CREATE A FOOD SECURE FUTURE FOR VERMONT'S CHILDREN.

While hunger and lack of proper nutrition is all-consuming at any point in our lives, it is most detrimental when experienced by children whose brains and bodies are developing more rapidly than at any other point. From birth to age 5 the brain more than triples in size, from 25% to 90% of full size, meaning that proper nutrition is especially critical in these beginning years. Proper nutrition throughout childhood and adolescence is essential for improved health, developmental, mental health, and educational outcomes.

Poor Health Outcomes

Childhood hunger often leads to poor chronic and acute health outcomes, including a higher risk of cardiovascular disease, cancer, asthma, and more throughout one's lifetime.¹⁶

Developmental Risks

According to the American Academy of Pediatrics, children in food insecure households, especially from 4-36 months old, are more likely to be at developmental risk than children in food secure households.¹⁷

Mental Health Problems

Beyond cognitive development, hunger during childhood can adversely affect kids' mental health, and it has been found to be a predictor of depression and anxiety in adolescence. In the latest UVM study on Experiences and Ongoing Challenges of Food Insecure Households in Vermont and Maine, researchers found that food insecure respondents reported being diagnosed with anxiety and depression disorders at twice the rate of food secure respondents.¹⁸ Additionally, studies show that schools with Universal School Meals and increased student meal participation have lower suspension rates.¹⁹

Poor Educational Outcomes

When children are hungry at school or in child care, it can hinder their ability to absorb and remember information. Longitudinal studies demonstrate that food insecurity in Kindergarten students predicts lower academic achievement in math and reading specifically.²⁰ This also contributes to behavioral issues that can disrupt and tax the entire classroom. Recent research shows that interventions, such as Universal School Meals, can increase school attendance rates and academic performance across all grade levels.²¹

Access to continuous, sufficient nutritious food in childhood can positively impact a child's mental and physical health and development.²² We must work together to ensure that Vermont children have access to proper nutrition wherever they are during the day. That means removing barriers to accessing meals in school and child care and expanding accessibility to nutrition programs like 3SquaresVT and WIC. It will take the joint effort of multiple organizations and state agencies to create a more robust and food secure future for all children in Vermont.

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- ⁷ *ibid*
- ⁸ Emily A. Shrider, U.S. Census Bureau, Current Population Reports, P60-283, Poverty in the United States: 2023, U.S. Government Publishing Office, Washington, DC, September 2024. <https://www2.census.gov/library/publications/2024/demo/p60-283.pdf>
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Acknowledging the Root Causes of Family Hunger

Family hunger and food insecurity in the United States are most fundamentally caused by a lack of sufficient income for a family to meet all of their basic needs at the same time. These conditions are not natural or inevitable. Rather, historic and long standing systemic economic and structural inequality have caused families to be at risk for hunger and food insecurity.

Early American expansion established that basic material human needs - such as food and shelter - were not rights society should collectively ensure, but rather privileges to be obtained individually through financial wealth. Predominantly white male settlers designed law and policy to entitle them alone to the land and its harvests, along with many additional social goods, such as access to voting, education, and paid employment. Settlers murdered 99% of the Indigenous population, then expanded private property and trafficked in humans from Africa, who were granted zero rights, to clear natural diversity in favor of cash crops like tobacco and other agricultural monocultures. The emergence of economic and structural inequality also impacted women and youth, who experienced marginalization in part through no economic or political value being attributed to domestic work, such as meal preparation and child care. Homes with successful male “breadwinners” developed into those with the best food access, while most others were left struggling to secure adequate nutrition. By the Great Depression, the root causes of family food insecurity today were thus already in motion, setting the stage for present conditions whereby women are two times, BIPOC communities four times, and households with young children five times as likely to experience hunger.

The Great Depression provided impetus for political and economic solutions to end hunger through addressing its root causes. The federal government implemented economic support for farmers and (re) distributed surplus food to hungry families. School lunch, social security, and supplemental nutrition assistance programs began. These initiatives improved Americans’ wellbeing. Still, crop monocultures expanded, making less nutritional foods more readily available, while redlining and other forms of identity-based discrimination kept women, low-income, and BIPOC communities from economic and political efficacy. The government’s new highways and roads embedded persistent inequalities further into the landscape, ensuring the most privileged had closest access to the best groceries, housing, schools, and jobs, while other families were left struggling.

Much of America’s development since the mid-20th century has been characterized by a continued tension to further address hunger’s root causes against efforts to uphold disparate groups of “haves” and “have nots”. During the pandemic, for example, there was a rapid expansion of government food and economic assistance that reduced hunger to a historic low. Yet, decision makers did not extend these programs for families in need past 2022 and 2023, and hunger has since risen sharply again.²³

Decisions to address hunger’s root causes have altered the course of food security before. Through the strategies outlined below, Vermont once again has the opportunity to change the trajectory of society and ensure a more food secure future for all Vermont children.

²³ <https://www.ers.usda.gov/topics/food-nutrition-assistance/food-security-in-the-u-s/>

Strategies for creating a food secure future for Vermont children where they live, learn, and play

The following strategies outline what needs to be done in order to end child hunger where children live, learn, and play. We have organized the strategies by two primary settings:

- Ensuring food security for children at home
- Feeding children in education and care settings

ENSURING FOOD SECURITY FOR CHILDREN AT HOME

Strategy 1: Expand efforts to reach Vermont's lowest-income families with dignified and convenient access to food through the charitable food system.

Background

Vermont Food Bank and other partners have developed many novel strategies to address childhood food security, though resource challenges persist. These solutions include the VeggieVanGo Schools program, a partnership between Vermont schools and the Foodbank, providing fresh fruits and vegetables directly to school communities where they can be easily obtained. VeggieVanGo Plus (VVG+) is also a school food program. It fosters pantries initiated and managed by schools in partnership with the Foodbank to provide consistent, easy access to nourishing food.

Feeding Champlain Valley has also worked with partners to offer critical nutrition assistance, with a focus on the northwestern Vermont counties of Addison, Chittenden, Franklin, and Grand Isle. This region is home to 40% of Vermont's population and 22,500 residents who live in poverty and struggle with food insecurity every day. Programs include food shelves that serve 14,509 people, with 3,300 children under the age of 18 over the last fiscal year. There are also food hub fulfillment centers located in Colchester, Middlebury, and Sheldon, where online grocery and meal orders are packaged for delivery with USDA commodities as well as culturally relevant foods such as goat meat, halal foods, and different varieties of beans and rice. A Meal Production Program provides grab and go meals, and the Good Food Truck partners with King Street Youth Center and other non-profits to provide meals and healthy snacks to kids at after school activities and events. In addition, the Head Start/Parent Child Center Food Access Program provides online ordering and delivery to the most vulnerable families and children in the region. Families "order ahead" online for shelf stable groceries, diapers and household items, prepared meals, as well as fresh produce, dairy products, eggs, and other items. Finally, Feeding Champlain Valley has teamed up with healthcare providers, and patients who pre-screen as food insecure can order directly from the online inventory described above.

These and other critical efforts to provide Vermont's lowest-income families with dignified and convenient access to culturally relevant foods through the charitable food system face several challenges. These include transportation barriers, such as long distances, limited public transit, and harsh weather in rural Vermont, which make accessing food difficult for youth. Families may also receive food that is not relevant or suited to their preferences, which can reduce program effectiveness. Additionally, families may avoid charitable food programs due to stigma. Moreover, inadequate systems for food delivery, storage, and inventory management, especially in rural areas, hinder effective food distribution.

Strategy Description

Tailor solutions to the needs of the community. This includes making nutrition available in places people are already visiting and providing relevant and preferred foods. Partnering with schools, early childcare settings, and other key organizations from design to implementation will lead to more sustainable, impactful food access programs.

Action Steps

- Support and expand the pilot food access program Feeding Champlain Valley (FCV) initiated at 11 Head Start locations in Vermont, growing this work throughout the Champlain Valley and creating a strong network of healthcare providers, food growers, partner non-profit organizations, and others that connect local food to people who need food help. With a strong partnership between Vermont Foodbank and Community Action Agencies, this model can be replicated statewide.
- Engage communities in conversation to identify targeted, impactful approaches to replace the Backpack Program that is being phased out. This program provides elementary aged students food bags for the weekend in just 13% of schools, and it did not provide the capacity-building or community-driven solutions needed to reach more Vermont children.
- Guide strategies to allocate resources more effectively, foster innovative partnerships with schools and organizations, and build local capacity to address food insecurity.
- Enhance and grow direct distribution and school pantry models as sustainable, effective approaches for targeted Vermont school communities. Incorporate insights from community conversations to evaluate whether these models can be adapted to reach youth and families through additional avenues and partnerships, such as parent-child centers, to further address food insecurity.

Key Project Partners

Vermont Foodbank
Feeding Champlain Valley
Hunger Free Vermont
Public Schools
Blue Sky Food Sourcing

Vermont Foodbank Network Partner
Food Shelves
Community Volunteers
Parent Child Centers
Head Start Centers

Community Health Centers including
FQHCs Mountain Health of Bristol,
Community Health Center of Burlington
and St. Albans
UVM Medical Center Children's Hospital
and Birthing Center
Community Action Agencies

Strategy 2: Connect more low-income families with 3SquaresVT by ensuring every eligible family in Vermont has the information and support they need to enroll.

Background

Despite 3SquaresVT's effectiveness, the program is underutilized due to barriers in awareness, convoluted eligibility, and a complicated, lengthy application process. The application process includes a 45 question application, interview, and documentation collection: all time-consuming activities that become barriers for busy families. WIC has similar eligibility requirements to 3SquaresVT.

WIC staff makes referrals to help eligible families enrolled in WIC also enroll in 3SquaresVT. Approximately 38% of Vermont's infants and one-third of Vermont's children participate in the WIC program²⁴, and 33% of the households Vermont Foodbank assisted with 3SquaresVT applications last year included a child under 18. In a world of siloed services, referrals help reduce the burden for families seeking support.

Strategy Description

SNAP, known as 3SquaresVT in our state, is a highly effective federal food assistance program that centers customer choice by providing funds to purchase groceries. 38,000 children (birth-18) in Vermont live in households that meet gross income qualification for 3SquaresVT. The Vermont Foodbank 3SquaresVT specialist team helps low-income eligible families (80% Area Median Income) connect with 3SquaresVT through referral relationships with Women, Infants and Children (WIC), in-person outreach at youth and family-oriented community sites, and by offering flexible text/email/phone options.

Action Steps

- Expand 3SquaresVT referral relationships to additional VT WIC offices, and highlight 3SquaresVT as a tool for communities to support food security through further partnership with youth and family-oriented community sites and schools.

Key Project Partners

Vermont Foodbank

Vermont Foodbank

Hunger Free Vermont

WIC

3SVT Workgroup

Public Schools

The Family Room

Elevate Youth Services

Interaction

Additional youth and family oriented Vermont Foodbank Network and Community Partners

²⁴ <https://www.healthvermont.gov/sites/default/files/document/fch-wic-program-participation-and-reach.pdf>

Strategy 3: Pass legislation to improve the adequacy of Reach Up payments to the lowest-income single parent households.

Background

Reach Up is Vermont's income assistance program for very low-income (50% of Area Median Income) families with children. This program is funded by a combination of federal Temporary Aid to Needy Families (TANF) block grant and state funds. The State of Vermont is using outdated 2001 housing cost data and 2019 cost of living data to determine the basic needs budget for Reach-Up families. They then apply a "ratable reduction" to cut this completely inadequate grant in half. This keeps our most vulnerable families in deep poverty—by providing less than half the income we know these families need to survive.

As one of very few programs that provides cash grants, Reach Up is a critical source of flexible income that allows eligible families raising children in poverty to respond to their changing circumstances in ways that best meet their children's most urgent needs. When families can meet their basic needs, risks to children decrease. Child abuse and physical and mental health conditions decline in children, youth do better in school, and costly demands on other state and social services go down. To reap these benefits and empower families, a coalition of organizations, led by Voices for Vermont's Children, is advocating to have Reach-Up provide grants that bring Vermont's poorest families with children at least up to the actual poverty line.

Strategy Description

In order for Reach Up to keep single-parent families out of deep poverty, the formula for how the State of Vermont determines Reach-Up grants must be adjusted in two ways:

1. The cost of basic needs for eligible families must be determined using current data aligned with the basic needs budget calculated every two years by Vermont's Joint Fiscal Office.
2. The ratable reduction currently applied to the Reach Up basic needs grant must be eliminated.

Action Steps

- Support and grow the already formed Reach Up Coalition, led by Voices for Vermont's Children, as they work to re-introduce legislation to make these changes to the current state statute that sets Reach-Up grant criteria.

Key Project Partners

Voices for Vermont's Children – LEAD
Building Bright Futures
Champlain Valley Office of Economic Opportunity
Disability Rights Vermont
Hunger Free Vermont
Planned Parenthood–NNE

Prevent Child Abuse Vermont
Public Assets Institute
Root Social Justice Center
Vermont Commission on Women
Vermont Early Childhood Advocacy Alliance
Vermont Foodbank

Vermont Legal Aid
Vermont Low Income Advocacy Council
Vermont Parent Child Center Network
Vermont Network Against Domestic and Sexual Violence

Strategy 4: Expand non-congregate summer meals.

Background

Summer can be the hungriest time of the year for children, because school breakfast and lunch are not available 5 days a week when school is not in session. The Summer Food Service Program (SFSP) is a federal program administered by the US Department of Agriculture (USDA) and used to provide meals to kids while school is out over the summer. SFSP reimburses sponsoring nonprofit entities for meals provided to children age 18 or younger at no cost, at sites physically located in eligible areas. Examples of sponsoring nonprofit entities include schools, private nonprofit organizations, and nonprofit universities or colleges. Eligible areas are where 50% or more of the children are either eligible for free and reduced-price meals, or census-designated as low income.

SFSP was only available as a congregate feeding program prior to the Covid-19 pandemic, with children being served and eating the meal on-site. Vermont summer meals programs served a record number of congregate meals (450,000) in the summer of 2019. The program dramatically changed during the Covid-19 pandemic. New program rules allowed programs to offer non-congregate meal service, which allows families to pick up meals or 'meal kits' (groceries that can be used to put together a set menu of meals and can be prepared by the kids themselves) to eat or prepare at home. Congress and the USDA saw its impact, learned some valuable lessons from the modified meal service during the pandemic, and non-congregate meal service became a permanent part of the program for rural areas in 2023.

For many families, the option to get bulk meals each week has made it possible to participate in the SFSP program for the first time – significantly increasing summer meal accessibility. Because of this expansion and increased area eligibility, Vermont SFSP Sponsors (the organizations that operate the meal programs) are serving more meals over the summer than ever before; eclipsing one million meals in 2024. Vermont SFSP Sponsors have been among the leaders and innovators nationwide in adapting to these new program rules and starting new, innovative non-congregate service models.

Strategy Description

Leverage new developments in the federal Summer Food Service Program (SFSP) that allow meal programs to provide food for children to eat at home through new non-congregate summer meals sites. Expanding this new service model with more novel ideas and by replicating effective ones will dramatically increase access to nutritious meals for kids over the summer months.

Action Steps

- In order to increase summer nutritional programming and feed more kids, we must expand on the new models emerging, focusing on the most-successful strategies. These include providing easy-to-prepare weekly meal kits, building new community partnerships, creating efficient local distribution networks, and addressing transportation challenges for families.
- Identify and test more novel approaches and ideas to further expand accessible pathways to effective non-congregate meal service.
- Develop new training for programs and provide direct technical assistance and tools to navigate federal rules, utilize meal kits, and implement other best practices.
- Invest further in training and technical assistance to propel robust growth in the program and illuminate the next steps and changes that are needed to expand access to the program. We must equip all the summer meal programs with the tools to implement emerging best practices and service models.

Key Project Partners

Hunger Free Vermont

Vermont Agency of Education

School Nutrition Association of Vermont

Strategy 5: Build a successful, permanent Summer EBT program.

Background

During the Covid-19 pandemic, the federal government offered a temporary pandemic benefit program, called Pandemic EBT (P-EBT) that provided money to families who lost access to free and reduced-price meals during school closures. This temporary program provided critical nutritional resources to families during an extremely challenging time.

Building on the success of P-EBT, Congress passed a permanent Summer EBT program to provide food to all free or reduced-price eligible children during the summer months when schools are not in session and children do not have access to the meals they would get at school. The benefit is provided as money for food groceries on an Electronic Benefit Transfer (EBT) Card, like 3SquaresVT. The state faced some unique challenges in implementing the new program in 2024, but, with a heroic effort from state administrators and additional flexibility provided by USDA, was able to distribute \$4.5 million in benefits to families with kids. The program had high participation, and families spent 75% of the benefits issued that summer. Going forward, the state is making some technological improvements that should significantly streamline student-matching and allow benefits to be distributed much more easily and efficiently going forward. Summer EBT (S-EBT) is a new federal program that rolled out for the first time in 2024, and will become permanent in 2025. It is critical to build on the initial rollout of S-EBT in 2024 to create a robust program. There are additional improvements that can be made to reach families who are not automatically matched through participation in another program and have to apply for the benefit directly, and more still to help families understand the program and how and where they can use the new benefits they are issued. There are a few clear opportunities to improve the program going forward.

Strategy Description

Implement Summer EBT, a new program to provide a grocery benefit to families with free and reduced-price kids over the summer to ensure that eligible families are able to receive a benefit and spend it on eligible foods.

Action Steps

- Improve matching technology across state agencies so that automatically-eligible families are easily identified and provided with benefits.
- Build better public outreach about the program so that families who need to apply know they need to and how to do so.
- Expand public outreach efforts to inform families with children about the program and how to spend their benefits at eligible retailers such as grocery stores, convenience stores, and farmers markets.

Key Project Partners

Vermont Department of Children and Families
Vermont Agency of Education
Vermont Agency of Digital Services
School Administrators

Strategy 6: Leverage healthcare to recognize and alleviate hunger.

Background

Non-medical elements of our lives have significant impacts on our health and future health outcomes. Food insecurity is associated with significantly poorer health, this includes mental and physical. By routinely asking about food insecurity, healthcare providers can identify potential issues early on before they significantly affect health. The healthcare system is extensive and most Vermonters intersect with some part of it in an ongoing way. These factors uniquely position medical providers to play a pivotal role in connecting people with food security resources.

Strategy Description

Foster the development of systems that help medical providers to prioritize food security screening and facilitate referrals to community food resources.

Action Steps

- Expand universal screening for food security status within the healthcare system, using a validated screening tool. Pair with subsequent action for those identifying as food insecure. Such screening could be a source of data related to food security progress in Vermont.
- Ensure that medical providers have the training and support they need to implement and prioritize screening for food security.
- Explore, mobilize and maximize medicaid funding.
- Guarantee that medical systems connect with supporting community partners for robust and sustained interventions (after screening)
- Provide clear access to translated Hunger Vital Sign (™) questions and framing statements.
- Ensure that the IE&E (Integrated Eligibility & Enrollment System) simplifies the process of enrolling in multiple programs 'one door'.
- Create robust referral systems - connecting to 211, 3SVT application assistance and other community food resources. Referral systems are also critical for community service providers outside of medical offices.
- Fund Vermont 2-1-1 sufficiently to make it a fully functioning information referral system that connects people to the IE&E. It can also provide other comprehensive resources, information, and assistance to people and communities statewide, and collect data.
- Collaborate with insurance carriers to ensure that visits to the grocery store, farmers markets, and other food distribution locations are reliably and consistently classified as health-related trips.
- Ensure that medical staff have paid time to take part in quality improvement projects to streamline and increase consistency and effectiveness of the Hunger Vital Sign (™) food security screening tool.

Key Project Partners

UVM Health Network
Federally Qualified Health Centers
Bi-State Primary Care

Vermont Child Health Improvement Program (VCHIP)
Vermont 211

FEEDING CHILDREN IN EDUCATION AND CARE SETTINGS

Strategy 1: Continue and expand Vermont's Universal School Meals program.

Background

Vermont Food Bank and other partners have developed many novel strategies to address childhood food security, though resource challenges persist. These solutions include the VeggieVanGo Schools program, a partnership between Vermont schools and the Foodbank, providing fresh fruits and vegetables directly to school communities where they can be easily obtained. VeggieVanGo Plus (VVG+) is also a school food program. It fosters pantries initiated and managed by schools in partnership with the Foodbank to provide consistent, easy access to nourishing food.

Feeding Champlain Valley has also worked with partners to offer critical nutrition assistance, with a focus on the northwestern Vermont counties of Addison, Chittenden, Franklin, and Grand Isle. This region is home to 40% of Vermont's population and 22,500 residents who live in poverty and struggle with food insecurity every day. Programs include food shelves that serve 14,509 people, with 3,300 children under the age of 18 over the last fiscal year. There are also food hub fulfillment centers located in Colchester, Middlebury, and Sheldon, where online grocery and meal orders are packaged for delivery with USDA commodities as well as culturally relevant foods such as goat meat, halal foods, and different varieties of beans and rice. A Meal Production Program provides grab and go meals, and the Good Food Truck partners with King Street Youth Center and other non-profits to provide meals and healthy snacks to kids at after school activities and events. In addition, the Head Start/Parent Child Center Food Access Program provides online ordering and delivery to the most vulnerable families and children in the region. Families "order ahead" online for shelf stable groceries, diapers and household items, prepared meals, as well as fresh produce, dairy products, eggs, and other items. Finally, Feeding Champlain Valley has teamed up with healthcare providers, and patients who pre-screen as food insecure can order directly from the online inventory described above.

Strategy Description

Vermont's Universal School Meals program must be continuously maintained and strengthened. It is an essential piece of ensuring a food secure future for all of Vermont's children. Universal school meals ensure that all children receive adequate nutrition and can better focus in school. Regardless of socioeconomic status, the program eases pressure on household resources and removes stigma between students. Building off the successful implementation of Universal School Meals in the state, there are several clear opportunities to improve the program for k-12 students going forward.

Additionally, under Vermont's Universal School Meals Act, nonprofit universal PreK programs are eligible to receive universal meals for all enrolled children if their program is listed as a site under one of Vermont's School Food Authorities. A number of universal PreK programs are eligible, but very few are making use of this option. Relationships need to be fostered between school districts and these programs, and funding may also be needed to support the capacity of school meal programs to prepare and deliver these meals.

Action Steps

- Serve meals free to all students in public schools in Vermont in perpetuity.
- Connect nonprofit universal PreK programs to School Food Authorities to bring them under Vermont's Universal School Meals Program as well.
- Engage statewide coalition support, analysis, and response to continually improve program efficacy and adapt to public emergencies.
- Advance legislative advocacy to continue investment in universal school meals.
- Expand public education and outreach to ensure participation and inform program improvements.
- Provide technical assistance and innovation support for child nutrition programs and nonprofit universal PreK programs to expand access to universal meals and continue to strengthen school meal program operations.
- Determine to what degree alterations have to happen in USM act to align with public education reform efforts
 - Ensure meal programs continue to be adequately funded

Key Champions

Hunger Free Vermont

The Vermont Agency of Education Child Nutrition Team

The Vermont Farm to School & Early Childhood Network

The Vermont State Legislature

Strategy 2: Make CACFP fully functional for early childhood education programs.

Background

The Child and Adult Care Food Program (CACFP) is a federal nutrition program administered by the United States Department of Agriculture Food and Nutrition Services through state nutrition agencies. In Vermont, the Vermont Agency of Education Child Nutrition Programs team administers the entire CACFP at the state level and directly supports afterschool programs and licensed child care centers. CACFP sponsor organizations administer the program for registered and licensed family child care homes.

In January of 2024, only 35.4% of registered and licensed early childhood education (ECE) programs in Vermont were participating in the CACFP. A primary barrier to participation in the CACFP is the rising cost of food, transportation and labor combined with inadequate federal reimbursement rates. In order to overcome the immediate challenge of affordability and make it possible for ECE programs to participate in the CACFP, it is critical that the state legislature establish a state subsidy that covers financial gaps.

Most recent data shows that 581 ECE programs do not participate in the CACFP. This means that up to 71% (16,246) of children attending an early childhood education program are not receiving meals or snacks from their child care provider. The CACFP is a critical support for low income families and families who do not have time or other resources to procure, make, and pack nutritious and developmentally appropriate meals and snacks for their children during the child care day.

Strategy Description

Federal Child Nutrition Programs, like the Child and Adult Care Food Program (CACFP), are the most equitable way that children can access nutrition in educational and other congregate settings. Over half of the early childhood education (ECE) programs in the state of Vermont do not currently participate in the CACFP. In order to restore basic functionality to the CACFP, we must supplement the program financially via multiple avenues at the state level while also continuing to advocate for program expansion at the federal level.

Additionally, we must advocate for cross-agency support of meal programming in ECE settings. For example, building a bridge between ECE program onboarding through the Child Development Division and child nutrition programming resources from the Agency of Education and CACFP Sponsoring Organizations would be a very direct way to mitigate some of the confusion and misinformation about what it takes to participate in the CACFP as a new ECE program.

Oftentimes a main barrier to meal programming in ECE settings is lack of equipment and infrastructure. There are currently grants available through the Vermont Child Development Division (CDD) and the Vermont Agency of Agriculture Food & Markets that can be used for expanding infrastructure. Programs are not always aware of these opportunities, and some do not have the capacity or expertise to submit the required grant applications. More outreach and support is needed to get the word out about these grant opportunities and the options available for using funds toward meal programming equipment and infrastructure.

Action Steps

- Enact state supplemental payments to the organizations that serve as sponsors for Family Child Care Homes to use the CACFP to provide free meals.
- Work with the Child Development Division (CDD), the Child Nutrition Department at the Agency of Education (AOE), the Department of Health, and other relevant state agency departments and divisions to change the approach to licensing and onboarding new childcare and early learning providers so that the CACFP is included in the process—along with related grant funding opportunities.
- Inform the upcoming Child Care Financing Study with data around meal program cost so that meal programming is included as a line item in the total estimate for what it would cost to invest in quality early childhood education in Vermont.
- Support federal legislation that would support CACFP program expansion and viability by ensuring that our Vermont congressional delegation members are aware of and cosponsoring related bills
 - HR 2859 / S 1420 - Child Care Nutrition Enhancement Act of 2025 - which would increase the amount of reimbursements under the child and adult care food program
 - HR 2818 / S 1447 - Early Childhood Nutrition Improvement Act - which would improve the CACFP by way of decreasing paperwork burden, including reimbursement for serving an additional meal, and other critical improvements.
- For ECE programs where the CACFP is not a viable possibility, or when there may be other more streamlined meal program models for ECE programs to opt into, continue to research and pilot alternative ways for ECE programs to participate in meal programming. Example actions include:
 - Vending meals and snacks through the CACFP from school food authorities or other food service companies when in-house meal programming is not possible.
 - Receiving meals through the National School Lunch Program (NSLP) when eligible to do so (see Strategy II.1: Continue and expand Vermont’s Universal School Meals program for more details).
 - Cultivating a shared services model of meal programming amongst cohorts of small, regional ECE programs.

Key Champions

The Vermont Agency of Education Child Nutrition Team

The Child Development Division

The Vermont State Legislature

First Children’s Finance

Hunger Free Vermont

Strategy 3: Expand afterschool and summer meals.

Background

The Child and Adult Care Food Program (CACFP) is a federal nutrition program administered by the Child hunger spikes when kids lose access to school meals in the summer, afterschool, and on weekends and holidays during the school year. Vermont summer and afterschool meals programs reach far fewer children outside of school time, serving 54 summer lunches and 6 afterschool suppers for every 100 free and reduced price school lunches. Expanded use of federal nutrition afterschool and in summer would greatly improve child food security.

Due to the state of Vermont adopting new methods for counting students' eligibility status for free and reduced price meals combined with implementation of Universal School Meals, more schools and communities across the state are eligible for afterschool and summer meal programs than ever before. Over 240 schools have qualified to host summer and afterschool meals sites in 2024-2025, up from 89 just last school year (2023-2024). We have a rare opportunity to strengthen food security for kids—if we move quickly and strategically.

Summer meal programs are already seeing rapid growth in the state, but Child Nutrition programs, producing and serving more meals than ever before, are struggling to adopt and expand afterschool meal programs at the same rate. It will be critical to build the capacity of these programs to navigate yet another complicated federal program and expand their meal service further.

While expanded eligibility means that over 75% of Vermont communities could now provide summer and afterschool nutrition, many children who would benefit participate in afterschool and summer programming in ineligible places. It remains essential to also provide meals in these settings.

Strategy Description

Increase the number of programs serving afterschool and summer meals to kids and teens through two federal programs: the Child and Adult Care Food Program (CACFP) At-Risk Afterschool Meal Program and the Summer Food Service Program (SFSP). Meal service must be added to existing programming for kids, and new approaches to meal service that increase program access need to be developed and implemented, so that student participation in these programs aligns more closely with the number of school lunches served each day.

Expansion of afterschool and summer meal programs will require recruiting new sponsors, identifying newly eligible sites, increasing collaboration between school programs and community places where children congregate, and piloting unique and underutilized program options to reach underserved children. This will require coordinated statewide outreach to raise awareness about the programs and meal site locations.

Finally, summer and afterschool meals need to be expanded to serve communities that are currently ineligible for the federal programs. Many children living in these areas depend on free school meals and are excluded from this crucial resource outside of the school day.

Action Steps

- Build capacity among School Food Authorities (SFA's) and other community food program sponsors to operate CACFP At-Risk Afterschool.
- Recruit Sponsors in eligible areas to serve meals through SFSP and CACFP At-Risk Afterschool.
- Provide robust training and education to summer and afterschool program leaders and staff to incorporate meals into existing programs.
- Bring state, schools, non-profits, and local communities together to build collaborative annual outreach that ensures that children and their families are able to find and access open free meal programs in their communities.

Key Champions

The Vermont Agency of Education Child Nutrition Team

The Child Development Division

The Vermont State Legislature

First Children's Finance

Hunger Free Vermont

Strategy 4: Build robust training and education for Child Nutrition Programs.

Background

Child nutrition programs are constantly changing. At the federal level, there are regular shifts in eligibility and program requirements, in addition to the ongoing seasonal changes that cause each program to change or adapt. At the local level, Vermont's child nutrition workforce is highly variable, at times experiencing resource shortages and high turnover. These conditions create a need for constant technical support that bridges the gaps between shifting regulatory requirements and a dynamic local labor force.

Additionally, some programs have not fully recovered to pre-pandemic levels, such as afterschool meals participation, which ranks twelfth in the nation. There is an opportunity to develop additional capacity for child nutrition technical assistance and program support by leveraging existing networks with the expertise and foothold in relevant communities combined with expanded eligibility and programmatic possibilities.

The long term dedication of several organizations offering direct technical support to child nutrition programs has helped to build Vermont into a leader of these programs. Vermont has consistently ranked among the top states in child nutrition program participation in annual reports released by the Food Research & Action Center (FRAC) including leading the way on summer meals and being third in the nation in the reach of school breakfast. Technical support has helped many Vermont programs get to the cutting edge, and has also been central to Vermont's trailblazing innovative approaches like Farm to School & Early Childhood. Ongoing technical assistance and new models for support of child nutrition programs are essential to sustain and build upon Vermont's successes.

Strategy Description

Robust training and direct education and support for child nutrition program operators in every program must be developed so that they are continuously adapting, growing, and expanding meal service.

Additional investment in training and education will support programs in adapting to new rules and opportunities at the local, state, and federal levels. Direct programmatic assistance will also uplift innovation, so that child nutrition program operators can implement new approaches to their meal service that enhance their programs' growth and ability to feed more youth within ever changing government requirements.

Training and education for child nutrition programs will take many forms to meet community needs, including: developing pilot programs that increase access to meals, securing new funding opportunities and adaptation to rules and regulations, helping meal programs identify and advocate for changes with key decision-makers, and creating training and workshops that guide participants to program expansion.

Action Steps

- Train more trainers to develop additional capacity for technical assistance and program support from many angles through State Agencies, key support organizations such as Hunger Free Vermont and VT-FEED, professional organizations such as SNA-VT, program education networks, and new partners.
- Establish more robust peer-to-peer training opportunities for school nutrition leadership and staff that expands the community of practice and promotes sharing of expertise and best practices.
- Expand the breadth of training and technical support available and explore statewide professional development such as conferences that provide robust and well-rounded professional learning for CN program leaders and staff.
- Closely support development of new meal programs in previously underserved parts of the state.
- Develop and teach models of successful meals programs, building easily replicable pathways to growth for others.

Key Champions

SNA-VT

VT Association for the Education of Young Children

VT Agency of Education

VT Child Development Division

Northern Lights CCV

Shelburne Farms

Hunger Free Vermont

Strategy 5: Invest in the Child Nutrition Program workforce

Background

The child nutrition workforce is underfunded and lacks adequate training and programmatic support. In Vermont, the mean pay for k-12 school child nutrition workers exceeded \$30,000 annually per full-time equivalent (FTE) for the first time in 2024.²⁵ This lags well behind the mean pay for food preparation and serving occupations in Vermont, which is \$47,370.²⁶ Short order cooks, hosts, and hostesses make over \$37,000 in annual mean pay in Vermont, for example, and waiters and waitresses over \$60,000.²⁷ One in ten child nutrition staff has a family income at or below the federal poverty line and 16% receive Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) benefits.²⁸ The workforce is overwhelmingly women, and many are parents of school-age children or older adults.²⁹

The School Nutrition Association of Vermont (SNA-VT) is the main association supporting child nutrition workers. At a functional level, SNA-VT can offer training, scholarships, awards, marketing tools, advocacy, and other critical professional and workforce development resources. However, SNA-VT is currently run by a volunteer board, and has been unable to offer the level of professional development, advocacy, training, and networking needed to grow a child nutrition workforce in the state that will reach more children with critical meals in the settings where they learn and play.

Child nutrition program staff in Vermont are expected to be able to aptly navigate federal guidelines and reimbursements requirements, have a good concept of nutrition, attention to detail and paperwork, interact well with children, be creative with food, adapt to changing circumstances, engage effectively independently and in teams, and commit to a consistent schedule that starts and ends earlier than a typical business day and may only offer seasonal employment. With other food service sectors offering higher wages, retaining a skilled workforce for these and other tasks can be challenging for many programs across Vermont. The lack of investment in a child nutrition workforce creates internal barriers that can make or break meal programs, and addressing this through dedicated workforce support will have ever broadening, positive impacts that far exceed the cost.

Strategy Description

Increase investment in child nutrition program staff, a chronically undervalued workforce, by improving pay standards and investing in professional development networks to ensure a stable and skilled industry is feeding kids in school, early childhood programs, after school, and over the summer.

Vermont's child nutrition workforce requires significant investment to ensure it is able to continue to develop, meet increasing demand, and serve programs in ways that are effective, sustainable, and appropriate. Advancing and sustaining child nutrition staff across Vermont depends on a strong and secure School Nutrition Association of Vermont (SNA-VT), one that is funded to staffing levels sufficient to support school nutrition leaders and staff across the state. It also necessitates improving pay standards for the industry, so that it is more competitive against employment opportunities elsewhere in the local food system and attracts the skilled and stable child nutrition workforce needed to best feed kids. Additional investments in workforce development, including training and professionalization opportunities, will also ensure programs cultivate, retain, and attract new staff equipped to support food secure youth statewide.

²⁵ Vermont AOE Teacher and Staff FTE Report, <https://education.vermont.gov/data-and-reporting/school-reports/teacher-staff-fte-report>

²⁶ https://www.bls.gov/oes/current/oes_vt.htm#35-0000.

²⁷ https://www.bls.gov/oes/current/oes_vt.htm#35-0000.

²⁸ Congressional Research Service, The School Foodservice Workforce: Characteristics and labor Market Outcomes, July 27, 2022, <https://crsreports.congress.gov/product/pdf/R/R47199>

²⁹ *ibid*

Action Steps

- Fund SNA-VT to hire staff to support the organization's growth and ensure it has the capacity to fulfill its mission.
- Improve pay standards for child nutrition program staff so wages are livable and competitive.
- Invest in workforce development, including improving child nutrition staff recruitment, mentorship, training, and professionalization and advancement opportunities.

Key Champions

School Nutrition Association of Vermont

Vermont Agency of Education

Vermont Child Development Division

Strategy 6: Eliminate structural barriers to school meal programs.

Background

Universal School Meals eliminated a major structural barrier to nutrition programs for kids by ensuring that children are not charged for the healthy school meals that give them essential tools they need to learn and grow. Despite this huge step that has ensured 2.5 million more school meals are served each school year in Vermont, barriers to meal programs remain for many children.

A strong body of evidence shows that school breakfast supports better education, nutrition, and behavior outcomes at school.³⁰ Despite significant gains, breakfast is offered before the start of the school day in many schools and participation still lags behind school lunch. Early meal times mean some students miss out on food altogether, or kids have to choose between getting a school breakfast and social time with their friends.

Often, lunch periods can be prohibitively short, even just 20 minutes, which could include time spent waiting in line for food, cleaning up after eating, and changing for recess. This does not leave enough time for kids to eat their meals. Some schools provide recess before lunch, though this best practice is not universally adopted. This allows kids to get out their pent up energy before lunchtime, help to manage behavior problems in the cafeteria, and gets kids hungry and ready to eat when they come in for lunch.

There are additional barriers including variable and inconsistent school snack foods and times, cafeteria design that can make it hard for some kids to participate at meal times, or foods offered across meal times may not be appealing or appropriate for all kids. School nutrition programs work to build in choices that meet students needs, but can run into significant challenges, not least the challenge of operating within a budget set by generally inadequate federal reimbursement for breakfast and lunch. Working on identifying creative ways to address these barriers and increasing the funding available to nutrition programs can go a long way toward making school meal programs more accessible for kids who are not yet eating school meals.

Strategy Description

Ensure that all children in public education have unrestricted access to school breakfast and lunch. This will involve eliminating barriers to participation that remain in nutrition programs despite the fact that meals are now offered free to all children through Universal School Meals.

There are many interventions that can continue to ensure better and more equitable access to school meal programs. Requiring breakfast to be served as part of the school day, “after the bell,” would help to ensure that children are not excluded from this essential meal at school. Additionally, ensuring adequate time for kids to eat meals, including moving recess before lunch so kids are eating when they are engaged and hungry, can significantly improve kids’ ability to participate at mealtimes. Expanding snack programs during the school day and making meals more attractive and engaging for students are also ongoing projects needed to ensure food security for all Vermont kids.

³⁰ FRAC, Benefits of School Breakfast, <https://frac.org/programs/school-breakfast-program/benefits-school-breakfast>

Action Steps

- In order to adequately identify the most important next goals for improving kids' access to school meals, SNA-VT will need to lead a process of engaging stakeholders, building capacity, and prioritizing next steps to address these barriers in coming years.

Key Champions

School Nutrition Association of Vermont

Vermont Agency of Education

Hunger Free Vermont

Strategy 7: Provide accessible, culturally and religiously responsive meals in Child Nutrition Programs.

Background

Even with permanent Universal School Meals, not all children are able to access free meals in school. For many students, the food offered in schools or early childhood programs may not reflect their cultural identity, offer them choices that are familiar & accessible, or meet their dietary needs. Many schools in Vermont are working on trying to expand the cultural diversity of their menus and add new recipes. However, training is limited and the structural barriers to procuring and producing halal meals are especially challenging.

An influx of refugee and New American families with children has highlighted the need for system changes, particularly in Rutland and Bennington counties, in order for schools and early childhood education programs to be able to serve culturally diverse meals and snacks that meet the needs of the students attending their programs. Schools and ECE programs have had a hard time procuring Halal chicken and what they have found has been up to \$20/lb. Additionally, there is very limited professional development opportunity for child nutrition professionals to learn more about best practices for introducing culturally relevant meals and snacks in their menus.

Strategy Description

Build widespread access to food that is culturally and religiously responsive for all children in their education and care settings. In order to ensure that every child in Vermont is able to participate in child nutrition programs, the programs must provide accessible and culturally responsive meals.

In order to grow these culturally responsive and accessible options, programs will need to engage their local communities, build trust with students and their families, work with local farms and producers, develop new recipes and menus, and test & replicate new service models to ensure the food is readily accessible. It will be important to build resiliency and to meet students' needs through the local food system to ensure that adequate variety and affordable food is available to Vermont programs and families. In particular, Kosher and Halal food options are difficult for programs to procure and handle appropriately, and improvement is needed throughout the local supply chain to ensure these foods are available. Robust training is also needed to ensure that program staff have all the tools and knowledge to cook with new foods, follow appropriate food preparation guidelines and restrictions, and achieve appropriate certifications when needed.

In addition, we must pilot unique and underutilized program options with schools and other sponsors, such as migrant sites or innovative service models, to reach underserved children with the programs. New service models and other best practices can help eliminate barriers to access for children to these meal programs.

Action Steps

In order to begin making progress building sustainable models for providing culturally and religiously responsive meals in child nutrition programs in the state, we need to establish effective service models and address the immediate availability of food.

- Research and learn about new and innovative ideas getting put into place around the country and our region. New projects in Portland, ME and Boston, MA school systems provide early blueprints for Vermont programs to adapt and learn from, as well as a growing community of practice to utilize as a resource.
- Identify training needs and bring new training opportunities to program staff in CN programs throughout the state.
- Pilot Kosher & Halal meals on a small scale in Vermont to establish replicable models for other schools and early childhood programs to adopt.
- Identify and invest in supply chain improvements to ensure that more food options are available to meet students' needs.
- Pilot migrant summer meals sites, which can be used to provide meals to migrant children even in areas not otherwise eligible.

Key Champions

Vermont Agency of Education

Vermont Agency of Agriculture Food & Markets

NOFA-VT

Vermont Farm to School & Early Childhood Network

Hunger Free Vermont

School Nutrition Association of Vermont

Strategy 8: Invest in Farm to School & Early Childhood.

Background

Farm to School and Early Childhood (FTSEC) is an innovative program that nurtures children's health, cultivates viable farms, and builds vibrant communities. This multi-pronged approach of place-based food and farming education, local food procurement, and expanded meal programs that feed kids seeks to build education communities throughout the state that connect children to long-term food resiliency and security in their classrooms, their cafeterias, and their communities.

FTSEC engages children directly in their local food system; facilitating learning about food, providing exposure to new foods, creating better access to quality food. This builds a stronger local food economy that improves climate resilience and food access in our local communities. In addition, this program has been crucial in building connections between schools and families around food that help and inspire community-based solutions to improving child food security. This has also created a gateway into new or expanded meal programming for early childhood programs through the CACFP.

Strategy Description

Cultivate robust Farm to School and Early Childhood (FTSEC) programs and expand investment in Vermont's Local Food Purchasing Incentive Program to support Early Childhood Education (ECE) programs as well as schools.

Vermont has always been at the forefront of FTSEC programming, a comprehensive approach to food and agriculture education that helps to feed children in the present and ensure a food secure future as they grow up. The state has a FTSEC grant program built to ensure that children are engaged in their food system, meal programs can flourish, kids are well-nourished, and a resilient food system is sustained. Continuing to expand farm to school and early childhood programs will feed this virtuous cycle and help sustain a food secure future for Vermont kids.

In 2021, Vermont initiated a Local Food Purchasing Incentive Program for schools. Sustaining and expanding this highly successful program to ECE programs would help financially sustain ECE meal programs and further support Vermont's farm economy.

Action Steps

In order to continue to grow Farm to School and Early Childhood programs in Vermont, it is necessary to

- Continue to fully fund state Farm to School and Early Childhood Grant Programs and the Local Foods Incentive for Schools, currently at \$500,000 for each program.
- Research and pilot local food procurement strategies for early childhood education programs that increase local purchasing power
- Continue expanding the Vermont Farm to School and Early Childhood Network

Key Champions

The Vermont Farm to School & Early Childhood Network

The Vermont Farm to Early Childhood Coalition

VT FEED

Vermont Agency of Agriculture Food & Markets

Hunger Free Vermont

Vermont Agency of Education

Regional Farm to School Organizations

- Food Connects
- Vital Communities
- Vermont Farm & Forest School
- Acorn
- Healthy Roots
- Green Mountain Farm-to-School

Conclusions & Next Steps

This report outlines the strategies that need to be undertaken in order to create a food secure future for all Vermont's children. The strategies outlined in this report encompass a variety of necessary approaches, some of which will require legislative action and others of which will rely solely on technical assistance and direct support and education. Some strategies will likely take multiple years to accomplish, while others are shorter term and more time sensitive in their required action. Aspects of the initiatives outlined in this report will take statewide effort across varying sectors, including state legislative action. We would be remiss not to mention that many of the food access programs that we mention in the report, including 3SquaresVT (SNAP), WIC, the National School Lunch & Breakfast programs, the Summer Food Service Program, the Child and Adult Care Food Program, and Summer EBT are all federally-funded nutrition programs, which will also require federal efforts in order to make the programs more accessible to the families enrolled in them. We continue to work with our Federal Delegation to update them about the needs of Vermonters when it comes to making programmatic changes and expansions at the federal level.

As mentioned in the executive summary, this report is not one unified campaign. We are working with an extensive group of key champions, who helped us create a collective description of the range of strategies that need to be implemented to ensure that every child in Vermont has a food secure future.

Next Steps & Implementation:

The next phase of this effort is to formally invite the coalition of identified key champions to meet and discuss next steps for the strategies outlined in the report. Key champions must commit to long-term action on the strategies in partnership with state lawmakers, child nutrition program operators, the private sector, and Vermonters with children to advance the initiatives in this report with the available tools and resources to end childhood hunger in Vermont.

A long-term commitment requires an inspiring vision and framework, with a set of principles to help us agree on priorities and to keep our actions aligned and working effectively toward our goals, and consistent message frames we all can use to communicate the vision of a Vermont free from childhood hunger to all who might join this effort.

While the lead project partners and some additional stakeholders are already inspired by the process of creating this Strategic Plan, and have begun taking specific actions to fulfill it, more capacity is needed in order to be able to fulfill these strategies today and well into the future. Funding is needed in order to engage with key champions to design an inspiring and strategic framework for our collective work, and to integrate the strategies detailed here into the work plans of many organizations and agencies. Further feedback on the strategies outlined in this plan from Vermonters with children, young people themselves, and child nutrition professionals is needed to ensure the sustainability of the solutions proposed in the report, and resources must be provided in order to engage the people who are most affected by child hunger in the campaigns that can end it.

Glossary

CACFP = Child and Adult Care Food Program

CDD = Child Development Division

CNP = Child Nutrition Program

ECE = Early Childhood Education

FCCH = Family Child Care Home

FPL = Federal Poverty Level

FTS&ECE = Farm to School and Early Childhood Education

NSLP = National School Lunch Program

SBP = School Breakfast Program

SFA = School Food Authority

SFSP = Summer Food Service Program

USM = Universal School Meals

VAAFAM = Vermont Agency of Agriculture Food & Markets

VT AOE = Vermont Agency of Education

Endnotes

Further Reading:

1. [HFVT 2022 Providing Meals in Early Childhood Settings Report](#)
2. [CACFP Participation in Vermont 2022 Story Map](#)
3. [CACFP Participation in Vermont 2024 Story Map](#)
4. [CHILD AND ADULT CARE FOOD PROGRAM: TOTAL MEALS SERVED](#)
5. [Vermont Early Care and Education Financing Study \(2023\)](#)
6. [Food Security Roadmap](#)

Appendices**A. Appendix A 2022 & 2024 Providing Meals in Early Childhood Education Settings Focus Group****ProjectReports****a. (Tables 1-4)**

APPENDIX A**2022 & 2024 Providing Meals in Early Childhood Education Settings Focus Group Project Reports**

2024 Providing Meals in Early Childhood Education Settings Focus Group Report Findings

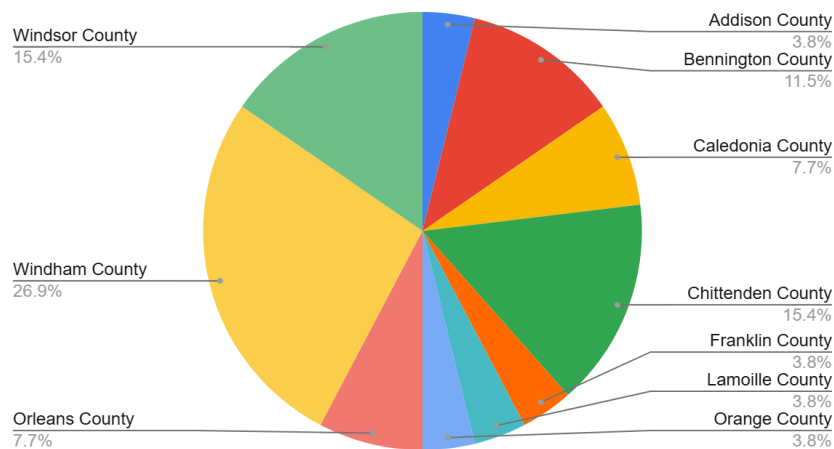
In our 2022 *Providing Meals in Early Childhood Settings* focus group study, we were able to determine that the most common barriers for participating in meal programming in early childhood education settings were as follows:

1. Cost of operating a meal program
2. Paperwork
3. Current Early Childhood Education Staffing Shortages
4. Time it Takes to Administer the Meal Program

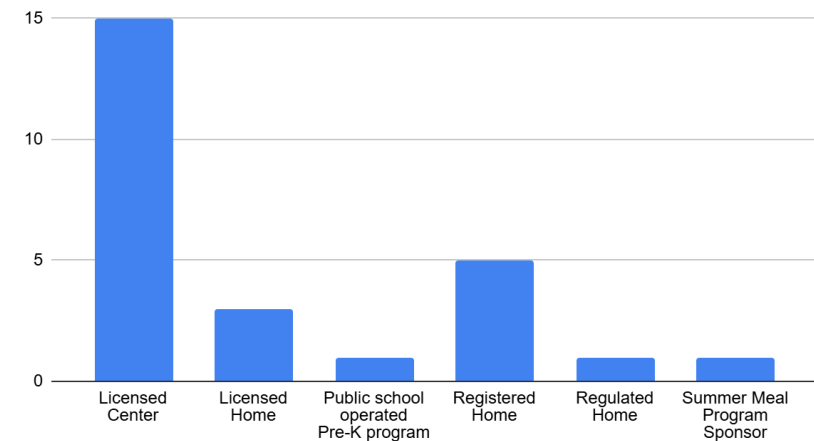
The preliminary findings from our updated 2024 focus group study, conducted from September-November of this year, indicate that the same barriers persist. Barriers like cost are exacerbated by rising food and transportation costs, while the reimbursement rates for the CACFP do not keep up with the rate of inflation.

In 2024, 26 registered and licensed early childhood education (ECE) programs participated in focus groups about meal programming in early childhood education settings. These focus groups were conducted virtually and hosted by Hunger Free Vermont. Each participant received a \$150 stipend in the form of a check as compensation for their participation. Below is the demographic data of the participating 26 ECE programs,

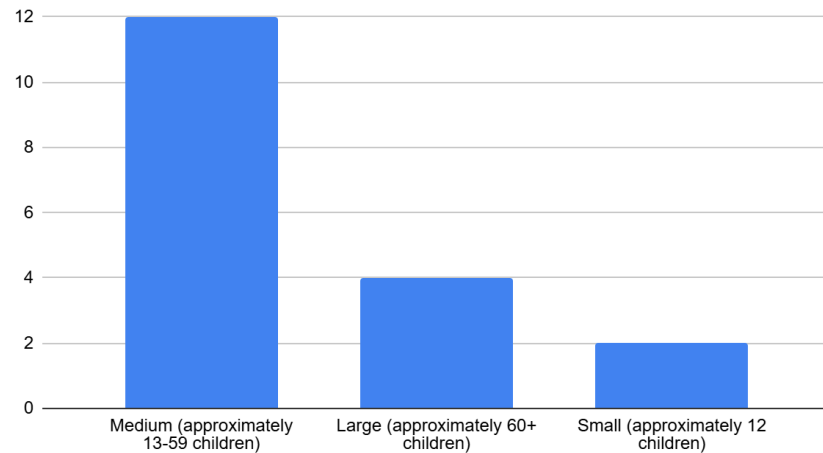
Count of County



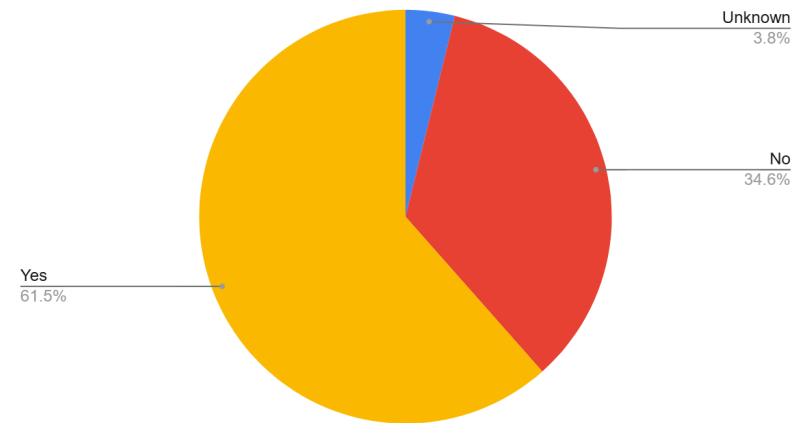
Type of Early Childhood Education Program



Size of Participating Early Childhood Programs



Participates in CACFP



We asked the participants the following questions during the focus group sessions:

1. What is your perceived cost of your meal program? This number would include cost of food, cost of infrastructure (supplies, cooking space, etc.) and cost of labor. This might be easiest to calculate with a weekly or monthly snapshot.
2. What are stories of success you've had with your meal program? Examples could be collaboration with local schools or stakeholders, connections made with families, resources that have made an impact, and more. These successes may help to encourage other early childhood programs to expand and increase access within their own organizations.
3. What are the barriers to operating a meal program in an early care and education setting, in your experience? Examples of barriers could be administrative burden, cost, etc.
4. What would you need in order to be able to participate in meal programming/providing meals and snacks in your program?

Themes and Calculations around Cost of Participation in Meal Programming:

The cost of operating a meal program in an early childhood education program is a significant barrier to participation and has been reported as a reason why some ECE programs have discontinued participation in meal programming.

Thematically, participants reported that when they participated in the Child and Adult Care Food Program (CACFP), the federal reimbursements they received covered approximately half of their meal program operating costs, and often didn't actually cover the full cost of food let alone staff time, infrastructure and supplies. Participants reported that they must cover any additional costs through tuition or other private supplemental funding. Additionally, some participants work in ECE programs who offer meals and snacks but they don't participate in the CACFP, meaning that they fund their meal program entirely out of tuition and other private funds.

From the data we received from focus group participants who operated meal programs regarding their food program costs (Table 1), we identified these average annual meal program costs for small, medium and large programs:

Average Annual Cost of a Large ECE Program: \$72,000.00

Average Annual Cost of a Medium ECE Program: \$41,016.33

Average Annual Cost of a Small ECE Program: \$15,203.33

Average Annual Meal Program Cost by Program Licensure Size Per Child (2023 Dollars)

Program Licensing Size ▼	Average annual cost per program size	Average Annual Cost Per Child Per Enrollment Average
Small (6-12)	\$15,203.33	\$1,900.42
Medium (13-59)	\$41,016.33	\$1,925.15
Large (60+)	\$72,000.00	\$1,200.00
Average	\$42,739.89	\$1,675.19

Most Common Barriers to Participation in Meal Programming (Table 2):

1. Amount of paperwork required of federal meal program, the CACFP
2. Time that it takes to buy, prepare, and serve the food
3. Cost of the meal program including food cost, infrastructure, staff time, and supplies

4. Red tape of administration of the federal meal program, the CACFP

Examples of Meal Programming Successes (Table 3):

1. Receiving free school meals from local school districts when eligible to do so
2. Partnerships with local food shelves and/or the VT Foodbank
3. Receiving Farm to School & Early Childhood Grants from the Vermont Agency of Agriculture Food & Markets
4. Children trying new foods that they may not have had the opportunity to try at home

What do ECE Programs Need in Order to be able to Serve Meals and Snacks? (Table 4):

1. More funding and opportunities for local purchasing
2. Higher reimbursements
3. Reduced administrative burden
4. Qualified meal program staff - a cook and/or a meal program coordinator

Conclusions:

Although the Child and Adult Care Food Program remains the most equitable and viable way for early childhood education programs to provide meals and snacks to their students, there are still many barriers to participation.

Cost of meal programming remains the most commonly cited barrier to participation in the CACFP. Interestingly, meal program budgets vary widely across early childhood education programs. We heard consistently that the amount of federal reimbursement participating programs received barely covered food costs, let alone the other costs associated with operating a nutrition program such as staff time to administer the program and complete the paperwork, staff time to procure the food, staff time to prepare the food, infrastructure, etc. The first step in mitigating this barrier is to provide state funding to cover the gap in funding to make the CACFP more viable for more ECE programs in Vermont. Simultaneously we should be providing technical support to ECEs around creating their meal program budgets in more efficient and effective ways.

New changes to the way the CACFP is administered has also created confusion for participating programs. Although participating ECE programs receive robust training on the CACFP annually and as federal changes are made, tracking the meal program alongside all of the other aspects of ECE programming when technology does not align across the board makes the meal program extremely cumbersome and, in many cases, inaccessible for ECE programs who are already extremely limited on time and capacity.

A challenge that was mentioned as being particularly burdensome for Family Child Care Homes (FCCHs), though still came up as a burden for center-based programs as well, was the time that it takes to purchase and prepare meals and snacks. In many cases for small FCCHs, who may only be a staff of one, they are working 15-16+ hour days and then having to build in more time to go grocery shopping and then prep the food for the next day. In many cases this time commitment is unrealistic, and yet programs cannot afford to pay an additional staff member to coordinate the nutrition program.

The strategies outlined in the section above related to the CACFP and early childhood education meal programming reflect the needs identified in the focus group conversations we had with actual early childhood education programs who are trying to provide quality child care along with all of the other components of holistic early childhood education, including nutrition programming.

Child care food programming changes from 2022 to 2024:

In 2022, there were 950 registered and licensed child care programs in the state of Vermont with a licensed capacity of 21,675 children. Of those child care programs, 226 (or roughly 24%) participated in the federal child nutrition program, the Child and Adult Care Food Program (CACFP). In 2024, there were 900 registered and licensed child care programs in the state of Vermont with a capacity of 22,965 children. Of those child care programs, 319 (or roughly 35%) participated in the CACFP. While there are a variety of ways child care programs may be providing meals to children, the CACFP is the most commonly utilized meal program model due to the fact that it provides a cash reimbursement for each qualifying meal served, meaning that the child care programs do not have to fund the full cost of the meal program out of pocket.

While it is encouraging to acknowledge that a higher proportion of child care programs are participating in the CACFP in 2024 than were in 2022, it's important to note that there are less child care programs operating in general statewide, which skews that data. Additionally, although we have seen an increase in CACFP participation, 35% participation is still drastically lower than pre-pandemic participation (50% of all registered and licensed child care programs) as well as public K-12 school participation in the federal child nutrition program. In many cases when child care programs are not participating in the CACFP, parents are required to provide meals for their children during the child care day. The CACFP is the most equitable way for children to access nutrition at child care because every child receives the same nutritionally-adequate and developmentally-appropriate meals and snacks, whereas when parents are required to provide meals and snacks children may not receive proper nutrition due to lack of family food security, capacity and resources.

We can also evaluate changes in total meals served through the CACFP in Vermont over time to analyze the viability of the CACFP in Vermont specifically. Nationally we have seen rates of participation in the CACFP drop, along with decreases in the number of CACFP meals served

annually. In Vermont, we saw a significant decrease in CACFP meals served annually since before the pandemic with meals served still not reaching pre-pandemic numbers:

2019 - 5,045,495 CACFP meals served

2020 - 3,528,966 CACFP meals served

2021 - *no data*

2022 - 2,460,740 CACFP meals served

2023 - 2,457,295 CACFP meals served

2024 - 2,464,303 CACFP meals served

2,581,192 decrease in CACFP meals served since prior to the pandemic - the only Child Nutrition Program in VT to see this pattern

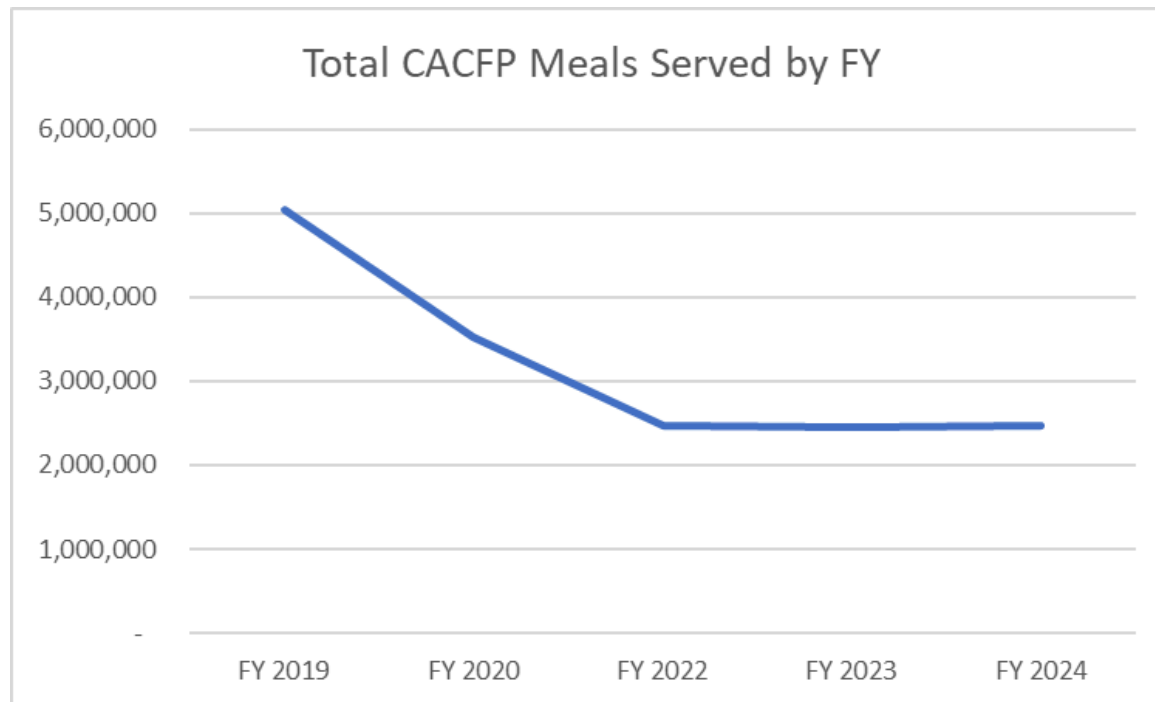


Table 1 - Cost of providing meals in early childhood education settings

<u>County</u>	<u>Type of Early Childhood Program</u>	<u>Size of Program</u>	<u>Participates in CACFP (yes/no/unknown)</u>	<u>Estimated Annual Program Cost</u>	<u>Insight Into Program Cost (if provided)</u>	<u>Estimated Annual Federal Reimbursement (if participating in CACFP)</u>
Windsor County	Licensed Center	Medium (approximately 13-59 children)	U	\$0.00	Receive meals from school through National School Lunch Program Universal School Meals;for snack they “hoard” shelf stable stuff that comes in from lunch; parents sometimes bring stuff in	N/A
Franklin County	Registered Home		Y	\$7,200.00		--
Chittenden County	Registered Home		Y	\$8,460.00	Reimbursement from CACFP does not include labor costs; pays missing amounts out of pocket	--

Addison County	Registered Home		Y	\$3,000.00	Only provides breakfast & PM snack through the CACFP; the cost of operating the meal program is a lot higher than the reimbursement rates, to the point where sometimes it doesn't feel worth it - this is a real struggle; reimbursement doesn't cover labor costs or record keeping; reimbursement rate feels insulting	\$1,200.00
Windham County	Licensed Center	Medium (approximately 13-59 children)	N	\$72,800.00	created budget that includes 2 snacks and a meal + cost of labor = \$1400/week to run non-parent supported meal program	N/A
Windham County	Licensed Center	Large (approximately 60+ children)	N			

Bennington County	Licensed Center	Large (approximately 60+ children)	Y	No Response	reimbursed through CACFP and they get the highest reimbursement rate because Head Start program; no financial qualification for kids enrolled in their program, auto qualify for free lunch because Head Start program; CACFP knows they can't cover the cost of the program with the reimbursement rate, it doesn't cover the cost (even though they are reimbursed at the highest rate) and through application they have to provide info on other financial streams (grants, head start program)	
Orleans County	Summer Meal Program Sponsor		N	\$15,000.00	food part of program is all reimbursed through the federal Summer Food Service Program (; the rest of program costs are covered with grants and sales	N/A

					of adult meals (served through lunchbox program too, but paid for); only open for 8 weeks in the summer	
Windham County	Licensed Center	Medium (approximately 13-59 children)	Y	No Response	not everything is covered by reimbursement, especially not labor; with head start - emphasis on local foods but that is a barrier because it is so expensive and reimbursement only goes so far;	
Chittenden County	Licensed Center	Large (approximately 60+ children)	N			N/A
Orleans County	Licensed Home	Small (approximately 12 children)	Y	No Response	a very budgeted shopper and almost made money on the meal program because they budget so much	
Bennington County	Licensed Center	Medium (approximately 13-59 children)	Y	\$62,000.00	Reimbursement does well covering food costs because high number of low income families, 21	--

					free and reduced lunch families	
Windham County	Licensed Home		N	No Response		N/A
Windham County	Licensed Center	Medium (approximately 13-59 children)	N			N/A
Chittenden County	Licensed Center	Large (approximately 60+ children)	Y	\$72,000.00	reimbursement about covers labor cost and they do the food -"its not sustainable"; had a hard time finding a chef but they finally got one (march-sept without a chef)	\$24,000.00
Windsor County	Licensed Center	Medium (approximately 13-59 children)	Y	\$9,310.00	The federal reimbursement is nowhere near enough	
Bennington County	Licensed Center	Medium (approximately 13-59 children)	Y	No Response	get about half reimbursed and they have to pick and choose where they put that money	
Lamoille County	Licensed Center	Medium (approximately 13-59 children)	Y	\$47,000.00		\$21,150.00

Windsor County	Licensed Center	Medium (approximately 13-59 children)	Y	\$80,000.00	get about half reimbursed	\$40,000.00
Windham County	Licensed Home	Small (approximately 12 children)	N	\$750.00	Wants to participate in CACFP, but needs a new well in order to be eligible; A new well would cost \$18,000	N/A
Windsor County	Public school operated Pre-K program	Medium (approximately 13-59 children)	N	\$0.00	Free breakfast and lunch from school food program	N/A
Windham County	Regulated Home		Y	\$21,000.00		\$12,000.00
Chittenden County	Licensed Center	Medium (approximately 13-59 children)	Y	\$54,000.00	\$2K deficit/month with reimbursement	\$30,000.00
Orange County	Licensed Center	Medium (approximately 13-59 children)	N	\$988.00	only offer morning and afternoon snack (children bring lunches)	N/A
Caledonia County	Registered Home		Y	\$5,200.00	serves an extra snack not covered by CACFP	\$3,900.00
Caledonia County	Registered Home		Y	No Response		

Table 2 - Barriers to Operating an Early Childhood Meal Program

<u>County</u>	<u>Type of Early Childhood Program</u>	<u>Size of Program</u>	<u>Participates in CACFP (yes/no/unknown)</u>	<u>Barriers to Operating an Early Childhood Meal Program</u>
Windsor County	Licensed Center	Medium (approximately 13-59 children)	U	teachers hate the paperwork that comes with every meal; feeding kids is already busy and then they need to document what's served, what's composted, etc;
Franklin County	Registered Home		Y	
Chittenden County	Registered Home		Y	cost, especially in the last year, things cost more than they used to; "everything is expensive now"
Addison County	Registered Home		Y	the time it takes to prep food, could provide more variety if they had more time, doesn't want to have to prep food outside of the work day which is already 9 hours, lack of time is the reason they don't provide lunch - can't imagine doing it and would love to be a fly on the wall to see how other programs do it while also spending time with the children; kids would get much better tasting food if they had time as a resource or some sort of service to come in and prep stuff or food share with a school
Windham County	Licensed Center	Medium (approximately 13-59 children)	N	concerns about the quality of food provided through CACFP and lack of control for different diets; outdoor program/nature based school so lots of the cooking and eating is done outside and they can't meet regulations when they are doing food prep outside/cooking over a fire/etc.;

Windham County	Licensed Center	Large (approximately 60+ children)	N	economic diversity of families - not enough free and reduced to qualify for a lot of the money other programs get; some families could pay for things and others cant; feel like they are in the donut hole where they can't have families pay for everything because not all families have the budget for that but they also don't qualify for high reimbursement/certain federal programs because they have too many high income families;
Bennington County	Licensed Center	Large (approximately 60+ children)	Y	staffing, staffing, staffing!; 3 FT cooks, 2 PT kitchen assistants; one person is the coverage when someone is out; administrative burden of CACFP is huge; the CACFP regulations themselves are a barrier to feeding kids; cost, staffings, all the same stuff [that others said]; another challenge in the whole system, when talking about meal modifications, is the healthcare system - they seem annoyed/burdened when the ECE program needs medical forms in order to provide medically tailored meals - they understand this annoyance because it is also a burden on the healthcare workers - CACFP guidelines is a burden on not only child care programs, but also on health workers/system; agrees about CACFP guidelines being westernized and not flexible enough for cultural or medical needs; some immigrant families want to help cook and educate cooks on how to make culturally relevant meals but the CACFP guidelines are confusing to them also
Orleans County	Summer Meal Program Sponsor		N	administrative burden is significant; food service position is grant funded so they are always looking for grants to fund that position, plus they had a grant review in the middle of the summer which was really tough; a lot of the paperwork is really duplicative; the truck is getting old, having trouble starting, needs to be jump started a lot and it costs a lot of money to keep the truck running; guidelines say kids must take milk and lots of kids don't drink it so it goes to waste

Windham County	Licensed Center	Medium (approximately 13-59 children)	Y	only have 1 chef to cover 5 sites and 15 classrooms, can't do a lot of homemade foods with just 1 chef; low staffing in general; staff changes can throw things off majorly ("so and so used to do this" so when they leave, who does it?); hesitation on grants due to the time commitment involved with them; transporting food is tough, they pull maintenance crew into helping with that, which then makes things complicated because they have to be mindful of the crews schedules for their normal work; infants to age 5 so menu adjusts a lot and is limited because of choking hazards, etc., and can't make 2 meals; tailoring to dietary needs is also tough and limits what they can do, especially when combined with time constraints and staff shortages; obviously cost is huge one too; you really need a whole staff person to oversee just the food program,
Chittenden County	Licensed Center	Large (approximately 60+ children)	N	staffing changes at partners can throw things totally out of whack; cost always going to be a big one; haven't been "bad enough" to prioritize (which they hate saying) but they are only one person and it's hard to move things along when its one persons solo project; staff always really hard, do they have enough staff to check in with families and kids; not participating in CACFP because of staffing, cost, and physical space which is an ongoing problem; systemic web of staffing and money which is hard to even think about approaching; anytime they've had a little bit of wiggle room for an extra staff person, it is grant tied so when the grant runs out, they have to let the extra staff person go; if they're going to add anyone new, it has to be permanent

Orleans County	Licensed Home	Small (approximately 12 children)	Y	getting kids to sit down for a meal has been a struggle - they want to graze all day; a lot of it is budget; if you don't know how to cook and prepare; the cost is insufficient; they can take the time to drive to multiple stores but not everyone can do that; they get paid less for school agers but they cost more to care for; reimbursement doesn't cover everything, for most people it doesn't even cover the food let alone labor and everything else that goes into running a meal program; a lot goes to waste because you have to serve a certain amount of food and kids throw it away; there are a lot of rules; its hard too because if you go get fresh veggies you need to utilize them quickly, or processed to be frozen; pop-in visits from administrators of meal program
Bennington County	Licensed Center	Medium (approximately 13-59 children)	Y	Paperwork and reviews. Reviews every two or three years. Had a virtual one during COVID. Doing on-site again but asking to front load information in the portal, interview, then come on-site and watch meal prep, then exit interview. This four-part process is new. When enroll family, enroll into food program. Hard to get families to fill out the paperwork in subsequent years. Time to track down families. Federal program so confusing, federal form, particularly about the income piece. Form is burdensome to families. Sometimes have to fill out for families and they review. Cost is still an issue. Part of it is because buying mostly fresh food. Preparing more food than minimum portion size because kids are growing and are hungry and not all families have food security. Prepare twice as much as the portion size. Cost and paperwork burden in summary.

Windham County	Licensed Home		N	More rural areas, harder to get to places where can buy food in bulk. Not reimbursed enough to buy locally. Share tips/food ideas like discount breads if buy at the end of the day, etc. Different experience with food program than others. Have administering organization visit 3 times a year, some are planned visits and some are unplanned. Not required to upload everything to the portal. Ok to send take pictures of documents and text vs. scanning. Live in low poverty area, so automatically in Tier 1 area so all kids get to eat for free so parents do not need to complete paperwork. Just need to get signature from parents on a form, but still an administrative task for staff to make sure it is renewed. Other challenges such as which parent the child is enrolled under and who picks up/drops off for signature on the form.
Windham County	Licensed Center	Medium (approximately 13-59 children)	N	Haven't done food program yet. Paying for the time to use the Church's kitchen is a barrier and having the negotiation with them for the rent increase, and developing the budget to see if it is worth it to put the time and effort into running especially when the families are mostly pretty good at providing snacks, though not true for all of the kids. A few kids would really benefit.
Chittenden County	Licensed Center	Large (approximately 60+ children)	Y	inability to find food service workers who are qualified, able to navigate the food program, will accept the weird hours, etc; chefs often operate off ego but with kids they need to listen to feedback and change and chefs dont really have that mindset, so finding the RIGHT person, the qualified person, who will take less money and less hours is a challenge; fears about running the food program accurately - can they save food? Feels bad throwing a lot in the compost
Windsor County	Licensed Center	Medium (approximately 13-59 children)	Y	also without a cook since march but they are not replacing cook, a new hire who is a provider/teacher has taken on that work; so relates to not knowing what they don't know, fellow employee used to work at the Agency of Education and does food stuff which is helpful otherwise its so much information

Bennington County	Licensed Center	Medium (approximately 13-59 children)	Y	lots of paperwork!, the forms change and it's hard to retrain everyone on the new ones; it's a lot to learn and they don't even know what questions to ask until they suddenly realize they did something wrong
Lamoille County	Licensed Center	Medium (approximately 13-59 children)	Y	really struggled to retain a cook who can encompass the entire job (cook, find deals at the grocery store while sticking to the approved menu, CACFP paperwork, etc)
Windsor County	Licensed Center	Medium (approximately 13-59 children)	Y	No Response
Windham County	Licensed Home	Small (approximately 12 children)	N	amount of paperwork is a barrier for wanting to do it at all - new program, wants to do the food program but the paperwork is extremely daunting - "how can I make all of the lunches AND do the paperwork all by myself?"
Windsor County	Public school operated Pre-K program	Medium (approximately 13-59 children)	N	No Response
Windham County	Regulated Home		Y	not having a chef takes away from program as lead teacher to make the meals, which is why she tries to infuse into the curriculum
Chittenden County	Licensed Center	Medium (approximately 13-59 children)	Y	STAFF have had to hire 2 people this year - can find a qualified food service staff, but not one that can work the necessary hours; online ordering through Hannaford, but have to pay for the delivery;
Orange County	Licensed Center	Medium (approximately 13-59 children)	N	capacity piece!!! Work so hard to keep meal program simple and under budget; facilities barrier - leasing a space
Caledonia County	Registered Home		Y	Had families try to pack lunches, was a mess. Waste a lot of food with portion sizes. Some providers don't want folks coming into the house for reviews, but this program feels it's necessary. Infant feeding hard to understand - when to start solids, how to start

				solids; options that they give you for reimbursement
Caledonia County	Registered Home		Y	<p>FCCHs face many different challenges than center-based programs face; not paid enough for infants - formula very expensive and the reimbursement doesn't cover the cost of formula/baby food; new changes and requirements - annual trainings that feel redundant, but take up tons of time; lots of providers in the area are fed up with the food program and are threatening to drop, has heard anecdotally; too much portion strictness - told serving too much food; RED TAPE - over complicated in last few years - computer software for meal program doesn't align with any other early childhood education software, tripling the workload; licensing requirements for FCCH are more complex overall, which makes everything more burdensome; healthy snacks too expensive and hard to make</p>

Table 3 - Opportunities Related to Operating an Early Childhood Meal Program

<u>County</u>	<u>Type of Early Childhood Program</u>	<u>Size of Program</u>	<u>Participates in CACFP (yes/no/unknown)</u>	<u>Opportunities Related to Operating an Early Childhood Meal Program</u>
Windsor County	Licensed Center	Medium (approximately 13-59 children)	U	free meals with no stigma is huge (USM!)
Franklin County	Registered Home		Y	
Chittenden County	Registered Home		Y	card that you put 100 (dollars?) on and you get 15 matched (sounds like this was from a farmstand)
Addison County	Registered Home		Y	BROC food boxes, lots of local foods that makes families and ECE program happy!
Windham County	Licensed Center	Medium (approximately 13-59 children)	N	new program this school year - parent education, helping parents understand healthy food choices for growing children, help parents look into what is in food, opening up picky eaters, confidence in foods at home, engaging school community; feedback on this program is overwhelmingly positive, parents are happy with it, option to participate so if buying snacks is not in the budget for the parents, they don't have to buy them (but their kids can still eat the snacks)
Windham County	Licensed Center	Large (approximately 60+ children)	N	

Bennington County	Licensed Center	Large (approximately 60+ children)	Y	community partnerships - HFVT, hunger council which has greatly enhanced the food systems in the county/area; sources culturally responsive foods like sourcing halal meat, found a vendor who can sell halal chicken (vendor is from new york, but they are only 10 miles from border); working with community partners to make sure students are actually getting their meals (ie. easter seals (?) makes sure foster kiddos are getting their meals at program, which sometimes involves to-go meals, which they can't get reimbursement for, but at least the kiddo is eating breakfast - had idea to collaborate with easter seals to bring parent into breakfast area for meeting with kiddo); cooking demo at local library piggybacked with recruitment effort for head start program; community garden on same block as largest program, they donated 3 plots to the program and families can go to it any time they want to, set up stand for families to get food from of donated food and get info on community garden;
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Orleans County	Summer Meal Program Sponsor		N	lots of success collaborating with local libraries, VT dept of health, WIC program; travels to different towns and sets up at libraries - coordinate with story hour, great way to get families with young children to meal sites; WIC does outreach at these events; other community orgs will come and do activities/presentations/giveaways/etc during lunchbox distribution; set up an enrichment activity alongside the truck as well as a market table of free food that is gleaned from school gardens and donations from local farmers, salvation farms who brings surplus, so families can take free food while at the lunchbox; provide recipes, taste tests, ways to learn and engage; these things make the program special; recently started adult meal vouchers - funding to pilot this in some towns, funding to provide coupons where adults can also get a free meal- this has been really successful at getting more people to the meal site
Windham County	Licensed Center	Medium (approximately 13-59 children)	Y	runs CACFP and have been doing it for years; had main agency but also work with nearby daycare centers and they provide food to these partner daycare sites; a success with all of this (re: providing local foods), nearby to Food Connects in Brattleboro - haven't done a lot with them yet but when they do, it's great because its a one stop shop and they deliver local foods! Success with them when they are able to order (would do it more if they had capacity to prep and cut things or if there was the option to get foods already prepped and cut directly from Food Connects)

Chittenden County	Licensed Center	Large (approximately 60+ children)	N	big amount of success with the food pantry project and building community connections with it - started with a community member donating food from Hannaford sort of randomly and ad hoc; started looking into what equipment they can get - got a fridge and shelving and put it sort of out of sight for folks to access; new partnership with Shaws and VT Foodbank, getting great food from them; just got \$5k grant from albertson's to supplement food pantry, got non perishables and toiletries; great feedback on the pantry from families
Orleans County	Licensed Home	Small (approximately 12 children)	Y	they either grow produce themselves or buy it from a local farmer and this helps them be able to serve better food, provide food to families; farm to school grant funds helped them be able to give meal kits to families; kids are really engaged with food when they can help prepare them themselves; food from the garden goes into meals - lots of tomato sauce and froze it, cucumbers, etc
Bennington County	Licensed Center	Medium (approximately 13-59 children)	Y	Success finding food service coordinator. Breakfast, lunch, snack all home cooked. From mac and cheese to more exciting items, like blueberry soup. Member of Bennington County collaborative in the Farm to Early Childhood/School early capacity building grant of \$5,000 rebuilt garden beds. Kids excited to eat the food that they grow. Use growing on food as part of curriculum. Enjoying trying foods that they wouldn't normally try because they grew it. CSA has allowed them to purchase more local food including meat, honey, maple syrup, and produce

				they can not grow themselves. Farm to School staff have been great to work with
Windham County	Licensed Home		N	How much children are willing to try new foods that they might not have eaten at home. Parents report that children are least picky eating at home. Children are often models for parents and siblings at home. Teaching kids language around trying new foods. Don't yuck my yum, take a taste, and it's not my favorite yet. Watching peers eating encourages the willingness of even older children to try and love a variety of foods. And, involving them to make their own snacks i.e. make your own tacos. Pride in making your own food and make it the way that they want to eat it. Community building opportunity of sharing food together and learning skills like take your own turn. Feed the teachers also.
Windham County	Licensed Center	Medium (approximately 13-59 children)	N	Gardening grant through early childhood network used for raised bed, kids would go to it and water, prune it and have ownership of it. Gift card for a CSA. Some cooking projects in the classroom ie. crockpot applesauce. Have small tasting things in a snack bag, not a full meal. Taste Test Tuesdays. Kids willing to eat foods for her than they will at home.

Chittenden County	Licensed Center	Large (approximately 60+ children)	Y	is personally very invested in food program - they didn't always have it but since they have, the difference is incredible because everyone eats the same nutritious foods and it really levels the playing field; when they didn't have a chef they tried a lot of things and at one point they thought they'd have to cut the program and parents really stepped up and said they'd help make it work (come into cut veggies, send groceries, etc); LOTS of buy-in to nutrition program!!
Windsor County	Licensed Center	Medium (approximately 13-59 children)	Y	just started working with the staff nutritionist, who really helped them get in a better frame of mind around food - staff has particular tastes/needs/wants/etc, talked with nutritionist about personal food issues with staff; also worked with nutritionist on kids serving themselves and it has led to kids sitting longer, great discussions; kids say thank you to the staff who cooked lunch - more of a whole group thing/celebration of eating; they are also a VT Foodbank partner and they get food from them and from another program called Willing Hands; last year they also did Vermonters Feeding Vermonters and got to essentially have a CSA and farmstand and they'd send food home with families and they LOVED IT
Bennington County	Licensed Center	Medium (approximately 13-59 children)	Y	they did the CSA during the summer and getting fresh fruits and veg from local places was really nice; even if they didn't get money through CACFP, they'd still want to run the same program they do because they get healthy meals for the kids which is important; CSA was through the ag dept

Lamoille County	Licensed Center	Medium (approximately 13-59 children)	Y	it's nice to be able to provide food for everybody, everyone starts at the same place every morning; they've talked to parents who lack food security and they say it's so nice to know their kids can eat at the program - this makes it all worth it!
Windsor County	Licensed Center	Medium (approximately 13-59 children)	Y	one of the reasons they are able to keep doing meal program is their partnership with the VT Foodbank; helps make the money that is reimbursed go further; they are a partner with the Foodbank because they also have a foodshelf; also a part of Willing Hands and took part in the Vermonters Feeding Vermonters program so they could get lots of local foods - they have gotten to try so many different foods and the kids love it
Windham County	Licensed Home	Small (approximately 12 children)	N	No Response
Windsor County	Public school operated Pre-K program	Medium (approximately 13-59 children)	N	receive free meals from school; on site
Windham County	Regulated Home		Y	overcoming picky eating; able to break through; whole families have changed eating habits in really positive ways; don't do the meal program for the money, do it for the process; important to model behavior by providing meals to staff as well
Chittenden County	Licensed Center	Medium (approximately 13-59 children)	Y	No Response
Orange County	Licensed Center	Medium (approximately 13-59 children)	N	No Response

Caledonia County	Registered Home		Y	actually feels like the program has gotten less burdensome, since before 10 years ago. Because on food program, can afford to buy fresh produce and better quality food than if weren't on the food program. Reviewer only there for half an hour for FCCH, vs AoE coming into licensed centers for the whole day. Sponsor who visits is very helpful, not judgemental
Caledonia County	Registered Home		Y	No Response

Table 4 - Needs for Operating an Early Childhood Meal Program

<u>County</u>	<u>Type of Early Childhood Program</u>	<u>Size of Program</u>	<u>Participates in CACFP (yes/no/unknown)</u>	<u>Needs for Operating an Early Childhood Meal Program</u>
Windsor County	Licensed Center	Medium (approximately 13-59 children)	U	local CSA - keep money in our communities but also getting variety in the kids diets - kids get sick of the same food over and over
Franklin County	Registered Home		Y	higher reimbursements; more opportunities for getting local CSA food
Chittenden County	Registered Home		Y	higher reimbursement rates; money for the extra stuff like paper products that are extra costs related to food; added kitchenette into the daycare in order to be able to step away and prepare food while keeping an eye on the kids
Addison County	Registered Home		Y	money, for one - it would be worth doing the work; they are the only person working at her daycare so if they had a delivery program that could drop meals off , that would be great because they just don't have the capacity to do it themselves; would consider getting meals from a vendor (school or restaurant) if the reimbursement rate was sufficient; could school culinary programs provide the food? Like high school culinary programs!!
Windham County	Licensed Center	Medium (approximately 13-59 children)	N	ease for shopping locally/stipends or incentives for shopping locally; not being forced to order from sysco or whoever; has not used the agency of ag grants for local food but is interested in it
Windham County	Licensed Center	Large (approximately 60+ children)	N	money, staffing, an economical way of paying for ingredients; less burdensome paperwork - parents see other programs doing meals, but the admin paperwork is such a lift that the ECE program can't necessarily do that - they are hesitant to take on a big extra thing

				even though it would be great for the parents
Bennington County	Licensed Center	Large (approximately 60+ children)	Y	would love to say money, but they would also say reduced administrative burden and usually more money comes with a higher administrative burden which they don't necessarily want - there is a lot of duplicity in the reporting; how do we get qualified staffing? How do we get people who can be cooks and not just "lunch ladies"? "I dont think there can be too many cooks in the kitchen"
Orleans County	Summer Meal Program Sponsor		N	a new truck!; getting rid of duplicated paperwork; funding for staff time
Windham County	Licensed Center	Medium (approximately 13-59 children)	Y	administration lift is so tough; CACFP coordinator could be great and make the program better; of course money would be helpful but the guidance in how to use the program
Chittenden County	Licensed Center	Large (approximately 60+ children)	N	not only their dream to have someone run it but to have someone else guiding them to do it well; in an ideal world where they have the funds and the staffing, it still feels so like "would it actually work?"; funding is the first piece and staffing for this specifically; huge site - capacity for 120 kids; challenge to find a program that fits the needs of so many kids so they would be infrastructure and staffing to manage this
Orleans County	Licensed Home	Small (approximately 12 children)	Y	a cook, or at least an extra set of hands; higher rate of reimbursement;
Bennington County	Licensed Center	Medium (approximately 13-59 children)	Y	Equipment like mixer, higher reimbursement rate to include salary, continuing Farm to ECE grants
Windham County	Licensed Home		N	Being able to ask for full-size refrigerator and a full freezer would be helpful to allow for buying in bulk. Upping the reimbursement rates. Reduce/streamline the paperwork i.e. if kid is marked as enrolled assume that they were offered are all of the meals. Smartcare has this feature. Should be able to use your own child

				care Higher reimbursement rate, appliances, streamlining paperwork.
Windham County	Licensed Center	Medium (approximately 13-59 children)	N	Need refrigerator, freezer, storage space, salary for someone to cook.
Chittenden County	Licensed Center	Large (approximately 60+ children)	Y	No Response
Windsor County	Licensed Center	Medium (approximately 13-59 children)	Y	No Response
Bennington County	Licensed Center	Medium (approximately 13-59 children)	Y	No Response
Lamoille County	Licensed Center	Medium (approximately 13-59 children)	Y	No Response
Windsor County	Licensed Center	Medium (approximately 13-59 children)	Y	No Response
Windham County	Licensed Home	Small (approximately 12 children)	N	state well registry of people who put wells in who would let a program do a payment program - companies would approve this; want to hire someone to do the food service program in a part-time capacity
Windsor County	Public school operated Pre-K program	Medium (approximately 13-59 children)	N	No Response

Windham County	Regulated Home		Y	food order system for ECE's that only had CACFP-approved items - in response to continuously-changing guidelines/requirements; especially FCCH are often a staff of one; serving size requirements are crazy especially for children who don't have enough food at home; unrealistic expectations of what kids should be eating
Chittenden County	Licensed Center	Medium (approximately 13-59 children)	Y	years ago adults used to get reimbursed for staff meals; important for modeling; even just the food being fully reimbursed; why do they have to prove the breakdown of the portion too much red tape and not enough trust;
Orange County	Licensed Center	Medium (approximately 13-59 children)	N	No Response
Caledonia County	Registered Home		Y	would be nice to be able to buy foods in bulk - currently limited to what is available at local grocery stores
Caledonia County	Registered Home		Y	No Response