

Testimony to Joint Fiscal Committee

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Good afternoon, my name is Maddie Kempner. I live in Cambridge and I work for the Northeast Organic Farming Association of Vermont. Thank you for taking the time to hear from all of us today.

NOFA-VT has just over 2,400 members statewide. We are farmers, farmworkers, and Vermonters working together to grow a healthier and more just food and farming system.

Policy and funding decisions being made at the federal level are already impacting our community in myriad ways - threatening health care access, cutting off critical support services for farmers and farm workers, and reducing food security.

Two of the most immediate impacts facing the farming community are related to health care:

As we shared during this committee's last meeting in July, the Bridges to Health program will be forced to shut down in January without immediate funding. Bridges to Health provides essential support to immigrant families and children in accessing medical care and other concrete supports like food. Immigrant and refugee families in our state have already been targeted by vastly increased ICE and Border Patrol budgets and activity, and will be impacted first and worst by upcoming federal changes to eligibility for SNAP and Medicaid, starting on October 1st and January 1st, respectively.

Bridges to Health is a trusted resource providing critical supports to immigrant families in all corners of the state, and their work directly serves the farming community. Over a 3-year period from March 2022 through March 2025, Bridges to Health supported 1,156 farmworkers and their family members to access needed services. These individuals work on 183 different farms including 160 dairy farms across all 14 counties.

The potential closure of this essential program is an immediate crisis the state can solve, with a relatively small amount of funding in the short term, and we urge you to do so.

Farmers and farmworkers will also be directly impacted by the expiration of the Advanced Premium Tax Credit at the end of this year. These tax credits, provided through the Affordable Care Act, have substantially reduced health insurance premiums for thousands of Vermonters. In 2024, over 26,000 Vermonters receiving these tax credits saved an average of \$703/month on their health care premiums. Right now, these subsidies are the only way that thousands of farmers and other self-employed people are able to afford the extremely high health insurance premiums in Vermont.

Currently on Vermont's health insurance marketplace, the lowest cost policy is almost \$900/month per person. Those "low cost premium" policies have \$6,000 to \$8,000 deductibles.

Policies with smaller deductibles cost significantly more. Many farmers and self employed Vermonters will not be able to afford even the lowest premiums without the subsidy, and will choose to forgo insurance.

Many, many other Vermont farmers who don't purchase health insurance on the exchange get health coverage through Green Mountain Care, and we are deeply concerned about the upcoming cuts to Medicaid that will significantly impact the farming community as well. Farming can be incredibly rewarding, but it can also be incredibly dangerous work. Farmers take on great risks to themselves, financially, physically, and mentally, in order to keep our communities fed. The state has an interest in ensuring they (and many other workers providing essential services to us all) can afford to access health care in the face of these federal cuts.

Already this year, Vermont's farmers have lost the expertise of over 80 local USDA staff whose work supports our agricultural economy in so many ways. Since January, Vermont has lost 26% of its USDA employees who provide essential services to farmers from loans to conservation technical assistance to critical research to nutrition services. In late July, USDA announced plans to move up to half of its DC-based staff to five hubs around the country without meaningful public input, threatening the further loss of institutional knowledge and expertise on which our farmers rely.

Finally, you're aware and have heard from some of our partners today about the impact of changes to SNAP eligibility and cost shifting to states. We know that these cuts will also harm farmers directly when SNAP users have fewer dollars to spend at farmers markets and farm stands around the state.

Our farmer members care deeply about all people having access to local and organic food, and many are already thinking about ways they can step up to help meet neighbors' needs, even as they face their own set of very real challenges, from the ongoing drought, to loss of health care, and significant staff losses in our local USDA offices.

We encourage you, as others have, to hold additional hearings this fall to better understand the impacts of federal funding and policy changes and how they will impact Vermonters in complex and often overlapping ways.

NOFA often uses the expression "May All Be Fed" in our work. In that spirit, we are all called upon more than ever to make sure everyone has the food they need and want, and we are committed to working together with you toward that vision so many Vermonters share. Thank you again for your time and attention today, and for your important work.