Dear Network Partners,

Governor Scott’s announcement today that Vermont has reached a significant vaccination milestone brings with it excitement and anticipation that the challenges of the pandemic are behind us. We here at the Foodbank share this joy and hope. We applaud all the hard work you have done to feed your communities amidst such unprecedented challenges.

While there is excitement and urgency to return to normal and particularly to socializing around meals, we are taking time to reflect. The changes in government mandates and social pressures are happening quickly, but the recovery will be lengthy for most Vermonters, especially for those experiencing hunger. We must continue to provide a safe experience, appropriate and nutritious food, and dignified service. We have heard from many of you and wanted to provide our perspective on the changing circumstances.

We want to recognize first that we believe you know your organization’s situation best, and are able to understand and respond to local needs better than we can. We encourage you to continue listening closely to the people you serve, your neighbors, and community stakeholders to form a plan that works for everyone. A plan should respect that there will be differences in how people respond to changing conditions, and recognize that we have learned a lot during the past year and some changes may stay with us. Use the State of Vermont Universal Guidance to inform this process, while remembering that we must also be responsible for the vulnerable populations we serve.

As you are aware, the Foodbank has long encouraged providing choice. Choice in the kind of food served and in the ways it is made available. This continues to be relevant guidance now. With differing comfort levels and tolerance for exposure comes the need to continue to operate in ways that work for all the people we serve. Across the state, you all have adapted incredibly well to the challenging health and safety requirements of the pandemic. We must continue to provide food to people in a way that respects their dignity and health safety tolerance and have options available for all. As you decide how to reopen, consider the impact a change may have on someone’s dignity. A public health crisis is a vulnerable time, we must be mindful of the stigma beginning to be associated with vaccination status, masks, and other choices during the recovery and continue to show extra kindness and care for all.

The guidance recently given to Vermont Foodbank staff is below in this email. It contains our own interpretation of what the Universal Guidance means for our operations. In particular, note the emphasis we place on practicing understanding for someone’s choices, and providing alternatives and options. We were able to do this because we conducted anonymous staff surveys about vaccination status and comfort level to inform our decisions. We continue to communicate frequently as new situations occur to be transparent and help everyone to feel like they know what to expect. Communicating clearly and often with your community can help you make decisions that work for everyone as well.

As the State of Vermont moves to Universal Guidance, and as some of the federal food support programs come to an end, your agency/program may start to see a spike in numbers of people seeking assistance. While you are probably aware of this, we wanted to make sure to note it here. Please keep in touch to let us know what you’re seeing in your communities so we may continue to advocate and communicate with donors about needs.
The Foodbank strives to provide resources to help you serve your community better. See the COVID-19 Resources page for the latest grant program for COVID-19 Relief. There you will find the grant application and information on the simple reporting requirements.

Please feel free to reach out with further questions.

With gratitude,
The Vermont Foodbank

Today, Governor Scott announced that Vermont has achieved the goal of 80% of Vermont residents having at least a first dose of the COVID vaccine. As such, Universal Guidance is now in effect, and we still must observe CDC guidelines for unvaccinated workers (staff and volunteers). Fully vaccinated is defined as two weeks after receiving a second dose of a two-dose vaccine, or two weeks after the single-dose Johnson & Johnson vaccine. That means:

- **All workers who are not fully vaccinated are required to wear face coverings over their nose and mouth when in the presence of others.** Please note that anyone may choose to wear a mask at any time! Fully vaccinated workers are not required to wear masks.

- **Those workers who are not fully vaccinated are required to observe physical distancing of 6 feet from other employees.** Some folks may wish to keep a safe distance from others, regardless of vaccination status; please be respectful of those requests. Fully vaccinated workers are not required to maintain social distancing.

- **Stay home if sick.** Workers who have COVID-19 symptoms or who have tested positive for COVID-19 in the last 2 weeks are not allowed at the Foodbank. Unvaccinated workers who have not had COVID-19 in the past 90 days and have had close contact for more than 15 minutes with any person who is diagnosed with COVID-19 are required to quarantine for 14 days or for 7 days prior to obtaining a COVID-19 test. **Those who have to quarantine will still receive full pay from the Foodbank.**

- **Practice good hygiene.** Handwashing or hand sanitization is required frequently including before entering, and leaving, job sites. All common spaces and equipment, including bathrooms, frequently touched surfaces and doors, tools and equipment, and vehicles must be cleaned regularly and, when possible, prior to transfer from one person to another, in accordance with CDC guidance.

- **Think before you travel.** As part of Vermont's phased reopening plan, there is new travel guidance. **Except for international travel, travel no longer requires testing or quarantine.** For more information on international travel, visit the Department of Health website.
We may resume normal operations with regard to eating in the kitchen, sharing food, gathering together, etc... For those that are interested in returning to work part-time in the Barre facility, there will be separate guidance sent about what space is available and how to reserve a seat. Just as we have been doing, those entering any facility or working at a food distribution must complete a daily health survey and temperature check - a new, shorter version will be used.

If you have any questions about this guidance, please let me know. I know this will take some getting used to, and it may feel awkward at first. Let’s just remember to be kind to ourselves and each other and let everyone adjust at their own pace. Thank you for your attention to health & safety over the past 15 months—we made it through together!!

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Chris Meehan (she/her), MBA
Chief Community Impact Officer
Vermont Foodbank | 33 Parker Road | Barre, VT 05641
Office: 802-477-4130