Kernels

THIS ISSUE

Together, our community is helping neighbors access nourishing food when and where it’s convenient: through local schools.

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The possibilities of connecting around food

Schools have been a focal point over the past two plus years. Toggling between closed, open, remote, and hybrid leaves parents and caregivers trying to figure out in real time how to care for our kids. Always critical partners to your Vermont Foodbank, we’ve found ourselves collaborating with schools in new ways. In this issue of Kernels, you’ll read about the pivots, possibilities, and progress that are shaping how together, we feed students of all ages going forward.

The days of “that’s the way we’ve always done it” are over. The disruption and creative destruction taking place everywhere are opportunities for beneficial change. Vermont Foodbank is accelerating our push to distribute the food people want in ways and places that work for neighbors and communities. At the same time, we’re partnering to address root causes of hunger: the systems that disadvantage neighbors with low incomes and limit opportunities for people experiencing significant life barriers.

A first critical step is recognizing that we’re all in this together, and how difficult it is to overcome these disadvantages and barriers without community support. Let’s take that step together.

Your support is building community and changing lives. Never doubt it.

Thank you!

John Sayles
CEO
Jody is a family outreach worker at Academy School in Brattleboro, where she sees firsthand the benefits for kids when they have enough food to eat. Thanks to your help, she is able to provide food to students facing hunger to take home when school is out.

For many kids, a school day might also mean a day with a nourishing breakfast and lunch, needed for growing bodies and minds. This need doesn’t disappear when the school bell rings on Friday afternoon. Which is why the Vermont Foodbank, with help from school partners and help from you, runs the BackPack program, which sends food home with kids when school is not in session.

“Having the snack bags as a resource for students, some in particular, is such a comfort. Without the program, my guess is that we would be trying to put together bags of food on a Friday afternoon for children that we know are experiencing food insecurity,” shares Jody.

The program works through collaboration — guidance counselors, school nurses, and other school staff send information and permission slips home inviting families who might benefit to participate. The Vermont Foodbank packages and distributes bags of kid-friendly, nonperishable, nourishing foods to participating schools, which are then shared in ways that are inviting and comfortable for kids. Your support helps to get food into kids’ backpacks!

When Jody asks her students about the food they take home, they talk about some of their favorites: cereal, mac and cheese, grahams, and the fruit cup. One student says that the bags are heavy. Around 60 bags of food are distributed each week at Jody’s school which has around 360 students enrolled.

Throughout Vermont, an estimated 1,350 kids will receive approximately 42,000 bags of food, helping to ensure full bellies over the weekend and other school recesses.

One school staff member describes the impact the food bags have on the kids, “They seem to have a sense of calm knowing that they have food on the weekends.”
Free, fresh food is being delivered to more convenient locations — with help from you.

School buses are helping with the last mile

In Rutland County, one school district is using buses to get free, nourishing food closer to home. Because of your support, and the dedication of local school staff and volunteers, our community is growing stronger every day.

The packed school buses cruising along Route 7 were silent inside. No laughing or banter about the day. Just silent. Because the passengers weren’t students, but rather, potatoes, carrots, and other vegetables and fruits.

The lobby at Neshobe School on the other hand, was full of laughter and cheer.

“Holy moly, look at all that food,” a student hollers as they march past boxes of produce that have just arrived via school bus from Otter Valley Union Middle and High School.

The program is part of a new distribution model designed to make it easier for student families to get nourishing food on the table. As students are picked up at the end of the day, so is fresh produce.

“It works for [parents]; they’ve made comments on that many times,” says Nancy, the
afterschool administrator at Neshobe. In the days leading up to the distribution Nancy finalizes the details of how many families will be picking up shares and rallies volunteers to help get the produce sorted and out the door.

The program is part of a new distribution model designed to make it easier for student families to get nourishing food on the table.

Throughout the state, the Vermont Foodbank community is putting systems in place, with your support, to serve families and communities in ways that best suit neighbors’ needs. By using existing transportation networks and community hubs — in this case the school district — food distributions can reach closer to where people are. In northern Rutland County, fruits and veggies arrive at Otter Valley Union Middle and High School from Vermont Foodbank and people drive up and pick up shares for themselves and others. While some volunteers load individual cars with fresh produce, others load buses destined for more schools within the district.

“I have had a couple parents say ‘I used to go to Otter Valley and pick it up so this is great that I’m able to just pick it up here when I pick up my child,’” Nancy says. “Others, I think they were just doing without, they either weren’t aware of the program or just couldn’t get to Otter Valley to pick it up.”

School nurse Tina directs a long line of traffic at the high school distribution. She helped get the new system off the ground and says that approximately 150 families will receive the shares going out on the buses. And is it making a difference in the community?

“Yes, yes … as far as exposure to some different fruits and vegetables,” Tina says. “And you know the expense of the fruits and vegetables can be huge, so that really helps people financially to be able to afford what they need for groceries.”

Across the lot, Rich passes bags of onions and potatoes to bus driver Mike. Rich manages facilities and transportation at Otter Valley. Although he doesn’t drive a regular route, he’s happy to make deliveries to the other schools.

At the start of the pandemic Rich, Mike, and other drivers used buses to deliver food directly to families. Once schools reopened, that delivery model stopped. And while the fresh food distribution serves hundreds of families, it hasn’t been enough, Rich says.

“I don’t think we had as many people coming to the site. It’s hard for people to get here to get the food,” Rich says. “It’s easier for them if we can get the food to them at their particular school. We’re trying to make it easier for them … you want to feed the community, it’s the right thing to do.”
Peer leaders raise awareness of food resources for college students

Four student ambassadors are working with Vermont Foodbank and Community College of Vermont (CCV) to spread awareness of and access to 3SquaresVT and address root causes of hunger in their college communities.

“The 3SquaresVT Student Ambassador project is born from the Vermont Foodbank’s community engagement work and how the 3SquaresVT team specifically values lived expertise,” explains Faye, who works at the Foodbank and is a CCV alum with lived experience of food insecurity. Faye has been building the foundation for the ambassador project for years. Ambassadors are Community College of Vermont students based at CCV sites statewide and are paid, part-time positions focused on peer outreach — making sure more people have access to 3SquaresVT (a program that provides money each month for groceries) and other supports.

“We know from the RealCollege survey that CCV students are struggling with food access, they’re struggling with hunger, they’re struggling with housing, all kinds of basic needs. And we know from 3SquaresVT research that college students often face the most significant barriers to applying for and accessing programs like 3SquaresVT,” says Faye.

The RealCollege report, a March 2021 survey showing how the pandemic has affected CCV students’ basic needs, found that 39% of students surveyed worried about running out of food before they had money to buy more, and 38% could not afford to eat balanced meals.

“More than half of the students who were working lost jobs,” says Faye. “Which means they’ve lost income. Then what’s next is their housing. The very first thing to go when you fall on hard times is your food security. Because you can not pay for your food and nobody’s really going to notice that your fridge is empty… They’re going to notice it if you don’t pay your tuition … your rent … if you don’t have your textbooks required for school.”

“We also know that when a peer — who looks like me, who sounds like me, who I’ve seen around campus or in my online classroom — talks to me about something, I’m much more likely to hear what that person is saying and be able to connect with them and relate to it.”

Faye describes the project’s value for the college community, the Foodbank’s mission, and the ambassadors themselves. “It’s providing the 3SquaresVT student ambassadors with a real leadership role in addressing an issue that they’ve seen themselves on campus, or that they’ve experienced themselves, and to have that lived experience valued every day.”
“Since going back to school in 2020, I have and still do struggle with food insecurity. The stigma around food stamps is still very real and the application process is difficult and time consuming. **If I can help someone else take the first steps to create a better situation for themselves, I want to do that.**”

— Cami, Design and Media Studies major

“I just want more people to know about [3SquaresVT] and to not feel shame in using it. I strongly believe that it’s our money, it’s tax money, and we have the right to use it in ways that benefit us. I will not be gaslit into believing that it’s a handout and that only corporations can socialize the losses but capitalize the profits. I don’t see any harm with somebody who needs access to food to be able to use the government’s help to get food, at all. So, it inspired me to destigmatize it and to be an ambassador promoting it.”

— Emmanuel, studying Accounting

“The impact I hope to see is to reduce the stigma around 3SquaresVT … The more that we bring awareness around it, the more we not only meet the student’s educational need but the social economic need of that student, the better off that student will be, the better they’ll be able to achieve … I think this is a great program and it’s doing wonders for students.”

— Amanda, Behavioral Science major

“During my childhood, my family struggled financially and used SNAP benefits. SNAP gave us the opportunity to be successful! Many of us go through difficult situations in our lives, and it’s nothing to be ashamed of. **I think having a student resource center led by student ambassadors also contributes to creating a community-oriented environment. It helps students feel they are not alone.**”

— Shannah, STEM major

To learn more, get in touch at 3svt@vtfoodbank.org. CCV student ambassador positions are paid for by CCV.
When costs rise, we step up to nourish one another

One month left before kids go back to school means one more month before kids and families can rely on breakfasts and lunches at school again. This summer has been particularly hard.

The Vermont Foodbank, and partner food shelves and meal sites, have been seeing visitor participation and the need for food increase in our state over the past few months. This May, the Foodbank’s fresh food distribution program saw a record number of people attending events across Vermont.

COVID-19 pandemic relief programs like rental assistance, stimulus checks, and child tax credits have ended or are ending.

At the same time, housing, fuel, and food costs have all risen. Here at the Foodbank, the cost of fuel for trucks delivering food throughout the state has risen 35%. And the food in the trucks? The cost of Vermont eggs is up 63%, spaghetti is up 59%, and local meat is up 10%.

We are all experiencing the squeeze of inflation.

The cost of living is outpacing worker pay. Living paycheck to paycheck has become even more difficult.

But the Vermont Foodbank will be here. Continuing to purchase and distribute nourishing food statewide — with support from the community and support from you — because no one should ever go hungry.

If you’re able, please consider making a $25 gift today to help ensure food is available to all who need it. Right now, while kids are out of school, is an especially critical time.

If you or someone you know needs help with food, please be in touch. You can reach us at (802) 476-3341 or vtfoodbank.org — now available in eight languages common to Vermont.