Meeting Minutes
Meeting Date: February 11, 2019

Present: Judy Ayers (Grand Isle Food Shelf), Koi Boynton (Healthy Roots), Destiny Cadieux (Vermont Department of Health), Stacy Carpenter (Vermont Department of Health), Jane Catton (Age Well), Jim Coutts (Franklin County Senior Center), Michael Frett (St. Albans Messenger), John Gorton (Sheldon Food Shelf), Liz Hamel (Building Bright Futures/Parent Child Center of Franklin and Grand Isle), Ross MacDonald (Vermont Department of Transportation), Chris Moldovan (Age Well), Rep. Carl Rosenquist (Vermont State House of Representatives), Leah Soderquist (United Way of Northwest Vermont), Michelle Trayah (Northwestern Counseling and Support Services), Robin Way (Champlain Islanders Developing Essential Resources), Thea Wurzburg (Office of Representative Welch)

Co-Chairs: Catherine Dimitruk (Northwest Regional Planning Commission) and Robert Ostermeyer (Franklin - Grand Isle Community Action, absent)

Hunger Free Vermont Staff: Olivia Peña and Jenna O’Donnell

Welcome and Introductions
Hunger Council members and guests shared brief introductions

Chris Moldovan and Jane Catton (Age Well) – Chris introduced Jane, Age Well’s new Executive Director.
  Chris and Jane shared that the Church of the Rock is the new hub for Meals on Wheels for the Saint Albans area. They just had their first day, and early feedback has been positive.

Stacy Carpenter (Vermont Department of Health) – Martha’s Kitchen has been exploring ways to support the community outside of St. Albans, and they’re now holding a weekly free lunch in Enosburgh.

Koi Boynton (Healthy Roots) – Healthy Roots is hiring for a Gleaning Coordinator; please share the job posting.

Judy Ayers (Grand Isle Food Shelf) – The Grand Isle Food Shelf has been partnering with the Grand Isle School and the Parent Child Center, and distributing packages of food to these sites weekly. Judy is happy to see that more families are being reached through these partnerships, and even though people receiving these boxes aren’t able to choose the food included, the feedback so far has been very positive.

Robin Way (C.I.D.E.R.) – Robin highlighted the coming winter storm as a reason to be thankful for programs like Blizzard Bags, which support people who are more vulnerable. CIDER distributes Blizzard Bags to 26 people on the Islands.

Michelle Trayah and Liz Hamel (Northwest Counseling and Support Services / Building Bright Futures) – Michelle introduced Liz, who is the new BBF Coordinator for Franklin and Grand Isle Counties. The Building Bright Futures Council has decided to do a toiletry drive in February, and have already collected nearly 250 items. These will be distributed to food shelves and other sites across the counties.

Michael Frett (St. Albans Messenger) – Michael shared that Katie Chapa, who used to cover Hunger Council meetings as a reporter for the Messenger, has left, and he will be taking her place at meetings.

John Gorton (Sheldon Food Shelf) – Construction is still on hold for the food shelf’s expansion.
  Through a connection made at the last Foodshelf Alliance meeting, John got connected with Restorative Justice, which resulted in John working with some volunteers at the food shelf for a
recent delivery day.
John has also been working with UVM’s Public Health Project, in which medical students conduct research for community partners.

Leah Soderquist (United Way of Northwest Vermont) – Leah helps with the Public Health Project, and shared that the resulting research has helped her secure grant money and partnerships. The Public Health Project is recruiting now for research projects.

Thea Wurzburg (Office of Representative Welch) – Thea shared that although there is a group of legislators working to reach a compromise, it’s not currently looking positive. Hopefully, an agreement will be made and another federal government shutdown will be averted, but the Congressman’s Office is preparing for the worst.
In terms of effects on food security, the USDA is not giving a lot of guidance for what would happen in case of another shutdown. Thea shared that the funding for SNAP benefits for March are available, but it’s unclear what would happen for distribution.

Jenna O’Donnell (Hunger Free Vermont) – Jenna thanked the Hunger Council for their help in spreading the word about 3SquaresVT early issuance during the last federal government shutdown. Hunger Free Vermont will continue to update people as possible.

Catherine Dimitruk (Northwest Regional Planning Commission) – Catherine described a pilot project in northwestern Vermont, which is focusing on how to make workplaces more welcoming to women in non-traditional roles (e.g. construction, truck driving). Research has shown that the wage gap is significantly less or even non-existent in this “non-traditional” fields. Contact Catherine for more information.

Supporting Food Security Transportation through Transportation

As transportation plays such a critical role in ensuring access to food, the Hunger Council members heard an update on the state of transportation in the region and potential opportunities for engagement and support.

Catherine reminded the Council that transportation comes up in every meeting, and can be an issue for both transporting people, and transporting food. Catherine is happy to use today’s meeting to explore this issue in greater depth.

Note: Chris Loyer was unable to make the meeting, so Catherine and Ross MacDonald tag-teamed an overview of Green Mountain Transit’s operations and services in his place.

Catherine Dimitruk (Northwest Regional Planning Commission) – Catherine is the Executive Director of Northwest Regional Planning Commission (NRPC), as well as Board Chair for Green Mountain Transit (GMT).
Regional Planning Commissions (RPCs) work on a wide array of issues, and have a few different roles for transportation and transit, including promoting coordination, adopting a regional plan that includes transportation, and sharing feedback from local municipalities with the Vermont Department of Transportation (VTrans). Northwest Regional Planning Commission has been very active in transit issues for many years, and Catherine described how these roles work in Franklin and Grand Isle Counties:
NRPC convenes monthly meetings of the Transportation Advisory Committee.
NRPC also leads the Regional Transportation Plan, which sets out the region’s vision for the...
transportation system, including all modes of transit (e.g. cars, bikes, and buses). This plan is updated every 8 years.

NRPC also helps annually to set the priorities for the Department of Transportation’s capital projects.

Catherine pointed out that there is no system for feedback to VTrans for transit.

Catherine recommended Hunger Council members look at the “Scorecards” produced by NRPC, which show data on 10 sectors, including Transportation. Catherine noted that trends for transportation were positive when gas prices were high, but as gas prices drop, so do indicators for transportation. Conversely, when gas prices are high, food insecurity is also high. Catherine and others are working to find ways for both transportation and food security to do well, by exploring creative ways to get people where they need to go as cheaply as possible.

Catherine described a challenge in public policy around transportation, in which roads are considered a collective good, but transit services are considered a local good. This means that the State covers the local match for the cost of road repairs or infrastructure investments on state highways that travel through multiple towns. However, municipalities must pay the local match for transit services that travel through multiple towns, such as the Richford-St. Albans Commuter Route.

Ross MacDonald (Vermont Department of Transportation) – Ross is Public Transit Coordinator and Go Vermont Program Manager.

Ross described the various funding stream for transit in Vermont, which has both traditional transit (e.g. fixed-line busses) as well as demand-response services (e.g. Medicaid rides). Most states use federal money to cover their transit costs, but Ross shared that Vermont is more creative, augmenting federal funds with State money. However, Ross pointed out that simply investing more money into the transit system is not going to fix the gaps in services in the state.

Currently, Vermont’s public transit system only services 10 – 15% of the population, and Ross emphasized the importance of using more technology, information, and creativity in meeting the needs of Vermonter.

There are 10 transit providers in the State, including Green Mountain Transit (GMT). As Catherine noted, transit costs are covered by both the State and the municipalities being served by the service provider, though Ross shared that some transit services have also been able to partner with local businesses (e.g. ski resorts or hospitals) to further diversify their funding.

Ross highlighted that the greatest opportunity to expand access to transportation in Vermont is by better leveraging carpooling options, and described some of the State’s incentive programs to encourage more carpooling.

Ross also described Go Vermont, a website that’s designed to help Vermonter and visitors understand the wide range of transportation options available to them. Go Vermont also has a call center (through Efficiency Vermont) to help commuters find rides: 800-685-RIDE (7433)

Ross described the need to combat the misperception that cars are required in Vermont. A study by the Vermont Department of Disabilities, Aging, and Independent Living (DAIL) found that people worry they won’t have transit options when they retire, and are reluctant to give up their cars.

Ross described the “Elderly and Disabled” program, which provides rides for eligible people (60 or older, or with a self-declared disability) to medical appointments and other sites (based on the criteria set by the transit provider). Each regional transit provider in Vermont gets a budget to cover these rides, and work with medical providers in their service area to set up trips and

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For more information:
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contributions. Ross noted that these rides are somewhat limited in what they can go to, but pointed out that gaps can be filled by programs like volunteer drivers.

**Robin Way (C.I.D.E.R.)** – Robin described how this works in Franklin and Grand Isle Counties. The Eldery and Disabled funding is split between C.I.D.E.R., Age Well, the Senior Center, and Care Partners. Robin shared that there’s a lot of flexibility in this region for how the funding can be used, and that C.I.D.E.R. is able to provide a lot of rides to help with food access using this, providing services to congregate meal sites and weekly shopping trips.

**Ross MacDonald** – Ross described the third main funding stream for transit – Medicaid transportation. Unlike the other funding streams, this comes through the Agency of Human Services (not VTrans), and covers rides to critical medical appointments to people who qualify for Medicaid. These rides can be through regular bus routes, taxis, or volunteer drivers, but the program prioritizes the least cost option, which is normally volunteer drivers.

**Robin Way** – Half of C.I.D.E.R.’s volunteers are for Medicaid rides. Robin described that many rides are to bring people to the methadone clinic in St. Albans.

**Leah Soderquist (United Way of Northwest Vermont)** – Leah is the Community Impact Manager for the United Way, and covers volunteer recruitment and the Bus Buddies program. Both are currently more active in Chittenden County, but Leah hopes to expand these to Franklin and Grand Isle Counties.

Leah shared that there are a lot of volunteer drivers in Chittenden, and emphasized how this service is both cost-effective and community building. Volunteers are also being used to help riders on the shopping shuttles carry their bags or get around.

The Bus Buddies program pairs volunteers with people who want to learn how to use the fixed routes system.

Leah highlighted the point made earlier by Ross MacDonald, that we can’t fix the current gaps in our transportation system simply by more money. The United Way, C.I.D.E.R., and others are doing research to better understand the needs of the community, their experiences with the current system, and how best to bring the riders’ perspectives into planning and design discussions.

The group discussed systems available for specific populations, like veterans or people who are seeking jobs through programs like ICAN and VocRehab.

The group also had an extended discussion on ways to use transit systems to transport food to people directly. Destiny Cadieux described an initiative being explored between the Vermont Department of Health and Northwest Family Foods to use the bus routes to transport food shelf foods to recipients, instead of bringing recipients to the food shelf and back. Ross MacDonald shared that Rural Community Transportation (RCT) is doing this in the NEK.

**Robin Way** – Robin described that C.I.D.E.R. is piloting this with Northwest Family Foods in Grand Isle through the Grand Isle Community Impact project. This “food shelf on wheels” is only going around once a month currently, but Robin is hoping to be able to expand this to twice a month.

The group discussed possibilities for changing routes with GMT, including adding routes to connect people more directly with the Sheldon Food Shelf. Catherine Dimitruk shared a map of GMT’s current system and plans for changes in the coming year (attached).

The group also discussed the high costs of doing background checks on volunteer drivers. Leah Soderquist shared a study on this issue had been proposed by Senator Kitchel, but nothing has been
done since, and Rep. Carl Rosenquist agreed to look into this at the State House. The group also discussed the challenges of using school buses for transportation, and different potential funding streams to support access to public transportation through infrastructure investments (e.g. improving bus stations, adding electric charging stations).

Catherine thanked the group for their ideas and discussion, and encouraged everyone to continue thinking about transit in further conversations.

**Updates and Announcements**

Hunger Council members and guests shared updates and initiatives related to hunger and nutrition.

**Liv Peña (Hunger Free Vermont)** – Hunger Free Vermont is scheduling 3SquaresVT Basic Trainings across the state, including one in St. Albans. These half-day trainings are great for service providers, and Liv encouraged Hunger Council members to share information on the trainings once the details are finalized.

Liv also encouraged people to share information on the connection between the Earned Income Tax Credit (EITC) and 3SquaresVT. If a household receives the EITC, they’re eligible for 3SquaresVT, even if their household income is outside of 3SquaresVT’s requirements. Hunger Council members further highlighted that if a household is then able to get onto 3SquaresVT, their children are then automatically eligible for WIC and free school meals.

**Hayley Turner-Lawyer (Vermont DCF – Economic Services Division)** – Hayley shared the exciting news that there will be more Farm to Family coupons this summer. Hayley encouraged Hunger Council members to share information about this program, which connects low-income households with farmers’ markets, as redemption in northwestern Vermont last year was low.

**Robin Way (C.I.D.E.R.)** – Robin described that the Grand Isle Collective Project is also looking at using transit to connect people with farmers markets. They’ve been experimenting with this in the past two years, but learning that transportation is not the only barrier for some people in terms of shopping at farmers markets.

**Jenna O’Donnell (Hunger Free Vermont)** – Jenna gave an update on the Grand Isle Collective Project. This is a three year project funded by UVM Medical Center and led by Hunger Free Vermont to improve food security in Grand Isle County. [Update: Funding for the 3rd and final year of the project was secured on Tuesday, February 12th!] As the project is entering its last year, the partners on this project will be focusing on some of the most effective initiatives that have been developed, and finding ways to ensure their sustainability.

**Jim Coutts (Franklin County Senior Center)** – The Franklin County Senior Center has discontinued its partnership with Age Well, and is thus no longer going to be distributing Meals on Wheels, or congregate meals through Age Well. The Senior Center will continue to have meals on-site.

**Chris Moldovan and the Hunger Council thanked Jim for his many years of important service to food security for older Vermonters in the area.**

Catherine thanked the group for meeting. The next meeting will be on April 15, and will likely be exploring ways to engage with and support medical providers.

Meeting Adjourned