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# Tackling Healthy Food Insecurity in Vermont's Windham County

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# Tackling Healthy Food Insecurity in Vermont's Windham County



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MARC J VECCHIO

GRACE COTTAGE, JULY-AUGUST 2017

OUTREACH COORDINATOR: WILLIAM MONAHAN, RN

MENTOR: TIMOTHY SHAFER, MD



# Health Concerns:

## Nationwide Trend Trickles Down to Rural Vermont Communities

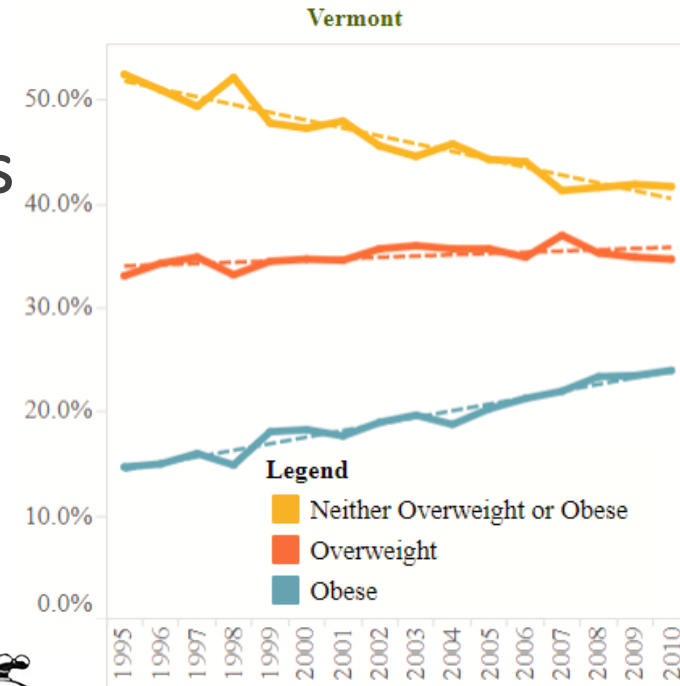
❖ Availability of cheaper food, larger portion sizes and the reliance on high-calorie ingredients have led to an epidemic of food-related health problems in the United States<sup>(2)</sup>

❖ The United Health Foundation ranked Vermont as the healthiest state in the country from 2009 to 2011; second healthiest from 2012 to 2015; and 5th healthiest in 2016 <sup>(2)</sup>

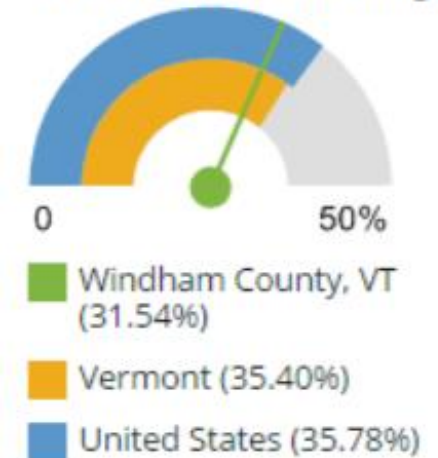
❖ In Windham County, the obesity and overweight rates indicate that over 50% of Vermont adults have a body weight greater than what is considered healthy <sup>(1)</sup>

❖ According to the U.S. Department of Health & Human Services, being overweight or obese puts an individual at risk for heart disease, high blood pressure, Type 2 diabetes, breathing problems, and certain cancers

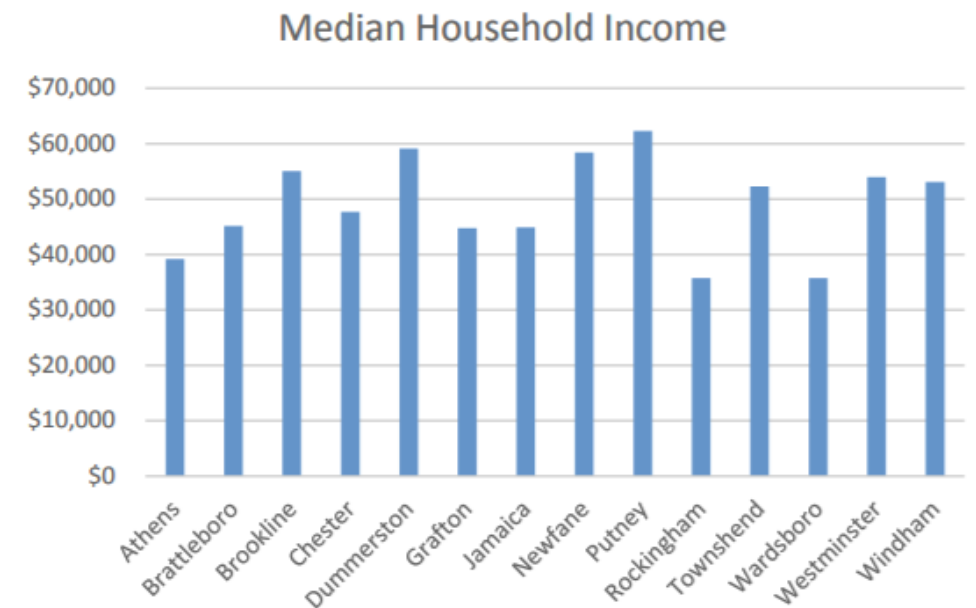
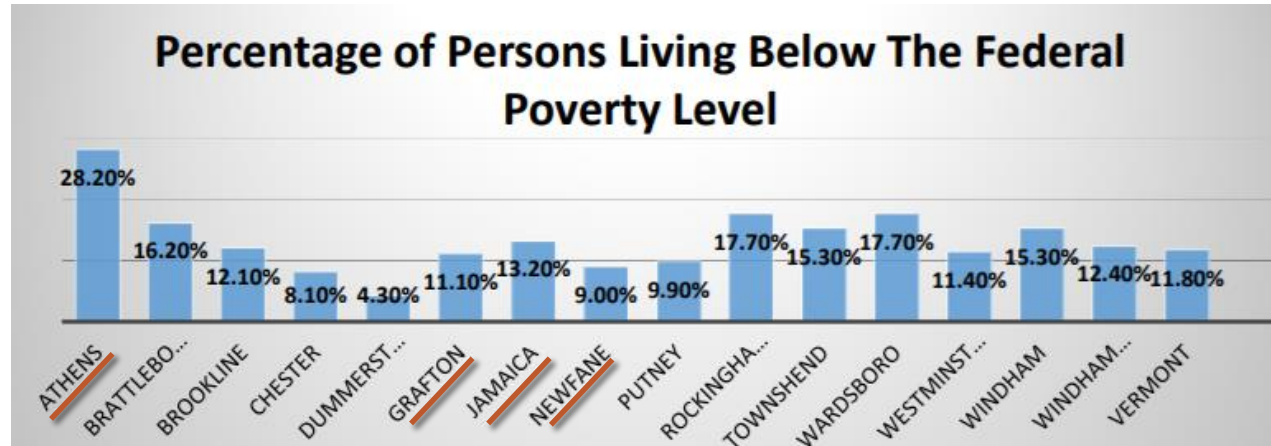
❖ This adds up to an estimated \$147 billion in medical costs



Percent Adults Overweight



# Persons at Risk:



- ❖ Currently, there is a nationwide shift to promote healthy eating in an effort to decrease the complications related to unhealthy eating and obesity
- ❖ Unfortunately, this shift has left a behind a significant portion of families who struggle financially and cannot afford the more expensive, healthy produce
  - ❖ A recent multi-country study, including the U.S, indicated that purchasing 'healthy foods' such as vegetables, fish, fruit, nuts rather than sweets, snacks and high fat foods on average costed the average consumer \$1.50 extra per day for a total of an additional \$550 per year <sup>(5)</sup>
  - ❖ In 2014, an estimated 63% of client households in Vermont reported they had to choose between paying for food or paying for utilities in the past 12 months <sup>(3)</sup>
- ❖ Struggling Vermont families often have to rely on nutrition supplied by local food shelves, which have historically had limited refrigeration and have been built around non-perishable foods <sup>(8)</sup>
  - ❖ Food shelves nationwide are now under tremendous pressure to not only get food to families in need, but now supply them with fresh, healthy produce



# Community Connections:

❖ Interview: **Jennifer Hutchinson** is the Manager of Youth & Family Based Initiatives at the Vermont Foodbank in Barre, VT

How have community members responded to the VeggieVanGo program?

*"I think people are encouraged by the setup we have now... We allow everyone to come by and pick up fresh produce...It's not like an assembly line, we're judgment free and I think people appreciate that... I think people appreciate having access to healthy produce and foods that are missing from their diet."*

Do you feel having volunteer drivers transporting produce to underserved Windham County towns would be a good way to initially expand the VeggieVanGo program?

*"I thinks it's an idea and could help, but to do something like what we're doing right now, the volunteers would have to have enough space to fit all of the food, pallets, a pallet jack and things like that ...There's so many people to provide produce for; at our newest location we had upwards of 80 people come by to get fresh produce."*

What is the greatest barrier to supplying healthy food options to those underserved in neighboring towns?

*"Money and trucks...Funding is always an issue...We don't have enough trucks to expand the VeggieVanGo program to neighboring towns... We've had 5 neighboring hospitals or schools that want to sign up, but we just don't have the trucks...Our driver today has to make 4 other stops with this same truck."*

Where does most of your food come from?

*"...it's not donated, unfortunately we have to buy most of the produce we supply, but we are able to purchase it at a subsidized price because the food is given to families in need."*



# Community Connections:

❖ Interview: **William Monahan, RN** is the Outreach Coordinator of the Community Health Team at Grace Cottage Hospital in Townshend, VT

Do you think Vermonters in Windham County know what it means to eat healthy?

*“That’s a tough question... I believe they do, but it really comes down to three things when it comes to eating healthy; knowledge, access and affordability...”*

What is the greatest barrier to supplying healthy food options to those underserved in neighboring towns?

*“For quality, nutritious food, affordability is the greatest barrier...Affordability, not only for the individual, but for the local culture and society... what is donated to the local foodbanks are what create nutrition and our nutritional foundation.”*

Do you feel having volunteer drivers transporting produce to underserved Windham County towns would make an impact?

*“I think it’s a good start, yes and everything can evolve and that’s where we’re at now.”*

How have community members responded to healthy food initiatives, such as your “A Ton of Tomatoes” program?

*“I was blown away by the community response. It’s funny, the program almost started out as a mistake...a volunteer just started handing out the newly made flyers and by the end of the day I had 100 tomato plants donated.”*



# Intervention and Methodology:

- ❖ Intervention: Transport fresh, nutritious produce supplied by the VeggieVanGo food truck to community centers (ex. Churches, Town Halls etc.) in Newfane, Athens, Grafton and Jamaica
- ❖ Methodology: Create a food sign up list and designate a local community drop off location in each town
  - ❖ Get the word out:
    - ❖ Advertise expansion of volunteer food services in Newfane, Athens, Grafton and Jamaica via social media (Facebook), local media (newspaper) and radio station (WKVT 92.7 Brattleboro)
  - ❖ Recruit volunteer drivers to transport the produce to the aforementioned drop off sites
- ❖ Create a community flyer to distribute to local businesses and farms encouraging them to use available tax deductions as an incentive to donate fresh produce to local community food initiatives



# Results and Response:

- ❖ Currently, three volunteer drivers have already signed up to help bring fresh produce to those who sign up for it in the Grafton, Jamaica and Athens area
- ❖ Flyers to be distributed to local farmers and businesses to raise awareness of the need of fresh produce food donations and the related tax breaks
- ❖ Transportation service will plan to be incorporated into Grace Cottage Hospital's "A Ton of Tomatoes" organized by Bill Monahan
  - ❖ Goal of "A Ton of Tomatoes" is to bring local, nutritious food to those in need year round
  - ❖ Currently accepting tomato donations



## FARM LAW: VERMONT FOOD DONATION AND TAX DEDUCTION

### LAW:

As of 2015, all businesses- Class C-corporations, S-corporations, LLCs, partnerships and sole proprietorships are eligible

### HOW DOES IT WORK?

The donating business can deduct the lesser of:  
(1) twice the basis value of the donated food OR  
(2) the basis value of the donated food plus ½ of the food's expected profit margin if sold at market value

Example deduction: A local farmer donates tomatoes with a market value of \$100. The basis value of these tomatoes was \$30. If the tomatoes sold at market value, the profit would be  $\$100 - \$30 = \$70$ . Under the tax deduction law, the farm is eligible to deduct the smaller of either (1) twice the basis value, which is  $\$30 \times 2 = \$60$ , OR (2) basis value plus ½ the expected profit margin, which is  $\$30 + (\$70/2) = \$65$ . In this situation, the deduction would be option (1), which is still well above the original basis value of the tomatoes



## WITH YOUR DONATION OF FRESH, HEALTHY FOOD YOU WILL HELP IMPROVE FOOD SECURITY IN VERMONT

RESOURCES: VERMONT AGENCY OF NATURAL RESOURCES, VERMONT DEPARTMENT OF ENVIRONMENTAL CONSERVATION, HARVARD FOOD LAW AND POLICY CLINIC, VERMONT FOODBANK



## HELP VERMONTERS

Prevent food waste and benefit the community and those in need

1 in 4 Vermonters rely on Food Shelves for their basic sustenance

## HELP YOUR BUSINESS

Businesses can deduct up to 15% of their taxable income for food donations

2016 VT Food Loss Study found that 92% of farms did not claim this deduction for food donations they had made in 2015

## FOOD REQUIREMENT

Must donate to charitable organization

Must be used for the care of the ill, needy or infants

Must maintain federal quality standards for donated food

# Expansion of Healthy Food to Underserved Areas in Windham County

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## EVALUATION OF EFFECTIVENESS:

- ❖ Review future Grace Cottage Community Assessments regarding health, food insecurity and access to nutritious produce
- ❖ Volunteer driver reports regarding program success in Grafton, Athens, Newfane and Jamaica
- ❖ Evaluation and analysis of the numbers of families who registered for the healthy food drop offs, as well as their satisfaction and health
- ❖ Review local business and farmer produce donations as well as reported usage of food donation tax deductions
- ❖ Monitor survey data collected by programs of the Vermont Foodbank, such as VeggieVanGo
- ❖ Follow Bill Monahan's "A Ton of Tomatoes" community program and evaluate the distribution of produce throughout the year

## LIMITATIONS:

- ❖ Funding seems to be a recurring issue regarding equipment and transportation
  - ❖ Volunteers lack adequate equipment and vehicles to transport enough food to provide for, potentially, an entire underserved community
  - ❖ Programs such as VeggieVanGo still have to rely on purchased healthy produce to supply families in need
- ❖ Amount of food donated by local farmers and businesses appears to be lacking. Financial incentives, rather than only tax deductions could help make an impact
- ❖ Shelf life of healthy produce remains a difficult hurdle to overcome, especially through the winter months when the growing season has ended

# Future Interventions and Projects:

- ❖ Increase area served by healthy food programs
  - ❖ Increase rural Vermont Foodbank volunteer work force to help transport food to neighboring communities not currently visited by healthy food initiatives
  - ❖ Funding needed to supply additional trucks for the expansion of the VeggieVanGo program
- ❖ Increase local farm or business food donations to Vermont Foodbank programs
  - ❖ In 2016, Congress made the enhanced federal tax deduction for food donations permanent for ALL businesses
  - ❖ Farms can deduct up to 15% of their annual income <sup>(6)</sup>
  - ❖ However, the 2016 VT Food Loss Study found that 92% of farms did not claim this deduction for food donations they had made in 2015 <sup>(7)</sup>
  - ❖ Advertising the benefits of donating food to local farmers or businesses could improve the healthy food supply. In addition, connecting local farmers and businesses with organizations focused on food rescue and farm surplus management could work to reduce healthy food loss in Vermont

# Resources

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