

Middlebury x Vermont Department of Health Capstone Project

ENVS 0401A

Professor Crawford

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Eat Fish - Choose Wisely

Safe eating guidelines for **Fish You Catch in Vermont**

Fish are part of a healthy diet. Use this chart to help you choose which fish to eat, and how often to eat them, based on their mercury levels.



1 meal of fish = 8 ounce fillet

<p>People who are nursing, pregnant or planning to be, and children under 6 years old</p> <p>Eat up to 4 meals per month</p> <p>Low Mercury</p>	<p>Rainbow Trout, Yellow Perch (less than 10"), Brown Trout, Pumpkinseed, White Perch, Brook Trout, Brown Bullhead</p>	<p>People who are not nursing, pregnant or planning to be, and children age 6 and older</p> <p>Eat up to 8 meals per month</p>
<p>OR</p> <p>Eat 1 meal per month</p> <p>Medium Mercury</p>	<p>Largemouth Bass, Yellow Perch (10" and larger), Smallmouth Bass (less than 14"), Northern Pike</p>	<p>OR</p> <p>Eat up to 6 meals per month</p>
<p>0</p> <p>Do not eat</p> <p>High Mercury</p>	<p>Lake Trout, Smallmouth Bass (14" and larger), Chain Pickerel, Walleye</p>	<p>OR</p> <p>Eat up to 4 meals per month</p>

If you reach the meals per month limit, eat no other fish that month. If you do not reach the limit, then you can eat additional servings of fish you buy. Use the fish meal calculator on our website to help you figure out how much fish to eat.

These guidelines are based on an 8-ounce fillet of fish caught in Vermont and scientific information about the harmful effects of mercury. They do not apply to dried fish, whole fish or fish organs. There may be specific safe eating guidelines in place for certain waterbodies in Vermont.

Want more information?
Go to HealthVermont.gov/Mercury-Fish where a text-only version of these guidelines is also available, or call us toll-free at 800-439-8550

Eat Fish - Choose Wisely

Safe eating guidelines for **Fish You Buy**

Fish provide key nutrients like omega fats, iron, iodine and choline. These nutrients are important for heart health and to support health during pregnancy, nursing or early childhood. **Everyone should try to eat 2-3 servings of fish per week.**

People who are nursing, pregnant or planning to be, and **children** under 6 years old

People who are nursing, pregnant or planning to be, and young children, should not eat fish from the "Choices to Avoid" list. These fish are high in mercury, which can be harmful to a developing nervous system.

People who are **not** nursing, pregnant or planning to be, and **children** age 6 and older

Use this chart to help you choose which fish to eat, and how often to eat them, based on their mercury levels.




<p>People who are nursing, pregnant or planning to be, and children under 6 years old</p> <p>Eat 2-3 servings per week and no other fish that week</p> <p>Low Mercury</p>	<p>Best Choices</p> <p>Anchovy, Hake, Shad, Atlantic mackerel, Herring, Shrimp, Black sea bass, Lobster, Sole, Catfish, Oyster, Squid, Clam, Pickerel, Tilapia, Cod, Pollock, Tuna: light & skipjack (canned, fresh or frozen), Crab, Salmon, Sardine, Whitefish, Flounder, Haddock, Scallop</p>	<p>People who are not nursing, pregnant or planning to be, and children age 6 and older</p> <p>No limit</p> <p>Eat at least 2-3 servings per week</p>
<p>OR</p> <p>Eat 1 serving per week and no other fish that week</p> <p>Medium Mercury</p>	<p>Good Choices</p> <p>Carp, Chilean sea bass, Snapper, Grouper, Spanish mackerel, Halibut, Tilefish (Atlantic Ocean), Mahi-Mahi/dolphinfish, Tuna: albacore/white & yellowfin (canned, fresh or frozen), Monkfish, White croaker (Pacific), Rockfish</p>	<p>OR</p> <p>Eat 2 servings per week</p>
<p>0</p> <p>Do not eat</p> <p>High Mercury</p>	<p>Choices to Avoid</p> <p>King mackerel, Swordfish, Marlin, Tilefish (Gulf of Mexico), Orange roughy, Tuna: bigeye (fresh or frozen), Shark</p>	<p>OR</p> <p>Eat 2 servings per week</p>

1 serving is about the size of the palm of your hand

- Ages 1 to 3 = 1 ounce
- Ages 4 to 7 = 2 ounces
- Ages 8 to 10 = 3 ounces
- Ages 11 to adult = 4 ounces (1 ounce = 28 grams)

These guidelines were developed by the U.S. FDA and U.S. EPA. Go to www.fda.gov/FishAdvice for more information about eating fish.

If you eat fish caught by family or friends, check the Fish You Catch in Vermont guidelines. Go to HealthVermont.gov/Mercury-Fish to learn more and for a text-only version of the guidelines.

By Nina Ahl, Thea Rosenzweig, Katelyn Petty, and Javier Merino Herrera

We have neither given nor received unauthorized aid on this assignment. - NA, TR, KP, JMH

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This report is dedicated to the memory of Pam Wadman, an Environmental Human Health Risk Assessor and Regulatory Public Health Toxicologist. She was a steadfast advocate for the importance of clear public health communication, committed to the Vermont Health “Eat Safe Fish” Program, and a beloved member of the Vermont Department of Health community.

1. Introduction and Project Scope

The following report details the ENV5 0401 Section A capstone project (“the project”) between Middlebury College Environmental Studies majors¹ and partners at the Vermont Department of Health (“VDH”). The original idea behind the project saw students focused on exploring the efficacy of VDH’s “Eat Fish – Choose Wisely” fish consumption advisory cards,² public health communication materials that aim to provide accessible actionable guidance to inform safe fish consumption, by understanding their distribution and evaluating how they have changed fish consumption behaviors in the pregnant population in Vermont. This project was inspired by the recent redesign of the “Eat Fish – Choose Wisely” cards and demonstrates the need for monitoring and evaluation protocols, which are critical yet sometimes overlooked elements of public health and policy initiatives. As noted in the project description, there are benefits – seafood can support growth and development due to its high-quality protein, essential omega-3 fatty acids, and micronutrients – and risks – seafood can contain contaminants like mercury that may inhibit fetal brain development – with respect to seafood consumption, as seafood contains many important nutrients but also may contain contaminants that can result in negative health impacts (FAO & WHO, 2024). Notably, mercury is a common contaminant in fish that can negatively impact neurodevelopment in fetuses and young children (U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, 2015b). VDH’s “Eat Fish – Choose Wisely” cards aim to provide clear messaging and information regarding fish consumption. However, complex messages that present nuanced trade-offs can be confusing to consumers; therefore, VDH seeks to understand how their messaging lands on consumers.

In practice, the project explores the development of the “Eat Fish – Choose Wisely” cards, their distribution, and how healthcare providers view them as tools for communication. Since pregnant people are a protected and vulnerable population (and accordingly, pregnancy status is protected health information) in the healthcare landscape and under federal law in the United States, this project does not contain any quantitative or qualitative data gathered directly from pregnant persons. Rather, the project focuses on interviews with researchers, administrators in Local Health Offices of VDH, and healthcare providers in various counties across Vermont to shed light on the development and redesign process of the “Eat Fish – Choose Wisely” cards, where the cards have been distributed to date, and how they are distributed to populations of interest: pregnant people for the purpose of this project (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2024; Colciago et al., 2020) (Table 1; Table 2).

¹ Thea Rosenzweig - Environmental Policy and Classical Studies, Nina Ahl - Environmental Policy, Katelyn Petty - Geography and Environmental Studies with a Global Health minor, and Javier Merino Herrera - Environmental Economics.

² Please find the fish consumption cards here:

<https://www.healthvermont.gov/sites/default/files/document/env-rw-eat-fish-choose-wisely.pdf> and VDH’s broader guidance here: <https://www.healthvermont.gov/environment/recreational-water/mercury-fish>.

Table 1. Vermont's 14 counties organized into 9 regional groups to display the distribution of "Eat Fish – Choose Wisely" Fish Cards.

County Group	County
1	Addison County (Middlebury)
2	Bennington County (Bennington & Manchester)
3	Chittenden County (Burlington)
4	Franklin County (St. Albans), Grand Isle County (North Hero)
5	Lamoille County (Hyde Park), Orleans County (Newport), Caledonia County (St. Johnsbury), Essex County (Guildhall)
6	Orange County (Chelsea)
7	Rutland County (Rutland)
8	Washington County (Montpelier)
9	Windham County (Newfane), Windsor County (Woodstock)

Table 2. Points of contact for outreach methods. Names omitted.

Office	Title	District/County
District Office	Public Health Nurse	Newport, VT
District Office	Public Health Nurse	Springfield, VT
District Office	Public Health Nurse; Public Health Nursing Supervisor	Brattleboro, VT
VDH	Public Health Nurse	Ferrisburgh, VT
FCHC	Perinatal Nurse Program Coordinator; Team Coordinator	Winooski, VT
St. Albans District Office, FCHC	Public Health Nurse, Family and Child Healthcare Coordinator	Grand Isle and Franklin Counties, VT
Rutland District Office, FCHC	Public Health Nurse	Rutland County, VT
Dartmouth College	Research Associate Professor	Morrisville, VT
St. Johnsbury District Office, PH Nurse	Public Health Nurse	Caledonia and southern Essex counties, VT
CVMC Obstetrics Midwifery and Gynecology	RN	Washington County, VT
Winooski School District	Teacher	Winooski Highschool, VT
VT DEC Pollution Prevention	Toxicologist	Burlington, VT
Morrisville District Office	PH Nutritionist	Lamoille County plus parts of Orleans and Caledonia Counties, VT
Dartmouth College Department of Ecology and Evology	Ecotoxicologist	Hanover, NH
UVM Health; Porter	OB/GYN	Middlebury, VT
UVM Health; Porter	RN	Middlebury, VT
UVM Medical Center	OB/GYN	Burlington, VT

1.1 Research Description

The specific version of the fish consumption advisory cards analyzed in this project was developed by VDH to convey seafood consumption guidance and has been in active use since May of 2025. Partners at VDH are interested in evaluating the effectiveness of both the card itself and the modes and means of outreach revolving around the card's distribution and usage. The project's goal in evaluating the cards aims to determine whether seafood guidance materials, notably the "Eat Fish – Choose Wisely" cards, have increased awareness, influenced consumption habits, and effectively communicated clear, compelling, and balanced information about risks and benefits of fish consumption to diverse audiences. The evaluation in the project also explores whether these materials are widely distributed and understood, and whether alternative formats or improved communication strategies could enhance reach and effectiveness. The methods of community-engagement revolve around interviews with administrative personnel in healthcare clinics and providers to learn about the deployment of the "Eat Fish – Choose Wisely" cards and to explore what other methods of outreach and communication might be desirable (Table 2). Further, the original project vision included the development of questions

to be added to a survey given to pregnant persons late in their pregnancies to gather information about seafood consumption information and associated behavior change during pregnancy.

The project scope now includes the following three elements: 1) A literature review to research mercury in fish, other states' fish consumption advisories, and health communication materials; 2) Interviews with Family and Child Healthcare Coordinators ("FCHCs"), staff at Obstetrician-Gynecologist ("OB/GYN") clinics and offices, and researchers who were involved in the development of the "Eat Fish – Choose Wisely" cards (Table 2); 3) Development of questions for a survey to be deployed by VDH to gather information about understanding of seafood consumption information and associated behavior changes in pregnant persons.

Final deliverables include this report, a final presentation, and the survey questions for VDH.

2. Background Information

The following discussion details the research that was conducted prior to beginning the outreach stage of the project. This research shaped our understanding of how to evaluate the efficacy of the "Eat Fish – Choose Wisely" cards. This section of the report functions as a literature review on relevant material to develop a scientific understanding of mercury in fish and delves into best practices and principles of science and risk communication with respect to the creation of health advisory materials.

2.1 Mercury in Fish

2.1.1 Mercury Bioaccumulates in Fish, Creating Higher Risk in Large Predatory Species

Elemental mercury is naturally occurring in geologic material and is present throughout the environment, including in lakes and streams. Mercury is concentrated in the environment by emissions from hydroelectric projects, the burning of garbage, fossil fuels, and industrial pulp and paper, and mining processes (Wooltorton, 2002). Mercury does not break down in the environment; it bioaccumulates through the food chain (Wooltorton, 2002; U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, 2015b). Methylmercury (MeHg) is a type of mercury that is found in fish (EPA, 2015b). MeHg is a highly toxic organic compound produced when airborne mercury settles into bodies of water and is transformed by microorganisms into MeHg (Organization of Teratology Information Specialists, 2025; U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, 2015a). Fish then absorb the MeHg through their gills and digestive tracts as they feed (U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, 2015a; Victoria State Government, 2022). Large, long-lived, predatory fish have the highest rates of mercury (Vermont Department of Health, 2025b). Larger species of fish in Vermont show consistent mercury bioaccumulation patterns, especially when compared to larger fish species in other states.

2.1.2 Prenatal Exposure Makes Mercury Communication Especially Important for Sensitive Populations

Methylmercury poses serious health risks to those who ingest it; it can cause cognitive impairment, motor skill loss or deterioration, sensory disturbances, and potential cardiovascular damage (Charkiewicz et al., 2025; Victoria State Government, 2022). Depending on factors such as age, the amount of mercury in an environment, the type of mercury, the duration of exposure, and the exposure method, the resulting health effects caused by mercury may vary. According to VDH, children under the age of seven, people of child bearing age, and people who are pregnant or nursing are considered sensitive populations (Vermont Department of Health, 2025b). MeHg is highly toxic, especially for fetuses. It can have impacts on their thinking, memory, attention, language, fine motor skills, and visual spatial skills (U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, 2015b; Oken & Bellinger, 2008). MeHg is easily absorbed and retained by the body, and it has a half-life in blood of about 44 days, which makes blood and hair testing useful measures of acute exposure (Wooltorton, 2002; Hong et al., 2012). Because MeHg readily crosses the placenta, even low or moderate maternal exposure can result in higher concentrations of methylmercury in the developing fetus than in the mother (Xu et al., 2016). This makes prenatal exposure a critical window of susceptibility, as the fetal brain undergoes rapid growth and differentiation (Dack et al., 2022). Importantly, many of the neurological effects associated with MeHg exposure may not be immediately apparent at birth, but can emerge later as delays or deficits in learning and behavior (Xu et al., 2016). This underscores the importance of clear, targeted communication to pregnant people about fish consumption. Fish is a valuable source of nutrients such as omega-3 fatty acids, protein, and essential micronutrients that support fetal brain development (Coletta et al., 2010). However, not all fish carry the same risk of MeHg exposure owing to variation in the age, size and habitats of different fish as well as a species' position in the food chain. Without specific guidance, pregnant people may either consume high-mercury fish unknowingly or avoid fish altogether, potentially missing important nutritional benefits like high-quality protein, essential omega-3 fatty acids, and micronutrients.

2.1.3 Fish Consumption Advisories Must Balance Nutritional Benefits With Contaminant Risk

Fish consumption advisories (“FCAs”) can be issued by states and local governments to protect the public from unsafe levels of chemical contaminants in wild-caught fish, such as mercury, polychlorinated biphenyls (“PCBs”), and per- and polyfluoroalkyl substances (“PFAS”) (Cleary et al., 2021). Because advisories are developed at the state and local level, recommendations vary across the United States depending on local fish species, contamination levels, geography, and public health priorities. VDH has recommendations for safe consumption of fish with respect to mercury specifically. The Vermont Department of Environmental Conservation (“DEC”) has online guidance pertaining to mercury, PCBs, and dichlorodiphenyltrichloroethane (“DDT”), dioxin, and cadmium (Department of Environmental Conservation, 2026). FCAs differ from state to state based on many factors like geography,

pollution levels, different interpretations of data, and culture around consuming fish. These recommendations are especially important for protected and vulnerable populations, including pregnant individuals, nursing parents, and young children.

However, fish advisories must also avoid discouraging fish consumption entirely, because fish provide important nutritional benefits. Fish have key nutrients for a healthy diet like omega-3 fats, iron, iodine and choline (U.S. Food and Drug Administration & U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, 2024; Oken et al., 2016; Cleary et al., 2021). Such nutrients are important for heart health and support health during pregnancy, nursing, and early childhood (U.S. Food and Drug Administration & U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, 2024; Oken et al., 2016). Fishing locally for freshwater fish can be a sustainable food source and may result in the catch of species with low mercury concentrations when compared to fish species at the supermarket (Vermont Department of Health, 2025b). For this reason, effective FCAs must communicate both risk and benefit: They should help people choose safer fish rather than avoid fish altogether.

2.1.4 Vermont's Fish Mercury Report Provides the Scientific Basis for the Card's Categories

In order to determine which fish in Vermont are safe to eat, VDH completed a Fish Mercury Report that lists mercury concentrations in local fish species and provides the scientific basis for Vermont's safe fish-eating guidelines. VDH completed research in 2013, and additional fish tissue sampling occurred through the Lake Champlain Project in 2017, to update the 1993 mercury levels in Vermont's bodies of water (Vermont Department of Health, 2025b). The Vermont Fish Mercury Report categorizes fish species into three consumption groups: "Best Choice", "Good Choice", and "Limit or Avoid". These categories are listed on the "Eat Fish – Choose Wisely" cards. The 2025 Vermont Fish Mercury Report shows that the safest fish to eat are Brown Bullhead, Perch (smaller than 10 inches), Pumpkinseed, and Stocked Trout (Vermont Department of Health, 2025b). In VDH's 2025 testing report, these species were in the "Best Choice" category, with mercury concentrations ranging from 0.11 to 0.16 milligrams per kilogram (mg/kg).

Largemouth Bass, Smallmouth Bass (under 16in), Perch (greater than 10in), and Northern Pike are all in the "Good Choice" category ranging from 0.35 to 0.42 mg/kg (Vermont Department of Health, 2025b). The "Limit or Avoid" category consists of Lake Trout, Chain Pickerel, Smallmouth Bass (greater than 16in), and Walleye. Lake Trout has the lowest mercury content within this category, at 0.55 mg/kg; Walleye has the highest, at 0.88 mg/kg. A sensitive population is advised to eat one meal per week with a mercury concentration of 0.15 mg/kg, while the general population can consume one meal per week with a concentration of 0.65 mg/kg (Vermont Department of Health, 2025b). Together, these thresholds explain why the "Eat Fish – Choose Wisely" card separates fish into different categories for the general population and for sensitive groups.

2.1.5 Grocery Store Seafood Guidance Shows Why Consumer-Facing Advice Matters

The most common types of seafood bought in the United States from a grocery store include shrimp, salmon, canned tuna, and tilapia (Fulton Fish Market, 2026; Ansai et al., 2025; National Fisheries Institute, 2023). Shrimp are the most commonly consumed seafood and are low in mercury, typically ranging from 0.009-0.02 mg/kg (McCormick et al., 2020; U.S. Food and Drug Administration, 2014). Salmon is another safe option with low mercury levels averaging 0.022 mg/kg (U.S. Food and Drug Administration, 2014). Canned tuna has an average level of 0.126 while fresh/frozen tuna has an average of 0.144 mg/kg (U.S. Food and Drug Administration, 2014). Yellow Fin Tuna has a slightly higher mercury level of 0.354 mg/kg (U.S. Food and Drug Administration, 2014). Tilapia also has low levels of mercury, averaging 0.013 mg/kg. VDH's "Eat Fish – Choose Wisely" cards reflect these results categorizing these seafood species in the "Best Choices" category.

This data highlights the need for clear, accessible fish consumption guidance that helps individuals – especially those in sensitive populations – balance the nutritional benefits of fish with the risks of mercury exposure. Effective fish consumption advisories, such as those developed by VDH, play a critical role in supporting informed decision-making by translating complex environmental health data into practical dietary recommendations.

2.2 Design Principles for Health Communication Materials

2.2.1 Scientific Accuracy Alone Is Not Enough for Effective Health Communication

The previous section of this report discusses the presence of mercury in fish from a scientific standpoint, providing the critical understanding needed to assess what information should be communicated. However, assessing how well communication materials work takes more than just scientific knowledge or subjective judgment. A strong assessment depends on a clear understanding of what constitutes effective design and messaging in conveying nuanced health guidance (U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, 2014). In public health contexts, especially those involving nuanced, complex, and potentially confusing guidance – such as fish consumption during pregnancy – communication and outreach materials must balance clarity, accuracy, and engagement. Without grounding design in established best practices for health communication tools, it becomes difficult to determine whether materials are likely to successfully communicate information and provide guidance on best practices. The following review and analysis provide a framework for understanding best practices in design in evaluating VDH's "Eat Fish – Choose Wisely" fish consumption advisory card.

2.2.2 Evidence-Based Design Principles Provide a Framework for Evaluating the Card

Because this project centers around evaluating the effectiveness of the card, reviewing evidence-based strategies for designing health communication materials is a critical component of research. These strategies provide a framework for assessing whether materials – specifically regarding fish consumption – are accessible, understandable, and appropriately tailored to their

audiences (U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, 2014). By identifying key elements such as visual hierarchy, readability, message framing, and accessibility, it becomes possible to systematically evaluate strengths and weaknesses in existing materials and to make informed recommendations for improvement (U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, 2014). The following discussion outlines best practices for designing flyers and posters in healthcare settings, which will serve as the criteria for evaluating the communication materials used in this project.

2.2.3 Visual Hierarchy and Plain Language Make Health Materials Easier to Use Quickly

Flyers and posters in waiting rooms, hallways, exam rooms, and similar health settings should be designed for quick understanding, prioritizing digestible and clear communication. The most effective materials use a clear visual hierarchy, with the most important information placed at the top (Health Communication Playbook, 2018). A strong concise headline paired with a high quality image is often the fastest way to attract attention (Kelly et al., 2024). Supporting text should be brief, with bullet points used instead of long paragraphs whenever possible (Best Practices for Designing Flyers, 2026).

2.2.4 Benefit-Framed Headlines Can Encourage Engagement Without Discouraging Fish Consumption

Research in health communication shows that headlines strongly influence whether audiences engage with information, and benefit-focused headlines are often more effective at encouraging selection and continued engagement (Jiang et al., 2021). In contrast, fear-based or negatively framed headlines can increase perceived risk but may reduce deeper engagement and follow-through, making them less effective for promoting sustained attention or behavior change (Jiang et al., 2021). This approach is especially useful for fish consumption cards, where the message may foreground the nutritional benefits of eating fish (U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, 2014; U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, 2015a; LeProvost et al., 2013). Sometimes, materials aim to change behavior, while sometimes they merely aim to educate (U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, 2019). Many communication materials intentionally begin by emphasizing the nutritional benefits of fish before introducing risks such as mercury exposure, helping to maintain engagement and avoid discouraging consumption. To avoid confusion, the message should be framed simply: eat more of certain fish, eat less of others. Scientific jargon and long explanations should be avoided (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2025).

2.2.5 Accessibility Features Shape Whether Materials Are Effective Among Different Audiences

Readability is also critical, and communication is most effective when there is a visual hierarchy so readers can scan material with ease (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2025). Materials should ideally use no more than one or two fonts, preferably standard Sans Serif fonts such as Arial, Helvetica, Open Sans, Verdana, or Tahoma (U.S. Department of Health,

2010). Bold text can help emphasize key points, while white space improves clarity and reduces overload. Plain language, active voice and common terms are recommended.

Color choices should support accessibility. Blue effectively draws attention, but it is best to avoid relying heavily on green when contrast is important because red-green color blindness is common (“Build Better Color and Color Contrast”, 2024).

Calls to action work best when they are simple, low risk, and immediately useful. A good example is: “Want to Learn More?” QR codes can be helpful as a secondary feature when they are clearly explained and link directly to mobile friendly content (Kohler, 2024).

3. Methods

3.1 Study Design

This project used a multi-step methodological approach that included (1) a literature review to research mercury in fish, fish advisories, and health communication materials; (2) stakeholder identification and outreach (Table 2); and (3) development of qualitative and quantitative interview instruments. Group members worked collaboratively in sub-teams to complete research and outreach strategies of emails and interviews.

3.2 Literature Review

We conducted two complementary literature reviews to inform the project. One sub-team reviewed scientific literature on mercury exposure and fish consumption, including U.S. Environmental Protection Agency reports, peer-reviewed articles, and public health guidance documents. This review focused on exposure pathways, bioaccumulation in fish, risks to sensitive populations, and existing fish consumption advisories (U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, 2015b). It informed the scientific framing of interview questions to ensure alignment with current public health guidance. A second sub-team reviewed federal guidance documents (e.g., CDC, EPA, and health literacy resources) and peer-reviewed literature on best practices for public health communication materials. The team used findings from this review to establish evaluation criteria for the “Eat Fish – Choose Wisely” cards and to guide the design of interview and survey instruments (Middlebury Social Science Research Methods Program, n.d.a,b).

Simultaneously, the full team compiled a comprehensive database of fish consumption advisories across all U.S. states using publicly available government sources. This internal dataset serves as a comparative baseline for analysis.

3.3 Stakeholder Identification

We identified stakeholder groups in collaboration with partners at VDH. Populations of ultimate interest included nurses and OB/GYNs directly interacting with patients, public health

nurses and administrative personnel in VDH District Offices and within the University of Vermont Health Network, and individuals like researchers, teachers, nursing supervisors, and FCHCs involved in distributing or using fish consumption advisory materials (Table 2).

The population identification method outlines an approach of identifying the stakeholders with whom conversations occurred, with whom they could occur, and those who are theoretically implicated in the study. Ideally, all pregnant people in the state of Vermont, all OB/GYNs, all nurses and doctors working in settings that provide obstetric, pre-natal, and maternal-fetal care, all individuals working in healthcare clinics that serve pregnant people, and all the researchers involved in the development of the “Eat Fish – Choose Wisely” cards would have provided valuable insights into fish consumption patterns in the pregnant population and how VDH’s cards affect that consumption.

The team compiled a contact list of potential stakeholders of interest developed through:

1. VDH-provided contacts acquired via the fish consumption advisory order form and internal contacts (Table 2)
2. Independent online research to ascertain contact information for healthcare providers and clinicians
3. Referrals from stakeholders and collaborators in the project

Given the existing VDH contacts and the information we were able to obtain online in compliance with Health Insurance Portability Accountability Act (“HIPAA”) requirements, Institutional Review Board (“IRB”) restrictions, and patient privacy, we have focused research contacts on OB/GYNs, nurses, healthcare clinics, and people who requested copies of the “Eat Fish – Choose Wisely” fish cards (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2021). The individuals we interviewed include academic researchers, FCHCs at VDH District Offices, and public health nurses in various counties (Table 1; Table 2).

3.4 Outreach Procedures

We conducted outreach primarily via email using standardized messaging and an internally developed email template. VDH partners also disseminated information about the project internally through district offices and across professional networks to increase awareness of the project prior to direct contact. Following email contact, we set up phone calls and Zoom meetings to engage in conversation with willing parties. Participants in the outreach process include OB/GYNs, public health nurses, FCHCs, and academic researchers. Interviewees include public health nurses, FCHCs, and researchers.

If contacted parties did not respond within two weeks, we sent follow-up email. If a contacted party did not respond within a week after we sent a follow-up email, we removed that party from consideration in our active contact list while retaining contact information.

We engaged in iterative recruitment and outreach, expanding our contact list over time with the identification of new stakeholders.

3.5 Development of Survey and Interview Instruments

The research team developed structured interview guides tailored to three audiences:

1. Healthcare providers
2. Public health practitioners
3. Pregnant individuals (via VDH-administered survey)

The team used findings from both literature reviews to develop interview and survey questions (Middlebury Social Science Research Methods Program, n.d.a,b). Drawing on the foundational research into effective health communication and the scientific literature on mercury exposure, the team drafted structured question sets designed to probe each audience's familiarity with the “Eat Fish – Choose Wisely” cards, the cards’ distribution and use in practice, and any barriers or gaps providers face in communication to pregnant patients (Zhao, 2020). For healthcare providers, questions were developed based on the “Mercury in Fish, Eat Fish–Choose Wisely” webpage that advertises the “Eat Fish – Choose Wisely” cards to inform providers about the recent redevelopment of the cards (Vermont Department of Health, 2025a). VDH card distribution records led us to engage in outreach with healthcare workers and public health personnel. We sought to examine whether healthcare providers received the cards and considered displaying them in their offices, while also learning how healthcare workers communicate nuanced health information, such as fish consumption guidance, to patients and district health offices. For public health practitioners and district offices, we used the same information and question outline to drive our process, asking whether personnel had received the cards, whether they had the opportunity and ability to distribute the cards, and how they communicated with patients and other health offices.

To guide these semi-structured interviews, we used a core set of questions while allowing for follow-up questions depending on each participant’s role and responses (Middlebury Social Science Research Methods Program, n.d.a). These questions included whether participants were aware that Environmental Health had recently updated its fish consumption guidance; how the cards came up in their work; where they received fish cards; how communication and information flow between local health offices and clinics worked with respect to prenatal care recommendations; whether they or their office distributed fish cards to prenatal care providers in their community; what barriers to distribution they had faced if they had not distributed the cards; and whether there was anything else they thought we should know about how the Department of Health communicates with pregnant people about fish consumption or mercury risks.

Since we could not speak directly with pregnant people, due to HIPAA regulations, we worked with VDH to develop a specific survey to be distributed to pregnant persons through secure channels (Middlebury Social Science Research Methods Program, n.d.b). The team iteratively refined draft instruments through internal workshops, faculty feedback, and review by VDH partners.

Final instruments focused on participants' familiarity with the "Eat Fish – Choose Wisely" cards, the cards' use in practice, and perceived communication barriers from the perspective of healthcare providers and personnel.

3.6 Data Collection Process

Data collection consisted of semi-structured interviews managed by consistent team members and through email-based responses. We conducted all interviews using standardized question guides to ensure consistency across participants.

As of 05/14/26, the team has conducted five meetings with five participants, and three other participants have answered questions via email.

4. Results

Interviews have been conducted with five VDH representatives across the state, two researchers at Dartmouth College, and a former VDH toxicologist to assess the distribution and reception of the "Eat Fish – Choose Wisely" fish consumption cards among prenatal care providers and pregnant people.

4.1 Fish Card Redesign and Development Process

4.1.1 Documenting the Redesign Process Preserves Institutional Memory

Including a discussion of the development and redesign process is essential to this report because it provides context that is not fully captured in existing documentation. As projects evolve over time, details about decision-making, revisions, and rationale can be lost, creating gaps in institutional memory. Documenting this process helps preserve that knowledge, ensuring continuity and making the information accessible to future stakeholders and collaborators. Documentation also establishes a shared understanding among readers, so that all audiences – regardless of their prior involvement – can clearly follow how and why the materials have changed. Most importantly, outlining the development and redesign process is key to understanding how the current version of the "Eat Fish – Choose Wisely" cards was reached, allowing for a more informed evaluation of their strengths, limitations, and potential next steps. The following discussion reflects on conversations with individuals involved in the development and distribution process of the "Eat Fish – Choose Wisely" fish consumption cards along with VDH and DEC.

4.1.2 The Current Cards Reflect Inter-Agency Compromise and Evolving Scientific Evidence

An ecotoxicologist at Dartmouth College, who began working with VDH on the cards in the mid-late 2010s, shared her insights with respect to her own involvement, the funding of the

project, stakeholders and developers of the cards, the research process behind the information displayed on the cards, and the mission driving the redesign process. The following conversation reveals how the cards in circulation reflect inter-agency compromise shaped by practical constraints, shifting priorities, fish-promotion goals, and evolving scientific evidence.

4.1.3 Dartmouth's Involvement Helped Connect Mercury Research to Public-Facing Guidance

Reflecting on her own involvement in the research contributing to the development of the cards, the ecotoxicologist highlighted Dartmouth's research Superfund program that was directly focused on mercury in fish. Working with a community manager at DEC and VDH, researchers at Dartmouth sought to assist in the redesign process of the cards, which had been in circulation for many years. The redesign of the cards, necessary as a result of new findings and updated data from ongoing research in addition to the desire to encourage people to eat fish, was originally intended to be displayed digitally via an app. However, during COVID-19, VDH's focus shifted away from the development of new "Eat Fish – Choose Wisely" materials. The funding originally supplied by the Lake Champlain Basin Program ("LCBP") was meant to aid in scientific research to augment the consumption guidelines. Additionally, funding from LCBP supported not only mercury research but also the printing of the updated cards, after which Dartmouth's direct involvement in the project concluded.

4.1.4 Risk Assessment and Fish Tissue Monitoring Drove the Redesign Process

Conducting research on mercury in fish and updating the information in site risk assessments were a driving element of the redevelopment and redesign process. Efforts revolved around measuring mercury in fish, the enhancement of long term data sets, and the collection of fish tissue to be monitored and surveyed. Given that there were previous versions of the cards in circulation, the aim of the redesign was to communicate the updated research in a manner that did not deter the public from consuming fish. Dartmouth was involved in a targeted arm of the overall process in developing the "Eat Fish – Choose Wisely" materials that was focused on targeting consumer markets such as grocery stores. Notably, however, the goal of the redesign overall was to address the consumption of fish in general, since most fish advisories are geared towards communication with anglers.

Given Dartmouth's ongoing work with DEC, it seems that differences in priorities and timelines between DEC and VDH shaped the revamping of the cards and the eventual distribution process to various locations, such as grocery stores, anglers, and healthcare offices. This demonstrates that the final product – the cards that are currently in circulation – was the result of inter-agency compromise and suggests that the final design and distribution of the cards were shaped as much by evolving scientific evidence as by practical constraints, shifting institutional priorities, and the need to balance public health messaging with broader goals of promoting fish consumption.

4.1.5 Grant Timelines and Practical Constraints Limited the Original Rollout

Conversation with a research scientist in the Earth Science department at Dartmouth College, further cemented how a grant from LCBP played a central role in the development, research, and dissemination of the fish consumption cards, supporting both scientific study and public-facing communication efforts. The aforementioned grant funded extensive fieldwork on mercury bioaccumulation, including sampling in 2013 of different bodies of water in Vermont. This included five key species – walleye, lake trout, smallmouth bass, yellow perch, and white perch – with roughly 70 individuals per species collected at catchable lengths (the specific size category of fish large enough to be immediately harvested by anglers), sometimes sourced through fishing derbies and angler participation. The grant also supported outreach initiatives, including distributing the finalized cards in grocery stores, presenting findings at poster symposia, and bringing educational materials directly to high school classrooms for stream-based science labs. While the original plan included broader dissemination through doctors' offices, time constraints near the end of the grant period limited these efforts, resulting in a more targeted physical distribution strategy driven by DEC. It seems as though the redesign process of the cards took longer than was originally intended, shaping VDH's ability to distribute to vulnerable and sensitive communities.

4.1.6 The Final Design Balanced Simplification, Limited Resources, and the Goal of Encouraging Safe Fish Consumption

A discussion of the design of the cards revealed VDH's desire to try to simplify the information, reflecting an intentional effort to make complex risk assessments accessible without discouraging fish consumption. Ultimately, the development and dissemination of the cards were shaped by a combination of rigorous environmental research, community engagement, and practical limitations, underscoring the challenges of balancing clear public health guidance with limited financial resources, overburdened healthcare workers, cultural sensitivity, regional variability, and the goal of sustaining fish as a valued part of local diets.

4.1.7 Historical Precedent and Budget Constraints Help Explain the Current Card Format

Conversation with a former VDH toxicologist revealed more information about the redesign process of the cards based on newer risk assessments. She described the evolution of the fish advisory cards, emphasizing that while earlier versions may have been supported by DEC funding and related efforts like a 2015 CDC environmental capacity grant, the cards themselves were not directly grant-funded. Instead, the work drew on broader research into chemical contaminants in fish, with significant quantitative risk assessment conducted over several years by risk assessors and toxicologists at VDH. However, development was shaped and guided by limited resources. The goal of the redesign process was to translate complex data into clear guidance that encouraged safe fish consumption while still highlighting fish as an affordable, healthy source of protein. Card design was informed by peer-reviewed models from states like California and Minnesota, while the final format and size were largely determined by historical

precedent in Vermont and budget constraints. Distribution proved challenging, with declining requests from healthcare providers and limited capacity for outreach, though there was interest in expanding access through inclusion in prenatal materials and potential multilingual options. Overall, the cards reflect a balance between scientific rigor, public health messaging, and practical limitations in funding and implementation.

4.2 Distribution of the Cards in Healthcare Settings

4.2.1 Interviews Showed That Card Recognition Was High, but Distribution Varied by Region

Interviews were conducted with VDH representatives and partners across the state to assess the distribution and reception of the “Eat Fish – Choose Wisely” fish consumption advisory cards among prenatal care providers and pregnant people. See Table 2 for a complete list of interviewees defined by their titles and offices.

4.2.2 Distribution Success Appeared Strongest Where Local Provider Relationships Were Strong

We intentionally sought perspectives from people in different regions of the state and found through our interviews that the “Eat Fish – Choose Wisely” cards are widely recognized and valued. However, their distribution varies significantly by region, with more success in areas that have fewer providers and stronger local relationships or where women, infants, and children (“WIC”) programs are used as a primary outreach channel. Participants also highlighted opportunities to improve impact through smaller or bundled materials, more translated materials to reach growing refugee populations, and greater reliance on trusted channels like WIC and community-based communication platforms.

All interviewees were familiar with the cards and viewed them as a useful resource, though distribution experiences varied considerably by region.

4.2.3 District Office Experiences Revealed Uneven Interest From Medical Practices

The Public Health Nurse in the St. Albans District Office reported proactively sharing the cards at multiple service line and community health meetings in early 2025, including OB and pediatric service lines, but noted that medical practices showed surprisingly little interest in receiving physical copies.

The Public Health Nurse and FCHC based in Ferrisburg described a smoother distribution process, attributing this in part to Addison County’s smaller number of providers – two pediatric offices and one OB clinic – and the strong personal relationships her office maintained with them; she was able to incorporate the cards directly into prenatal care packages and distribute them to WIC providers as well.

4.2.4 WIC Emerged as a Consistent Channel for Reaching Pregnant People

The Public Health Nurse in Springfield reported a particularly consistent and targeted distribution model. Her office, which serves as the local health department for Springfield, Vermont, provides the fish consumption advisory card to every pregnant WIC client and reviews it with them directly. She described WIC as the primary channel through which pregnant people could be effectively reached.

4.2.5 Retail Distribution Faced Physical Format and Approval Barriers

In Brattleboro, the Public Health Nurse Supervisor noted that while cards were generally well received at tabling events, outreach remained inconsistent due to structural barriers shifting priorities in the healthcare space. In conversation with a toxicologist who works with DEC, it was revealed that DEC printed the cards using grant funding and provided most of them to VDH for distribution. The Public Health Nurse Supervisor identified several barriers, including that the posters were too large to fit on store shelves, and that franchise grocers such as Aldi required corporate-level approval, making placement difficult. She suggested that a smaller, business card-sized format with a QR code might be better suited for retail settings. This grocer outreach effort was not the first of its kind: an earlier LCBP grant had funded placement of the cards in grocery stores, reflecting a longstanding recognition that retail settings are an important non-clinical touchpoint for reaching the general public.

4.2.6 Respondents Pointed to Digital, Bundled, and Translated Materials as Future Opportunities

Across all interviews, a recurring theme emerged around the limitations of physical card distribution. Respondents identified the format and size of the card as barriers, and emphasized that digital formats, including PDFs, social media posts, email, and platforms like Front Porch Forum, would reach pregnant people more effectively. The Public Health Nurse and FCHC based in Ferrisburg also suggested packaging fish consumption guidance alongside existing health materials, such as lead safety information, to reduce the burden on both providers and patients. The nurses in Brattleboro additionally highlighted the need for translated materials, noting that translations of the card into Dari and Pashto would help to better serve Brattleboro's growing Afghan refugee population. Some translation work has been undertaken previously, and earlier grant-funded outreach included community-level research – including a UVM thesis drawing on interviews with Somali, Nepalese, and other community leaders – to better understand fish consumption patterns among diverse populations. Nevertheless, gaps in language access remain. When asked how VDH might most effectively reach pregnant people directly, respondents pointed to WIC, text messaging, WhatsApp, Instagram, and Facebook as the most promising channels.

5. Discussion

5.1 Reflection on the Literature Review Process

The scientific literature review explores government reports, peer-reviewed articles, and public health guidance related to mercury exposure and fish consumption. The review synthesizes evidence on mercury sources and environmental pathways, bioaccumulation in fish, neurodevelopmental risks for sensitive populations, and the nutritional benefits of fish consumption. Findings generated an understanding of existing fish consumption advisories and public health messaging strategies aimed at promoting the benefits of fish while minimizing mercury exposure risk. The research aligns with the guidance on the “Eat Fish – Choose Wisely” cards and serves to frame the background of scientific knowledge for the project.

Prioritizing clarity, simplicity, and quick comprehension is crucial in public health communications. Overall, it seems that effective health flyers and posters rely on clear hierarchy, concise language, readable design, and straightforward actions so that people can understand and respond to the message within just a few seconds (Center for Health Care Strategies, 2024). Conducting this research laid the groundwork for this project with respect to two things: evaluating the efficacy of the “Eat Fish – Choose Wisely” cards and informing best survey design.

5.2 Interpretation of Results

5.2.1 Distribution Success Seems to Depend on Local Infrastructure, Not on the Cards Themselves

The findings from interviews with VDH district office staff and community partners, and researchers involved in the cards’ development reveal that the “Eat Fish – Choose Wisely” cards are generally well-regarded by those who have encountered them. However, the cards’ reach remains uneven, and their current format poses meaningful barriers to consistent distribution. The variation in distribution success across regions appears to be less a function of the cards themselves and more a reflection of pre-existing infrastructure: Counties with fewer providers and stronger interpersonal networks, like Addison County, were able to integrate the cards into established workflows more readily, while areas with more diffuse provider networks or larger or more diverse populations faced greater logistical challenges. This suggests that the effectiveness of the cards as a communication tool is highly dependent on the local conditions into which they are introduced, rather than on a standardized statewide system.

5.2.2 Format Constraints Limit Reach Beyond Clinical Settings

A recurring theme across interviews was the mismatch between the physical format of the cards and the realities of distribution (McDonald et al., 2021; Trezona et al., 2018). Studies note that waiting rooms are an opportunity for improving healthcare literacy, and materials with

photo narrative deliverables may result in a higher uptake of information (Jansen et al., 2021). While VDH's cards do have a mix of visual imagery and text, multiple respondents noted that the cards are large and unwieldy for point-of-care settings. This makes them potentially difficult to display, store, or hand out in clinical environments not designed to accommodate materials of that size. The failed grocer outreach effort described by a DEC employee illustrates how format constraints can prevent the cards from reaching important non-clinical touchpoints altogether. Understanding the specific nature of these physical limitations will be important for VDH if it considers redesign or alternative formats – whether digital, reduced size, or adapted for different display contexts.

5.2.3 The History of Distribution Reflects Shifting Grant Timelines and Institutional Priorities

The history of grocery store distribution is more complex than a simple failure. The original distribution plan for the cards did not include a pivot to grocery stores, but such a shift was a pragmatic response to circumstances: the grant period was ending, and the originally planned rollout to doctors' office had proved infeasible, leaving grocery stores as the most viable remaining option at the time. The cards were originally placed in grocery stores through the LCBP outreach and education grant, which also funded a fish survey involving the physical collection of five species – walleye, lake trout, smallmouth bass, yellow perch, and white perch – with 70 fish of each species caught at legal catch length. That risk assessment, conducted under 2011 EPA guidelines, helped directly inform the content of the cards. The Dartmouth ecotoxicologist confirmed that a key element of the research process involved measuring mercury, enhancing long-term datasets, and collecting fish tissue for monitoring and survey – work that was central to producing updated, evidence-based consumption guidelines. However, the grant timeline created real constraints. By the time the risk assessment was complete, the grant period was ending, and the development team pivoted to grocery store distribution when the originally planned rollout to doctors' offices proved infeasible. A planned mobile app was also shelved when the technology landscape shifted. The redesign effort coordinated by Dartmouth similarly saw its digital ambitions curtailed, this time by COVID-19, which redirected VDH's attention and effectively paused further development. DEC played a significant role in that earlier phase of the work before coordination responsibilities changed hands. One interviewee noted with surprise the low uptake of physical copies among medical practices. This observation is based on disruption patterns rather than confirmed data on provider behavior, and it is possible that providers are accessing guidance through other channels; nonetheless, it raises a broader question about whether print materials alone are a sufficient vehicle for this kind of public health messaging.

5.2.4 Health Equity: Language Access and the Cultural Significance of Fishing

Health equity is also a meaningful consideration that emerged from the interviews. The "Eat Fish – Choose Wisely" cards' current reach – largely through English-language clinical

encounters in counties with established provider relationships – leaves significant gaps for communities who access health information differently or not at all through those channels. While the existing “Eat Fish – Choose Wisely” card does have a QR code that, when scanned, directs users to the “Mercury in Fish” webpage where there are translations of the consumption advisory into other languages, the positioning of the QR code is not intuitive (Vermont Department of Health, 2025a). The QR code is in the bottom right corner of the card, and the translation symbol is small. Additionally, upon scanning the code, users must scroll to the bottom of the page through English-language content in order to find translations, which is a deterrent if one does not speak English.

Further, the Brattleboro District Office’s observation that translated materials in Dari and Pashto are needed to reach the region’s Afghan refugee community points to a gap in the current distribution model that extends beyond format and into language access. If the cards are only reaching English-speaking patients in counties with strong provider relationships, then the populations most likely to face barriers to prenatal health information, as well as access to grocery stores and co-ops where fish can be purchased, are also those least likely to receive fish consumption guidance.

This concern extends to rural and lower-income communities as well, where fishing often carries cultural and economic significance that goes beyond recreation. Fish can serve as a primary food source and, for communities like the Abenaki, fishing is a practice tied to cultural identity. A professor in Dartmouth’s Earth Science department explained that conversations with Abenaki tribal leaders revealed a difficult reality: some communities live in food deserts and have limited incomes, so warnings about fish-related risks need to be communicated carefully. Otherwise, people may avoid fishing altogether, even though it is an important source of food. Notably, fish is a traditional food and fundamental protein-source for the Abenaki people. Interviewees noted that some funding has been directed toward translation of the cards, and that earlier grant work included outreach to Somali, Nepalese, and other communities – including a UVM thesis based on interviews with community leaders – to better understand fish consumption patterns among diverse populations. These efforts reflect recognition of the need for more translated materials, but a comprehensive multilingual and culturally responsive distribution model has not yet been achieved. The approach recommended by several interviewees is not to lead with fear but to encourage fishing while providing clear, accessible guidance. Recommendations include distribution at boat ramps, at fishing license points of sale, and at community gathering points, with proper translation and outreach to community leaders. Similarly, a district office worker’s experience in Springfield – where the cards are distributed consistently to every pregnant WIC client – underscores that WIC represents one of the most equitable and reliable channels for reaching this population, and one that warrants deeper investment by VDH.

5.2.5 Vermont's Approach in Regional and Comparative Context

A number of interviewees pointed to New York State as a model worth examining. New York's fish consumption outreach program has more specific detail, with location-specific guidance mapped to particular fishing sites and a robust online presence that attracts significant traffic. The framing is explicitly pro-fishing – not anti-consumption – and the information is delivered in a way that empowers anglers rather than alarming them. Vermont's cards were similarly developed with the intention of keeping fish in people's diets rather than discouraging consumption; notably, the development team was not permitted to call the materials a "fish consumption advisory," reflecting a deliberate effort to avoid overly cautionary messaging. The Dartmouth ecotoxicologist reinforced this point, noting that the goal of the redesign was explicitly to communicate updated research in a manner that did not deter the public from consuming fish – and that, unlike most fish advisories which target anglers, this effort was specifically oriented toward consumer markets such as grocery stores. In cases where certain species – like walleye from specific areas of Lake Champlain – posed risks significant enough to warrant avoidance, the card developers had to navigate how to communicate that without undermining the broader goal of keeping fish in peoples' diets. The red, yellow, and green color coding was introduced as a way to simplify risk information, particularly as the card expanded to cover multiple lakes with varying risk profiles. The Lake Champlain Basin context also adds jurisdictional complexity: as a large lake shared by Vermont, New York, and Canada, fish consumption advice has historically been developed at the state level, but differences in risk assessment methodology – such as those between Vermont and Quebec – mean that anglers fishing the same waters may receive different guidance depending on which side of the border they are on.

5.2.6 Inter-Agency Dynamics and Community-Based Educational Models

The development of the cards was also shaped significantly by inter-agency dynamics. The Dartmouth ecotoxicologist noted that differences in priorities and timelines between DEC and VDH influenced both the development and dissemination process, suggesting that the final product was the result of inter-agency compromise as much as scientific consensus. The cards currently in circulation therein reflect not only the best available evidence but also the practical constraints, shifting institutional priorities, and negotiated messaging that characterize multi-agency public health projects. Finally, the grant-funded work also created some innovative educational touchpoints that extended beyond traditional clinical and retail distribution. One effort brought high school students to local streams to conduct science labs measuring mercury concentrations in dragonfly larvae: a hands-on way to help young people understand why mercury accumulates in fish at specific locations. The resulting findings were shared at a poster symposium, where the fish cards were distributed as part of a broader educational conversation about mercury. This kind of place-based, community-engaged outreach represents a notably different model from passive card distribution and may offer lessons for how VDH could deepen public understanding of fish consumption risks in the future.

5.3 Limitations

It is important to acknowledge the limitations of this study. The interview sample is small and geographically concentrated, with interviews conducted primarily in districts where card distribution was already underway, meaning that districts with little to no engagement are less likely to be represented (Figure 1; Figure 2). The perspectives gathered represent VDH district office staff, including administrators and public health personnel, rather than the pregnant people whom the cards are designed to serve (Table 2). Without direct data from the desired target population, more work in future studies is needed in order to understand whether the cards have influenced fish consumption behavior, which was part of the project’s original scope. The survey questions developed for VDH deployment represent an effort to address this gap, but those results fall outside the bounds of this report. Additionally, because interviews were conducted with individuals who had already engaged with the cards in some capacity, the sample likely skews toward those with higher awareness and motivation – meaning that gaps in regions with lower engagement may be underrepresented in these findings.

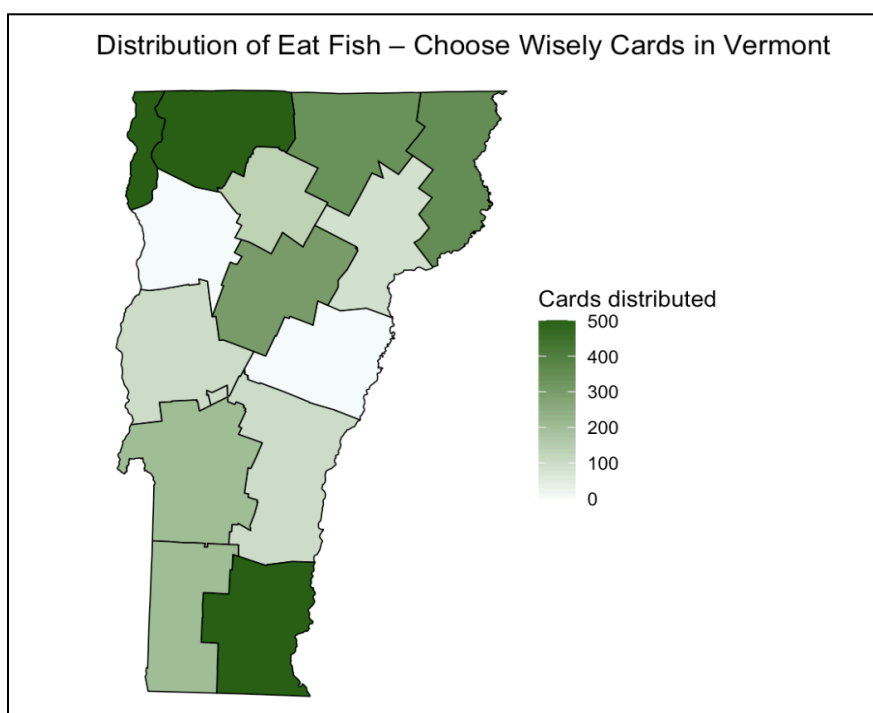


Figure 1. This map shows the distribution of “Eat Fish – Choose Wisely” cards across Vermont counties. Counties shaded in green indicate areas where cards were distributed, while counties in white indicate areas where they were not. Based on the distribution list shared by David Grass, the cards were not distributed in Chittenden County or Orange County.

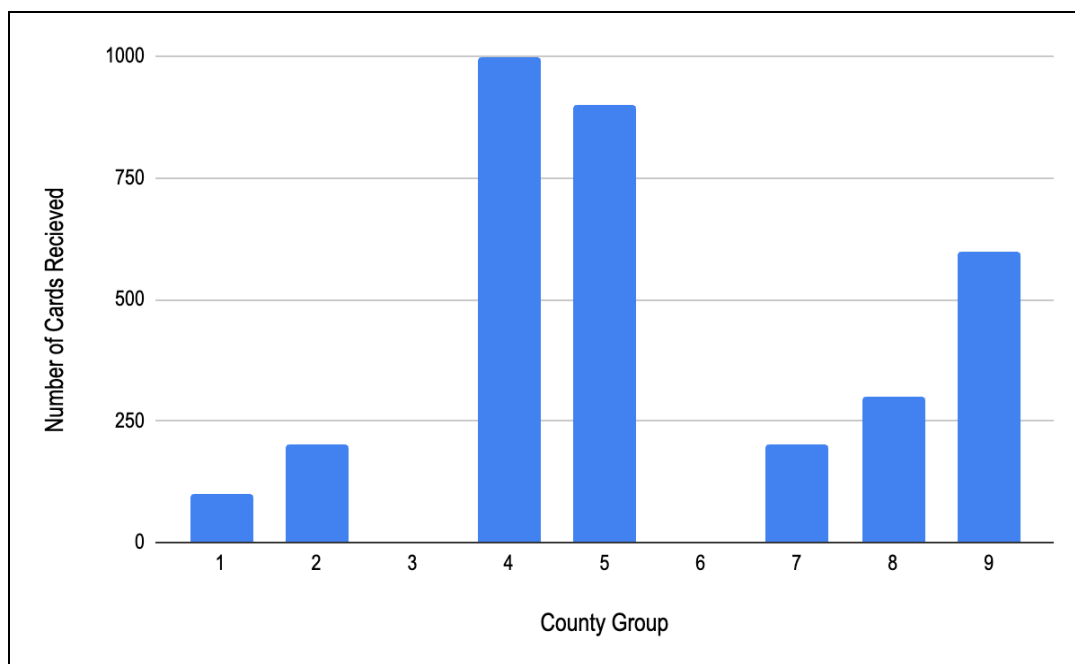


Figure 2. This graph shows the distribution of “Eat Fish – Choose Wisely” Fish Cards throughout Vermont by County Group. *Refer to Table 1 for County Group meaning.

6. Recommendations

Based on the findings gathered through interviews with VDH district office staff and community partners, this project offers several opportunities for enhancing the reach and effectiveness of the “Eat Fish – Choose Wisely” cards, building on an already strong foundation of existing outreach and education efforts.

6.1 A Smaller Card Format Could Make Distribution More Practical Across Care and Community Settings

If VDH is considering a redesign or reproduction of the card, the agency may wish to explore reducing the physical size of the card. A smaller format may encourage more concise and focused messaging, which aligns with evidence that simpler, easier-to-read health materials are more likely to be read and understood, offering a way to expand distribution and include audiences with lower health literacy (Dunnett et al., 2025). As multiple interviewees noted, the current format presents practical constraints in some point-of-care settings and has proven incompatible with retail shelf displays during the grocer outreach effort led by DEC. A smaller, wallet-sized or business card version – ideally with a QR code linking to the full guidance online – would be more practical for distribution across a wider range of settings, including grocery stores, WIC offices, and exam rooms. The cards in their existing format seem to be unwieldy for simple distribution alongside general guidance for pregnant patients.

6.2 Digital Versions Would Reduce Reliance on Physical Stock and Provider-Based Handouts

Outreach efforts could be enhanced if the cards were made widely available via digital formats. Respondents consistently identified email, PDFs, social media platforms like Instagram and Facebook, and community platforms like Front Porch Forum as especially effective channels for reaching pregnant people, instead of relying on physical distribution alone. People can only process a limited amount of information at once, so reducing friction by enabling people to access materials on their own time and in their own spaces improves comprehension and uptake (Sewell et al., 2020). A digital version of the card would allow healthcare providers, WIC coordinators, and community partners to share the guidance directly with patients and clients without relying on physical stock.

6.3 Separate Provider-Facing and Patient-Facing Distribution Strategies Would Better Match the Card's Two Audiences

VDH should consider that there may be value in further differentiating distribution strategies – one tailored to healthcare providers and one aimed directly at pregnant people – reflecting the fact that the two sides of the print card are designed for different audiences. Minnesota's consumption advisories present a strong example of this divide (“Eat Fish Often? A Minnesota Guide to Eating Fish”, 2025; Minnesota Department of Health, 2020). The Minnesota fish consumption advisories very clearly distinguish between recommendations for the general public and recommendations for “women who are or may become pregnant and children under 15 years old” (Minnesota Department of Health, 2020). The advisories are horizontally oriented, have very clear headers organizing types of information, and are not condensed with pictures. Additionally, the Minnesota “Choose Your Fish” card aimed at guiding pregnant people to consume fish safely has boxes with structured information such as “Every Week: Eat 2 Times, very low mercury” and “Every Week: Eat 1 Time, low mercury”. The cards contain very explicit recommendations. Currently, distribution of VDH's “Eat Fish – Choose Wisely” cards flows primarily through clinical and administrative intermediaries, which creates gaps wherever those relationships are weak or absent. The cards are printed two-sided and may be hard to digest for patients. They also may not be reaching the intended audiences due to the existing distribution infrastructure. This may reflect inequities in the healthcare system overall. A parallel direct-to-consumer strategy, leveraging WIC enrollment, prenatal appointment check-ins, and digital outreach, would help ensure that the guidance reaches pregnant people regardless of whether their provider actively distributes the cards.

6.4 Clearer Visual Hierarchy Would Help Readers Identify the Safest Fish Choices More Quickly

The information on the card should be made more digestible at a glance and presents an opportunity for continued refinement of clarity and usability. New York’s statewide fish advisory materials demonstrate a simplified means of communicating information about fish consumption guidance because they separate the most important action steps from the background scientific information, making it easier for a reader to understand actionable steps (New York Department of Health, 2024). Rhode Island’s fish consumption advisory is also a useful model because it not only warns people about mercury but also presents fish consumption as both beneficial and potentially risky, depending on the type and amount of fish consumed (Rhode Island Department of Health, 2024). This balance is important because the goal of the Vermont card is not to discourage pregnant people from eating fish altogether, but to help them make safer choices. Rhode Island’s advisory is especially effective because its title, “Fish is Good, Mercury is Bad” immediately communicates the central message in plain language. The Rhode Island card’s question-and-answer format also makes the information easier to navigate because readers can quickly find answers to practical questions, rather than having to interpret dense blocks of text. Revising the Vermont card with these principles in mind – clearer headings, more spacing, simpler wording, and a stronger emphasis on the most actionable fish choices – could make the card easier to use during a brief point-of-care interaction.

6.5 Printed Translations and Community Partnerships Would Improve Access for Multilingual and Refugee Communities

VDH may want to consider investing in producing printed translated versions of the card in additional languages to complement existing digital translation pathways. While the QR code on the existing English version of the print card does link to translated materials, some communities may benefit from print versions of the cards in other languages. The interviews highlighted a particular need for Dari and Pashto translations to serve Vermont’s growing Afghan refugee population. Partnering with refugee resettlement agencies and multicultural community centers, as suggested by interviewees from the Brattleboro District Office, could help ensure that translated materials reach the communities that need them most.

7. Understanding Distribution - Further Implementation

Below is a survey we created for VDH to distribute to pregnant people and people of childbearing age. The survey’s goal is to help VDH better understand whether the card is reaching its intended audience, whether pregnant people understand the information, and whether the guidance is influencing fish consumption decisions. This survey was developed in response to a gap that emerged during our interviews: While the card provides useful public health guidance, there is limited information about whether pregnant people are receiving it,

understanding it, or using it when making decisions about fish. The survey is therefore designed to collect basic feedback on fish consumption habits, awareness of mercury risk, preferred formats for receiving health information, and whether the card changes how people think about choosing to eat fish during pregnancy.

To move this survey from a draft tool to tangible implementation, VDH could first pilot the survey through a small number of trusted distribution points, such as prenatal care offices, WIC appointments, district health offices, community health centers, and refugee resettlement or multicultural community organizations. The survey could be offered through both a QR code and through paper copies so that it remains accessible to people with different levels of internet access, language comfort, and digital literacy. After a short pilot period, VDH could review the responses to identify whether the card is reaching the right audiences, which parts of the card are most or least clear, and whether additional translations or distribution strategies are needed.

7.1 Fish Consumption Survey → For VDH Deployment to Pregnant People

How old are you?	<input type="checkbox"/> 15-20 <input type="checkbox"/> 21-25 <input type="checkbox"/> 26-31 <input type="checkbox"/> 32-36 <input type="checkbox"/> 37-41 <input type="checkbox"/> 41+
Is this your first pregnancy?	<input type="checkbox"/> YES <input type="checkbox"/> NO
Are you eating fish while you're pregnant?	<input type="checkbox"/> YES <input type="checkbox"/> NO
If yes, during a typical week, how many servings (a serving is defined as a portion about the size of the palm of your hand) of fish do you eat?	<input type="checkbox"/> 1-2 <input type="checkbox"/> 3-5 <input type="checkbox"/> 5+
If yes, during a typical week how many servings of fish did you eat before becoming pregnant?	<input type="checkbox"/> 1-2 <input type="checkbox"/> 3-5 <input type="checkbox"/> 5+

If not, did you eat fish before becoming pregnant?	<input type="checkbox"/> YES <input type="checkbox"/> NO
Do you try to eat certain types of fish (species) and avoid others?	<input type="checkbox"/> YES <input type="checkbox"/> NO
If yes, what types and why?	open-ended
Did you know that there are guidelines about what fish are best to eat while you're pregnant?	<input type="checkbox"/> YES <input type="checkbox"/> NO
If yes, where did you learn about them?	<input type="checkbox"/> Healthcare office <input type="checkbox"/> Online <input type="checkbox"/> Informational poster outside office <input type="checkbox"/> Other
Have you seen the "Eat Fish – Choose Wisely" card from the Department of Health?	<input type="checkbox"/> YES <input type="checkbox"/> NO
Where do you get information about what foods are healthy to eat during pregnancy and which foods you should avoid?	<input type="checkbox"/> Healthcare office <input type="checkbox"/> Online <input type="checkbox"/> Informational poster outside office <input type="checkbox"/> Other
How likely are you to eat 2-3 servings per week of low mercury fish?	<input type="checkbox"/> Extremely Unlikely <input type="checkbox"/> Somewhat Unlikely <input type="checkbox"/> Neither Likely nor Unlikely <input type="checkbox"/> Somewhat Likely <input type="checkbox"/> Extremely Likely
How likely are you to avoid high mercury fish?	<input type="checkbox"/> Extremely Unlikely <input type="checkbox"/> Somewhat Unlikely <input type="checkbox"/> Neither Likely nor Unlikely <input type="checkbox"/> Somewhat Likely <input type="checkbox"/> Extremely Likely

<p>After seeing this card, do you think your fish consumption habits will change during pregnancy?</p>	<p><input type="checkbox"/> YES</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> NO</p>
<p>After seeing this card, how likely are you to eat 2-3 servings per week of low mercury fish?</p>	<p><input type="checkbox"/> Extremely Unlikely</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> Somewhat Unlikely</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> Neither Likely nor Unlikely</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> Somewhat Likely</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> Extremely Likely</p>
<p>After seeing this card, how likely are you to avoid high mercury fish?</p>	<p><input type="checkbox"/> Extremely Unlikely</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> Somewhat Unlikely</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> Neither Likely nor Unlikely</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> Somewhat Likely</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> Extremely Likely</p>

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Roadmap to Vermont Food Security 2035: Local Food

Access Objective C3

Report written in partnership with Carlin Molander and the Vermont Food Security Coalition

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ENVS0401A

Professor Crawford

18 May 2026



Vermont Farm to Plate, Photo Credits to Andy Duback

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I. Introduction

Food insecurity in Vermont is tied to broader economic and social inequalities and affects communities across the state in different ways. Estimates suggest that between 5-20% of Vermonters experience food insecurity, meaning they do not have consistent, reliable access to enough nutritious and affordable food (Feeding America, 2019). The effects extend far beyond hunger alone. Many individuals facing food insecurity are forced to make difficult financial tradeoffs, often sacrificing spending on healthcare, transportation, housing, or utilities in order to afford food. These difficult decisions are intensified for those who are providing for others, such as families with children (Center on Budget and Policy Priorities, 2023).

Research also shows that food insecurity is associated with higher rates of chronic health conditions such as diabetes and hypertension over the course of a person’s life (Vazquez et al., 2021). For children, inconsistent access to food can contribute to behavioral challenges, poorer educational outcomes, and negative impacts on overall development (Gallegos et al. 2021).

Food insecurity does not affect all Vermonters equally. The Vermont Foodbank defines priority populations as individuals who live rurally, live with a disability, have incomes below the poverty line, are Black, Indigenous, People of Color (BIPOC), and/or Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer (LGBTQ+) (Vermont Foodbank, 2024). The COVID-19 pandemic exposed and intensified many existing weaknesses within Vermont’s food system, causing food insecurity rates to rise sharply throughout the state. More recently, uncertainty surrounding federal funding for food assistance programs, healthcare, agriculture, environmental initiatives, and other social services has created growing concern that these challenges may continue to worsen in the future.

a. Broader Context: Food Security as a Systems Issue

Food insecurity is not simply a problem of food availability. Rather, it reflects the interaction of economic, social, physical, environmental, and political systems that shape whether people can consistently access the food they need and desire. While emergency food programs such as food shelves, meal sites, and charitable food distribution remain essential, they do not address the root causes of food insecurity on their own. Food insecurity is often tied to broader conditions such as poverty, housing instability, high healthcare costs, limited transportation, disability, geographic isolation, and insufficient wages. As a result, food access work must be understood as a larger, systemic effort to build more equitable and resilient communities.

This systems perspective is especially important in rural states like Vermont, where food may be available but still difficult to access. For instance, long travel distances, limited public transportation, inconvenient program hours, lack of childcare, limited digital access, stigma, language barriers, and confusing eligibility requirements can prevent people from using existing resources. Therefore, improving food security requires not only expanding programs but also making new and existing programs more dignified, accessible, culturally responsive, and aligned with people's daily routines.

Food security is also closely connected to environmental studies because it sits at the intersection of agriculture, public health, community planning, climate resilience, and social justice. A sustainable food system is not only one that supports farmers and protects the environment, but one that ensures all people can access nourishing, culturally appropriate food in dignified ways. Within this larger context, our project contributes to a shift from short-term food assistance toward long-term, community-informed food security by asking not only whether food resources exist, but whether they are accessible, usable, equitable, trusted, and responsive to community needs.

b. The Vermont Food Security Coalition

Founded in 2024, the Vermont Food Security Coalition (The Coalition) brings together seven organizations working across food access, agriculture, land access, and community development in Vermont: NOFA-VT, Vermont Foodbank, Hunger Free Vermont, Intervale Center, Land Access and Opportunity Board, Feeding the Valley Alliance, and Vermont

Sustainable Jobs Fund. The Coalition was created to support long-term, statewide efforts to address food insecurity through collaboration between nonprofits, food access organizations, agricultural groups, and community partners. Its work is guided by the Vermont Food Security Roadmap to 2035, a statewide planning framework developed through broad stakeholder engagement across Vermont's food system. The Roadmap identifies strategies aimed at improving consistent access to nutritious food, strengthening the long-term viability of Vermont farms, and increasing community resilience in the face of economic and climate-related changes. Thus, this framework is made up of three overarching categories: Government, Farms, and Community, with fifteen objectives and fifty-five total strategies. The Government goal (Goal G) is to ensure food security for all in Vermont. The goal of the farms (Goal A) is for Vermont farms to have the resources to be resilient. Finally, the Community goal (Goal C) aims for communities to have the tools to support food security. Central to the Coalition's approach is the belief that lasting food security in Vermont will require coordinated actions across sectors and communities rather than isolated individual programs. Information about Coalition member organizations and additional supporting resources can be found in Appendix A.

c. Food Insecurity Beyond Vermont: Models and Lessons from Other States

Food insecurity is not unique to Vermont but reflects broader national and structural challenges in food systems across the United States. Across the country, millions of individuals face barriers to accessing sufficient and nutritious food, particularly in rural areas where transportation limitations, geographic isolation, and limited infrastructure reduce access to food resources. Structural factors such as income inequality, rising food costs, gaps in social safety net programs, and uneven access to healthcare all shape whether individuals and families are able to consistently access food.

Our research beyond the state of Vermont identified useful models and valuable information from across the country. We focused on journal publications that analyze the efficacy and challenges of different approaches. Notable examples include mobile produce markets, community-owned food cooperatives, and SNAP matching programs. Mobile produce markets, including examples from North Carolina and Rhode Island, bring locally grown produce directly to underserved communities and have been associated with measurable improvements in fruit and vegetable intake among users. Community-owned food cooperatives, studied in rural towns

of approximately 1,000 people as well as in larger communities such as North Flint, Michigan, have been created after grocery store closures. These models can help stabilize rural downtowns, create local jobs, and improve accessibility and proximity to food sources. SNAP matching programs, such as Double Up Food Bucks, effectively increase the purchasing power for fresh produce at farmers' markets.

Across these models, one overarching lesson is that access alone is insufficient. Research consistently shows that financial incentives are most effective when paired with education, clear communication, and culturally relevant outreach. Trusted community members, including program users, religious leaders, educators, and local service providers, can play an important role in improving participation and reducing stigma. Programs designed with local community input from the beginning are more likely to reflect the actual needs, preferences, and constraints of the people they aim to serve.

When applying these models to rural Vermont, several considerations stand out. Mobile market models may increase food availability, but they can also assume that participants have refrigeration, cooking equipment, transportation to pick-up sites, and time to prepare food. These assumptions may not hold for people experiencing housing instability, disability, or other overlapping barriers. Needs assessments should be performed before instituting programs in different places, as there may be other interacting factors. Similarly, community-owned food cooperatives can improve local food access, but they require experienced retail management, careful financial planning, and substantial start-up support. Early funding, including programs such as the federal Healthy Food Financing Initiative, has proven important for building project momentum and attracting additional grants or private donors. Therefore, models from outside Vermont are most useful when adapted carefully to local conditions rather than replicated directly. Lastly, it is important to consider that even within Vermont, programs thoughtfully adapted to local communities could look different from region to region, demonstrating how food access is not a 'one size fits all' solution.

d. Our Project

Within the Middlebury College Environmental Studies Community Engaged Practicum of Spring 2026, ENVS401A, our group had the opportunity to work with Carlin Molander, our project partner working for the Vermont Food Security Coalition. In response to the need to

translate the Roadmap’s vision, this project focuses on supporting the implementation of Objective C3: Local Food Access. While the Roadmap provides a comprehensive framework for addressing food insecurity, significant work remains in determining how its objectives can be effectively operationalized across Vermont’s diverse and highly localized communities.

Our project objective is to generate research, data, and recommendations that inform the development and implementation of Objective C3, which seeks to improve access to local, nutritious food as a critical component of achieving full food security. This objective consists of four strategies outlined below. Rather than producing a public-facing deliverable, this project is designed to provide foundational research to guide the Coalition’s next steps. Central to this effort is the development of a series of “What We Know” (WWK) documents, which serve as situational analyses synthesizing findings from interviews, existing data, and secondary research. These documents are intended to support our community partner, Carlin Molander, and the broader Coalition in translating each C3 strategy into actionable, community-informed implementation plans.

To guide this work, the project addresses several key questions:

- What is the current status of local food access across Vermont?
- What leadership and infrastructure already exist, and where are there gaps?
- What actions are currently underway, and what additional efforts are needed?
- What would success look like, and how might it be measured over time?
- Finally, what timeline is appropriate for achieving these goals?

Addressing these questions involves a combination of research and engagement, including analyzing existing programs and infrastructure within Vermont; examining food access models from outside the state; conducting interviews with key stakeholders; and synthesizing findings into strategic recommendations. Through this work, the project aims to bridge the gap between the Roadmap’s vision and its practical implementation.

e. C3 Strategies

There are four strategies within the C3 community goal to improve local food access while working on full food security in Vermont. These specific strategies relate to local implementation and collaborative efforts among community organizations to expand access to food and knowledge of resources, and ensure that the needs of priority populations are met.

C3.1: Ensure local users and priority populations guide the design of community-based supplemental program outreach and implementation. Compensate people for their expertise and build relationships with trusted leaders. Offer programs at easily accessible times and places, and use both digital and non-digital methods of outreach.

C3.2: Tailor programs to the stated needs of the most vulnerable in a given community – for example, if housing security is low, develop food supports that do not rely on refrigeration, reheating, or equipment.

C3.3: Evaluate whether local food access initiatives are convenient to the relationships and routines people already have. Make free food available in places people already go to regularly, such as schools, doctors' offices, early childcare settings, and senior care facilities, so no additional trips are needed.

C3.4: Replicate Vermont's successful, localized food spaces to build social ties, promote food sovereignty, and distribute free and subsidized food. Examples in Vermont communities include gardens, ovens, freezers, and producer markets.

II. Methodology

a. Research Approach

This research uses a qualitative, interview-based approach to better understand barriers to local food access and identify effective strategies for addressing these barriers across Vermont. The primary method consists of conducting semi-structured interviews with stakeholders working throughout the state's food system. Interviewees include representatives from food shelves, non-profit and non-governmental organizations, local farmers, and community-based food access initiatives. A full list of interviewees is included in [Appendix B](#), and the interview guide is provided in [Appendix C](#).

Given the statewide scope of this project, we incorporate a regional sampling strategy to ensure geographic representation. Interviewees are intentionally selected from across Vermont's major regions: Northwest (Chittenden, Franklin, Grand Isle Counties), Northeast Kingdom (Caledonia, Essex, Orleans), Central West (Addison and Rutland Counties), Central East (Orange and Windsor Counties), and Southern Vermont (Bennington and Windham Counties). This regional approach allows us to account for Vermont's highly localized food system and rural

landscape, including variation in infrastructure (ex. kitchens, refrigeration, and electricity), storage, transportation access, population density, and the presence of food deserts.

b. Identifying and Recruiting Interviewees

Interview participants were identified through the relational food system network, recommendations from our community partner, and independent outreach. Early outreach also included Middlebury-affiliated individuals involved in food systems work, such as Megan Brakeley, the Associate Director of the Knoll, and Katie Horner, January Term professor of Intro to Agriculture Food Systems. Additionally, we were able to find out about programs across the state using the Vermont Food and Health Program Inventory - Farm to Plate and the Addison County Food Resource Guide. After compiling a list of potential people to connect with, Carlin Molander and Chris Meehan of the VT Foodbank provided direction and key introductions. From these initial conversations, we conducted snowball sampling to gather additional recommended contacts from each interviewee, representing the relational food system network. This process allowed us to build a broad and interconnected network of stakeholders across the state. Notably, interviewees generally expressed willingness to remain in contact, creating a potential resource network for future research and collaboration. This reflects the highly relational nature of Vermont's food system, where connections between organizations often shape access, coordination, and program effectiveness. The independent outreach conducted includes family members such as Virginia Foote, who worked at the Conservation Law Foundation, focusing on impact investing, food deserts, community food programs, and other stakeholders found through personal connections.

To include the opinion of local users and priority populations, we created a short questionnaire survey (fewer than fifteen questions) and printed out flyers designed on Canva with a scannable QR code linked to the survey. These flyers were distributed at the ACORN food hub and CVOEO food pantry during ACORN's Farmacy and Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) program hours and during CVOEO food pantry hours. We included an opportunity to leave contact information at the end of the survey if anyone was interested in sharing their further insight, opinion, or experience with food access in Vermont. Through our ENVS401 budget, we were able to provide anyone willing to engage in a short conversation a \$20 gift card to the Middlebury CO-OP as a thank-you for their time to speak with us. Due to

survey fatigue, we were cautioned that we may get low response numbers, but we were pleased to speak with one community member who utilizes these programs.

c. Developing and Conducting Interviews

All interviews follow a semi-structured format guided by a consistent set of core questions. These questions are derived from the WWK framework developed for each strategy within the Vermont Food Security Roadmap, with each question aligned to key strategy areas (C3.1-C3.4). Questions were primarily open-ended and organized around core themes, including barriers to food access, program effectiveness, outreach strategies, addressing stigma, and gaps within existing systems. Interviews were conducted either via Zoom or in person, depending on the participant's availability and proximity to Middlebury's campus. These typically lasted between 30 and 60 minutes. While all interviews followed the same general structure, the semi-structured format allowed for flexibility in question order and the inclusion of follow-up questions based on participant responses. This approach enabled deeper exploration of issues specific to each participant's role and community context while maintaining consistency across interviews. Interviews were not formally recorded; instead, detailed notes were taken during each conversation to capture key insights and ensure accuracy. Although there was always at least one note taker per interview, Zoom's meeting assets note-taking platform was occasionally used to further consolidate key takeaways, themes, and action steps. We tested this tool to assess whether it could efficiently condense notes and highlight themes. While it performed well at this task, we made a deliberate choice not to fully rely on it. This platform acted only as a supplemental source that was used when we were conducting more formal, foundational interviews, such as those that included multiple stakeholders. Additionally, this tool functions best when activated from the beginning of the meeting, so if we didn't initially start it, we wouldn't introduce it mid-conversation to avoid creating inconsistency across our records.

d. Community Engagement

When conducting interviews in person, we were able to connect with other staff and get a tour of operating facilities such as the ACORN food hub and office, the CVOEO food pantry, and the HOPE food shelf/pantry and their associated food storage unit. This was helpful to better understand what these programs look like for users and how they operate. Additionally,

in-person meetings with Vermont Game Warden, Abigail Serra, and Firefly Fields Farm owner, Nathan Hammer, allowed for further personal connection to our local community and the work being done within these local food systems.

e. Analysis and Collaboration

The detailed notes from each interview are compiled in a shared “Interview Contacts & Meeting Notes” document, which is also shared with the Vermont Food Security Coalition. Interview data are reviewed iteratively to identify recurring themes, patterns, and key challenges. These interviews are designed to capture micro- and macro-level barriers that affect organizations’ ability to support food security and ensure that all Vermonters can access adequate and appropriate food. In particular, interviews explore key challenges such as transportation limitations, stigma associated with food assistance, gaps in education and outreach, barriers to program enrollment (ex. 3SquaresVT), and broader structural constraints including income, housing, and the ability to prepare food. At the same time, interviews provide insight into successful programs and approaches that have improved food access in different local contexts, including efforts that increase food choice, reduce stigma, and incorporate community input into program design. Less effective or unsuccessful approaches are also identified to better understand existing gaps.

We are conducting this project in close collaboration with our community partner, Carlin Molander, the Vermont Food Security Roadmap project lead. We engage in weekly meetings to share progress, clarify our approach, and ensure that our work remains aligned with the needs of the Vermont Food Security Coalition. All research materials are shared with our partner to ensure transparency, accuracy, and accountability.

Finally, the research process is conducted collaboratively across the project team. All members participate in outreach, interviews, research, and analysis. This shared approach supports consistency in data collection and allows us to develop insights collectively rather than in isolation, bringing together multiple perspectives and reducing individual bias.

III. Results - “What We Know”: C3 - Using Communities to Improve Local Food Access

Basic information

Name of Strategy/Objective: **Strategy C3.1**

Ensure local users and priority populations guide the design of community-based supplemental program outreach and implementation. Compensate people for their expertise and build relationships with trusted leaders. Offer programs at easily accessible times and places, and use both digital and non-digital methods of outreach.

Name of Strategy/Objective: **Strategy C3.2**

Tailor programs to the stated needs of the most vulnerable in a given community – for example, if housing security is low, develop food supports that do not rely on refrigeration, reheating, or equipment.

Name of Strategy/Objective: **Strategy C3.3**

Evaluate whether local food access initiatives are convenient to the relationships and routines people already have. Make free food available in places people already go to regularly, such as schools, doctors’ offices, early childcare settings, and senior care facilities, so no additional trips are needed.

Name of Strategy/Objective: **Strategy C3.4**

Replicate Vermont’s successful, localized food spaces to build social ties, promote food sovereignty, and distribute free and subsidized food. Examples in Vermont communities include gardens, ovens, freezers, and producer markets.

Person filling out this form and email: [Sarah Bona](#), [Lucca Franz](#), [Shane Johnson](#), [Thaddeus Foote](#)

Form last updated on: **5/18/26**

Status of this phase: **Initial Research Completed**

Summary of What We Know

Overall Status of this Strategy/Obj

Objective C3

Across more than a dozen interviews with leaders from nonprofits, farms, advocacy groups, food access programs, academic institutions, and grassroots initiatives, one message was consistent: **Vermont does not primarily have a food shortage problem. It has an access, coordination, affordability, and systems design problem.** Our interviewees had deep admiration for Vermont's strong local food culture, dense nonprofit ecosystem, and relational community networks. Yet, nearly every interviewee also described fragmentation, transportation barriers, individual internal stigmas, unstable funding, administrative complexity, and insufficient infrastructure as major obstacles preventing people from consistently accessing healthy, culturally relevant food. To clarify: 'internal stigmas' are negative personal beliefs, insecurities, or disapproving thoughts that cause Vermonters to not utilize the food access resources available to them.

At the same time, many successful models already exist. These include home delivery, school meals, mobile distribution, farm-to-school lunch programs, produce prescriptions, gleaning, user-choice pantries, school pantries, food lockers, community meals, and benefits-matching programs. The strongest consensus across our interviews was that Vermont's food system needs to scale what works, coordinate existing efforts to share resources, and further work to center community voices.

Strategy C3.1

Strategy C3.1 focuses on ensuring that priority populations help design the programs meant to serve them. Vermont already has a large ecosystem of food access programs, including federal nutrition programs, nonprofit initiatives led by organizations like the Vermont Foodbank and Hunger Free Vermont, and local programs such as community food shelves and farm share subsidies. Both the [Vermont Farm to Plate](#) and the [Vermont Department of Health](#) have put together extensive lists of current programs. However, many Vermonters who qualify for these programs do not participate due to stigma, lack of awareness, transportation barriers, or programs that do not reflect community needs. A major gap exists between the number of Vermonters eligible for programs such as 3SquaresVT and those who are actually enrolled, suggesting that current outreach and program design are not effectively reaching or resonating with priority populations. While Vermont benefits from a dense network of organizations and relationships, engagement is often broad but shallow and does not always meaningfully incorporate lived experience into program design. For example, users are rarely involved in the decision-making process. Although the infrastructure for food assistance exists, there is currently no consistent statewide approach to incorporating the perspectives of program users into program design. Strategy C3.1, therefore, focuses on improving participation, outreach, and program design through direct engagement with priority populations.

Strategy C3.2

Strategy C3.2 focuses on tailoring food access programs to the stated needs of the most vulnerable people in a given community. Across our interviews, one clear theme emerged: food

access programs cannot assume that all Vermonters have transportation, stable housing, refrigeration, cooking equipment, time, language access, or the ability to prepare whole foods. Interviewees described the importance of prepared meals, home delivery, culturally relevant foods, user-choice models (a food pantry model that allows users to shop and choose as they would in a grocery store, a more dignified experience than receiving prechosen food), and flexible programs for people who are unhoused, older, disabled, working multiple jobs, or living in rural areas. For example, Capstone Community Action, a Vermont non-profit providing a suite of services to help Vermonters break the cycle of poverty, emphasized that frozen prepared meals have become an important pantry option for people who cannot easily cook or store food, while Feeding Champlain Valley's online ordering and delivery model shows how food access can be made more dignified, multilingual, and responsive to household needs. At the same time, programs remain uneven across the state and often depend on local capacity, grant funding, volunteers, and individual organizational leadership. Overall, Vermont has strong examples of tailored food access, but there is not yet a consistent statewide system for identifying vulnerable populations' specific needs and adapting programs accordingly.

Strategy C3.3

Strategy C3.3 focuses on making food access convenient to the relationships, routines, and places people already use. This was one of the strongest themes across our interviews. Interviewees repeatedly emphasized that transportation, time, stigma, limited hours, and fragmented program locations prevent many Vermonters from using available food resources. Many successful models already exist, including home delivery, mobile pantries, school-based distribution, clinic-based food access, childcare center pickup, senior meals, food lockers, and community meals. Feeding Champlain Valley's home delivery and food locker models were especially promising because they reduce transportation barriers, allow more flexible pickup, and make the process less stigmatizing. However, interviewees also stressed that Vermont needs to better understand where people naturally go in their daily lives, especially in rural communities, migrant communities, and areas with little formal food infrastructure. Overall, C3.3 is already happening in scattered but promising ways, and the main next step is to scale convenient access models while designing them around people's actual routines rather than expecting people to organize their lives around food programs.

Strategy C3.4

Strategy C3.4 focuses on replicating Vermont's successful localized food spaces, such as gardens, freezers, food hubs, community meals, farm shares, producer markets, and gleaning programs. Our interviews suggest that this strategy is one of Vermont's greatest strengths because the state already has a strong local food culture, many committed community organizations, and successful place-based models. Programs such as ACORN's Farmacy work, HOPE's gleaning and distribution system, Feeding Champlain Valley's food hub and local food purchasing, NOFA-VT's Farm Share and Crop Cash programs, community gardens, and cold

storage facilities all show how localized food spaces can increase access while also supporting farmers and building community ties. However, these efforts are often fragmented, underfunded, and dependent on grants, volunteers, and individual donors. Interviewees also noted that localized programs work best when they include education, recipes, preparation support, and user feedback, rather than simply distributing local produce and assuming people can use it. Overall, C3.4 is already underway through many successful local models, but Vermont needs more stable funding, coordination, and infrastructure to replicate these models across communities in ways that fit local needs.

Who is in Charge or Leading Efforts?

Strategy C3.1

Leadership is currently highly distributed, which is why coordination remains a central challenge. State agencies involved in this work include the Vermont Department of Health and the Vermont Department for Children and Families. Nonprofit leaders include the Vermont Foodbank, Hunger Free Vermont, and Coalition members such as NOFA-VT, particularly through programs like Farm Share and Crop Cash. Local healthcare institutions, schools, farms, community organizations, food shelves, and municipalities are also involved in outreach and program implementation. However, no single entity is clearly designated as the coordinating body for participatory outreach design across local food access programs. Food security networks through Hunger Free VT operate across nine regions of Vermont and serve as an important community-driven coordination mechanism by bringing together service providers and community members to share information and identify local needs.

Strategy C3.2

Leadership for C3.2 is also distributed across many organizations, because tailoring programs to vulnerable populations often happens at the local level. State agencies such as the Vermont Department of Health and the Department for Children and Families play a role through public health programming, benefit programs, and resource guides. The Vermont Foodbank, Hunger Free Vermont, Capstone VT, Feeding Champlain Valley, CVOEO, HOPE, ACORN, NOFA-VT, and local food shelves are all involved in adapting food access programs to meet different community needs. Healthcare partners also play an important role, especially through produce prescription and Pharmacy-style programs that connect food access to health needs. The Pharmacy Project model is especially interesting as it facilitates food through the healthcare system, prescribing food to underserved community members, thereby providing another avenue to food distribution. However, there does not appear to be one organization specifically coordinating statewide efforts to identify the needs of the most vulnerable populations and adapt programs accordingly. Most leadership is happening through individual programs, local partnerships, and community-based organizations that respond to the needs they see directly.

Strategy C3.3

Leadership for C3.3 is spread across organizations that are already bringing food to places people regularly go. In the context of C3.3, “places people regularly go” refers to everyday anchor institutions and service points that people already rely on, rather than separate food assistance locations that require extra transportation, time, or planning. This strategy is especially important in rural Vermont, where distance, limited transit, and uneven service coverage can make even well-designed food programs difficult to access. The Vermont Foodbank is a major leader through programs such as VeggieVanGo, BackPack, and its network of food shelves and meal sites. Feeding Champlain Valley is also a strong leader through its home delivery, online ordering, and food locker models. Schools, childcare centers, healthcare providers, senior centers, libraries, community action agencies, and local food shelves are all important partners because they are the places where food access can be integrated into people’s existing routines. Local food security networks also help identify where access points are needed in specific communities. However, there is not yet a clear statewide coordinating body responsible for mapping where people naturally go and building food access around those routines. Current efforts are promising but remain uneven depending on geography, local capacity, and existing institutional partnerships.

Strategy C3.4

Leadership for C3.4 is rooted in Vermont’s local food system and community-based food organizations. NOFA-VT leads important statewide efforts through Farm Share, Senior Farm Share, Crop Cash, and farmer-focused food access programs. ACORN, HOPE, Feeding Champlain Valley, the Vermont Foodbank, CVOEO, community gardens, food hubs, gleaning programs, producer markets, and farm-to-school programs are also key leaders in creating and sustaining localized food spaces. Farms and food producers are essential partners because many of these models depend on local purchasing, gleaning, CSA shares, storage, and distribution infrastructure. However, leadership remains fragmented, and many successful models depend on grants, volunteers, individual champions, and local relationships. There is no single coordinating entity responsible for identifying the strongest localized food spaces and helping communities replicate them statewide. The Coalition could play an important role by connecting these efforts, helping share models, and advocating for stable funding and infrastructure.

Is there a Storybook Ending, a goal, or similar?

Strategy C3.1

The “storybook ending” would be a Vermont food access system where priority populations are meaningfully involved in program design, outreach, implementation, and evaluation. Success would mean that people with lived experience are compensated for their expertise, trusted community leaders help shape outreach, and programs are designed around the real barriers people face, including stigma, transportation, language access, disability, work schedules, and cultural food needs. This could look like part-time employment or consultation payments for users who contribute to design. In the long term, this would support the broader

Roadmap goal of lasting food security in Vermont by 2035, where all Vermonters can access nourishing food in ways that are dignified, familiar, and responsive to community voices.

Strategy C3.2

The “storybook ending” would be a system where people who are unhoused, older, disabled, medically vulnerable, working multiple jobs, living in rural areas, or lacking kitchen access can still reliably access food that works for their lives. Success would mean that programs do not assume people have transportation, refrigeration, cooking equipment, stable housing, or time to prepare meals. Instead, communities would offer a mix of prepared meals, shelf-stable options, culturally relevant foods, home delivery, user-choice pantries, and food supports tailored to local needs. In this ideal outcome, food assistance would be practical, dignified, and usable for the people who need it most.

Strategy C3.3

The “storybook ending” would be a Vermont where free and subsidized food is available in places people already go, such as schools, childcare centers, healthcare offices, senior centers, libraries, community centers, workplaces, and trusted local gathering spaces. Success would mean that transportation, limited hours, stigma, and distance are no longer major barriers to accessing food. Programs like home delivery, mobile pantries, school-based distribution, clinic-based food access, and food lockers would be expanded and adapted across communities. In the long term, food access would feel convenient, normal, and integrated into everyday life.

Strategy C3.4

The “storybook ending” would be a statewide network of community-based food spaces, such as gardens, freezers, food hubs, community meals, farm shares, producer markets, gleaning programs, and farm-to-school models, that increase food access while also building social ties and supporting local farmers. Success would mean that communities have the infrastructure, funding, and relationships needed to adapt these models to their own local needs. These spaces would not only distribute free or subsidized food but also promote food sovereignty, local resilience, education, dignity, and community connection. In the long term, Vermont would have a stronger local food system where food access and farmer viability reinforce one another.

What is happening now that should continue?

Strategy C3.1

- Federal food programs (3SquaresVT), community food distribution, and local food access programs
- Food security networks, which provide a space for community members and service providers to share information and identify local needs
- Multi-channel outreach strategies (e.g., flyers, social media, community-based communication), recognizing that different populations require different approaches

- Efforts to center the most impacted populations in program design and prioritization

Strategy C3.2

- Use of prepared meals and ready-to-eat foods, particularly for older adults, people without kitchen access, and those with limited time
- Home delivery and flexible distribution models that reduce barriers for rural, disabled, or transportation-limited populations
- User-choice pantry models that allow individuals to select foods based on their needs and preferences
- Inclusion of culturally relevant foods and multilingual systems in food access programs
- Partnerships between food organizations and healthcare providers (e.g., Farmacy and produce prescription programs) that tailor food to health needs

Strategy C3.3

- Home delivery, mobile pantries, and site-based pickup models that bring food closer to where people live
- School-based programs, including school meals and emerging school pantry models
- Food access in community-based locations such as childcare centers, senior centers, libraries, shelters, and healthcare settings
- Food locker and online ordering systems that increase flexibility and reduce stigma
- Ongoing efforts by organizations like Feeding Champlain Valley and the Vermont Foodbank to expand access points

Strategy C3.4

- Localized food systems such as food hubs, community gardens, gleaning programs, farm shares, and community meals
- Partnerships between farms, food hubs, and food access organizations to increase the distribution of local food
- Programs that combine food access with education, such as cooking demonstrations, recipe sharing, and nutrition support
- Community-driven models like ACORN's Farmacy program and HOPE's gleaning and distribution system
- Investments in local infrastructure, such as cold storage, aggregation, and distribution networks, that support both farmers and food access

What is not happening now that should start?

Strategy C3.1

Better outreach is key, as many Vermonters do not use food programs even when eligible because of stigma, lack of awareness, and complicated enrollment. Food access should be embedded in daily spaces or have more local food spaces present, aided by community input.

Additionally, there is a need for a coordinated system across all nine food security networks to identify gaps, reduce duplication, and share best practices. There are currently no consistent or structured methods for incorporating community voice into program design, and engagement is often informal or inconsistent.

In a paper written by Needham et al., [“A Human-Centered Co-Design Framework for Developing a Web-based Platform to Engage With Rural Australian Communities: Addressing the Complex Issue of Healthy Food Access.”](#) several key insights can be gleaned. Firstly, the concept of Participatory Mapping is a tool that organizations across Vermont can implement to survey users and their local knowledge. Community members can mark important places on a map, like grocery stores, fast food, food pantries, or long travel routes, which can aid in providing local knowledge of both where food access is strong or weak, as well as providing helpful information on places they frequent in their day-to-day lives. Participatory Mapping can help organizations tailor programs to where people already visit as well as target programs to areas, based on user input, that have weaker food access. Importantly, this method of data collection can be distributed through a web-based platform instead of requiring in-person workshops. By making this mapping tool available online, people can participate on their own time from home, a library, or school. This removes barriers like travel, scheduling, and limits on organizational staffing.

In the interviews we conducted, the interviewees consistently repeated that organizations often struggle to gather meaningful community input despite recognizing its importance. Several organizations described inconsistent survey participation, limited staffing capacity for outreach, and difficulty engaging populations that are already time-constrained or distrustful of institutions. Existing efforts, such as community conversations, multilingual outreach, school-based engagement, and community food security network meetings, provide useful starting points, but there is no current standardized or statewide system for incorporating lived experience into program design. Expanding participatory planning tools alongside existing local networks could help organizations better identify unmet needs.

Strategy C3.2

Many Vermont food access organizations are already attempting to tailor programs to the needs of the populations they serve. The people we interviewed described offering a range of food options, including fresh produce, shelf-stable foods, prepared meals, home delivery services, and culturally relevant foods, depending on local community needs. Several organizations (ACORN, Capstone, NOFA-VT, Vermont Foodbank, HOPE) noted that these decisions are informed through surveys, direct feedback, and ongoing relationships with program users. However, interviewees also repeatedly identified important gaps that still need more attention. Many Vermont food access systems continue to assume that individuals have reliable transportation, refrigeration, cooking facilities, time, and physical ability to prepare meals. Expanding prepared meal options, food lockers, mobile delivery systems, culturally relevant foods, and low-barrier enrollment systems were all identified as important next steps.

Organizations also emphasized the need for more consistent and continuously updated community feedback systems so programs can adapt to changing local needs over time.

Strategy C3.3

Food access systems are most effective when they are integrated into the routines and spaces people already use in their daily lives. Transportation barriers, time constraints, childcare responsibilities, stigma, and limited mobility were all brought up as major obstacles preventing Vermonters from accessing food resources. As a result, many organizations have begun shifting away from centralized food shelf models toward decentralized systems that bring food directly into trusted community spaces. Examples discussed throughout the interviews included deliveries to schools, childcare centers, libraries, clinics, senior housing sites, churches, and community gathering spaces. HOPE, Feeding Champlain Valley, and Vermont Foodbank all spoke to how these models are more accessible, less stigmatizing, and more practical for families and individuals.

There were multiple times in our interviews when people stressed that Vermont should continue expanding home delivery services, food lockers, school pantries, mobile pantries, meal kit distribution, and online ordering platforms like PantrySoft. These approaches were seen as especially important in rural parts of the state. Predictable schedules and low-barrier systems that do not require additional trips or complicated enrollment processes are vital to accessible food access. Another major theme was the need for stronger transportation coordination throughout Vermont. Rural areas, and specifically the Northeast Kingdom, were highlighted as having the highest transportation barriers. Solutions that were suggested: micro-transit systems, expanded delivery infrastructure, mobile food delivery services, and stronger coordination between food access organizations and transportation providers. Many existing programs still assume access to refrigeration, kitchens, cooking equipment, and time for meal preparation. Expanding ready-to-eat meals and low-preparation food options was mentioned as an important next step multiple times.

Strategy C3.4

Vermont already has successful localized food spaces. Programs like ACORN's Farmacy program, NOFA-VT's Farm Share and Crop Cash initiatives, and Venison for Vermonters are programs that could inform similar efforts across the state. These programs are effective not only because they distribute food, but because they reduce stigma, support local farmers, build relationships, and create stronger community connections around food.

Food sovereignty and local control within Vermont's food system are also important. Programs that source food locally, support small farmers, and allow communities to shape programs around their own needs are more resilient and community-centered than highly centralized systems. At the same time, organizations noted that many programs operate in isolation and compete for limited funding and staffing capacity. Interviewees suggested that Vermont should improve communication and collaboration between organizations while helping

communities adapt successful local models to fit their own regional needs rather than creating a single statewide system.

Share the Harvest Program

Another strong potential policy regarding venison donation can be drawn from MassWildlife's Share the Harvest Program. This program provides incentives for hunters to donate their venison with a reward scale that offers increasing discounts off processing fees based on how much meat they donate. Additionally, the reward for a whole deer donation is a free antlerless deer tag. Not only does this allow the hunter to access more meat, but it also distributes it to others. Since its inception in 2022, this program has distributed over 100,000 meals to people in need in Massachusetts. This program would work great in tandem with the Venison For Vermonters roadkill recovery program because they require the same infrastructure (processing facilities, processing staff), and could be run by the same government agency, VT Fish and Wildlife.

Venison For Vermonters

[Venison for Vermonters](#) represents a promising but underdeveloped opportunity that could be expanded to improve local food access. Currently, the program is highly limited in scale, relying primarily on one game warden and inconsistent volunteer support, and lacks the infrastructure needed to process and distribute venison more widely. Establishing a formal nonprofit structure, along with dedicated processing facilities and staffing, could significantly increase the program's reach. Additional incentives, such as compensating game wardens for recovering and contributing deer, could also help address current supply bottlenecks. Existing data suggests strong potential: in 2016 alone, over 2,300 deer were involved in vehicle collisions statewide, and even a modest recovery rate could yield more than 20,000 pounds of high-quality protein. Expanding this program would not only increase access to nutritious food but also provide a culturally relevant resource for many rural Vermonters while making use of an otherwise underutilized food source.

What is happening now that should stop?

Strategy C3.1

Stigma in food access, along with systems that require additional travel, provide barriers for rural communities. Additionally, reliance on outdated, fragmented application systems should be reduced, as they create unnecessary barriers to participation. The current dependence on mail-based communication should also be reconsidered, as it is unreliable for many populations. Rather than pre-designing communication strategies that work best for the organization, outreach should instead be tailored to varying user-preferred methods. For example, social media, flyers, Front Porch Forum, etc. Systems that expect individuals to independently navigate complex program requirements without sufficient support should be replaced with more accessible and

user-centered approaches. Furthermore, when including users in the design process, there must be shared decision-making power, rather than token representation and marginalized “input.”

Strategy C3.2

Programs should stop assuming that food access looks the same for every household or community. Food distribution models that rely heavily on raw ingredients, refrigeration, cooking equipment, reliable transportation, or consistent housing may unintentionally exclude some of the most vulnerable Vermonters. Programs should also move away from overly rigid eligibility rules, limited food options, and one-size-fits-all food boxes that do not reflect dietary needs, cultural preferences, or people’s ability to prepare food. Interviewees also emphasized that programs should stop treating “healthy food” as only fresh produce without considering whether people have the time, tools, knowledge, or desire to use it. Instead, food access should prioritize choice, dignity, prepared options, culturally relevant foods, and practical supports that match people’s lived realities.

Strategy C3.3

Food access systems should stop expecting people to make extra trips, travel long distances, or rearrange their lives around limited food program hours. This is especially important in rural communities, where transportation barriers, limited public transit, and long distances make even available programs difficult to use. Programs should also move away from models that require people to enter stigmatizing or unfamiliar spaces when food could instead be offered in places they already go, such as schools, childcare centers, healthcare offices, senior centers, libraries, shelters, and community centers. Interviewees repeatedly emphasized that convenience should be designed around people’s actual routines, not organizational convenience. In practice, this means reducing reliance on centralized pickup locations, limited weekday hours, and fragmented access points that require people to navigate multiple disconnected systems.

Strategy C3.4

Vermont should stop treating successful localized food spaces as isolated, one-off programs that depend on unstable grants, volunteers, individual champions, or short-term enthusiasm. Many strong models already exist, including food hubs, community gardens, farm shares, gleaning programs, food lockers, community meals, and Farmacy-style programs, but they are often underfunded and disconnected from one another. Programs should also stop assuming that simply distributing local produce is enough without providing recipes, preparation support, storage capacity, transportation, and user feedback systems. Additionally, organizations should avoid competing for the same limited funding in ways that reinforce fragmentation. Instead, localized food spaces should be supported as essential community infrastructure, with more stable funding, coordination, and shared learning across regions.

Any idea of the timeline for this strategy?

Strategy C3.1

There is no clear formal timeline for this strategy yet, but it should begin immediately because meaningful community engagement is foundational to the other C3 strategies. In the short term, the Coalition and partner organizations could identify existing food security networks, outreach efforts, and community leaders already connected to priority populations. Within the next 1-2 years, partners could develop shared best practices for compensating people with lived experience, gathering user feedback, and using both digital and non-digital outreach methods. Over the longer term, this should become a standard part of program design and evaluation, rather than a one-time consultation process. By 2035, the goal would be for community-guided design to be built into Vermont's food access system at every level.

Strategy C3.2

The timeline for C3.2 should also begin in the short term because many vulnerable populations are already facing immediate barriers to food access. Some adaptations, such as increasing prepared meal options, expanding home delivery, offering more flexible food choices, and improving multilingual access, could begin within the next year through existing organizations and programs. In the next 2-3 years, the Coalition and partners could help identify which models are most effective for different populations, such as older adults, people without kitchen access, people with disabilities, migrant communities, and rural households. Longer-term progress will depend on stable funding, staffing, infrastructure, and stronger systems for gathering feedback from users. By 2035, tailored food access should be the norm, with programs designed around the actual living conditions of the people they serve.

Strategy C3.3

This strategy has both immediate and medium-term opportunities. In the short term, partners can continue expanding food access in places people already go, such as schools, childcare centers, healthcare offices, senior centers, libraries, shelters, and community centers. Within the next 1-3 years, there is an opportunity to scale promising models such as home delivery, food lockers, school pantries, mobile pantries, and clinic-based food access. This timeline may vary by region because rural communities will likely need more time to map transportation patterns, identify trusted access points, and build local partnerships. By 2035, food access should be fully integrated into everyday community spaces so that people do not need to make extra trips or navigate separate, stigmatizing systems to get food.

Strategy C3.4

C3.4 will likely require a longer timeline than the other strategies because replicating localized food spaces depends on infrastructure, funding, land access, storage, staffing, and strong community relationships. In the short term, the Coalition could identify and document successful models already operating in Vermont. Within the next 2-5 years, partners could begin

replicating these models in communities that have both need and local capacity, while adapting them to each place rather than applying a single statewide model. Longer-term work will require stable funding, technical assistance, farmer partnerships, and infrastructure such as cold storage, transportation, and processing capacity. By 2035, successful localized food spaces should be more widely available across Vermont and should support both food access and farmer viability.

Any things we need to watch out for that you are aware of?

Strategy C3.1

The instability of federal funding is a large thing to be aware of. Multiple strategies should be in place to reduce dependence on any single funding source. Additionally, rural access barriers and program fragmentation play a large role. There is also a risk of continued fragmentation across organizations and a lack of coordination between existing efforts. One-size-fits-all approaches may fail to address the diverse needs of different communities, particularly in rural or underserved areas. Persistent barriers such as transportation, digital access, and stigma must be considered. Finally, system-level design failures, especially outdated applications and communication systems, may continue to limit participation even when programs are available.

Strategy C3.2

One major risk for this strategy is continuing to design programs based on assumptions about what people “should” need, rather than what they actually need. If programs are not informed by real living conditions, they may unintentionally exclude those facing housing instability, disability, time constraints, or lack of cooking access. There is also a risk that efforts to promote healthy or local food could become overly prescriptive, limiting choice and reinforcing stigma. Funding instability and staffing capacity may also limit the ability of organizations to offer more flexible options such as prepared meals, delivery, or multilingual services. Additionally, tailoring programs too narrowly without coordination could lead to inconsistency across regions and confusion for users. Ensuring that flexibility does not come at the cost of clarity or accessibility will be important moving forward.

Strategy C3.3

A key challenge for this strategy is the variability of infrastructure across Vermont, particularly in rural areas where there are fewer existing institutions and gathering spaces to anchor food access. There is also a risk of over-reliance on certain access points, such as schools or healthcare facilities, which may not reach all populations equally. Coordination between organizations and institutions may be difficult, especially when partners have different priorities, capacities, or funding constraints. Additionally, expanding models such as home delivery, mobile pantries, and food lockers requires sustained funding, staffing, and logistical support, which may be difficult to maintain over time. There is also a need to ensure that expanding convenience

does not unintentionally reduce user choice or dignity. Careful planning will be needed to balance accessibility, flexibility, and sustainability.

Strategy C3.4

For C3.4, a major concern is the continued reliance on short-term grants, volunteer labor, and individual leadership to sustain localized food spaces. Without stable funding and infrastructure, successful programs may not be able to scale or be replicated in other communities. There is also a risk that replication efforts could overlook important local differences, applying models in ways that do not fit the needs, culture, or capacity of a given community. Competition for limited funding between organizations may further reinforce fragmentation rather than collaboration. Additionally, building local food infrastructure requires long-term investment in land access, storage, transportation, and workforce development, all of which may face economic and policy constraints. Finally, there is a risk that efforts to support local food systems may not fully align with affordability goals if costs are not carefully managed.

Your Opinion on What We Should Do Next

Should the Coalition lead on this strategy or join an existing effort?

Strategy C3.1: Ensure local users and priority populations guide design, outreach, and implementation

The Coalition should primarily join and strengthen existing efforts, while helping fill coordination gaps where needed. Many organizations across Vermont are already doing community engagement, outreach, and user-informed programming, including [Hunger Free Vermont](#), [Vermont Foodbank](#), [HOPE](#), [Capstone Community Action](#), [ACORN Food Hub](#), and county-level [food security networks](#), administered by Hunger Free Vermont, such as the Addison County Food Security Network.

The main challenge is inconsistency and limited staff capacity. The Coalition can add value by helping standardize best practices for community engagement across organizations. This includes compensating people with lived experience for their input and using multilingual, multi-format outreach, including paper, verbal, and digital methods.

Strategy C3.2: Tailor programs to the needs of the most vulnerable

The Coalition should take a stronger leadership role on this strategy. Multiple interviewees repeatedly identified a mismatch between many programs and users' actual living conditions, particularly for those facing housing instability, transportation barriers, disability, aging, language barriers, or lack of cooking facilities.

Organizations like HOPE, Capstone Community Action, Vermont Foodbank, and Hunger Free Vermont are adapting programs to be more flexible. HOPE offers home delivery; they operate 15 distribution sites across Addison County, and they provide a variety of food choices.

Those in rural settings are most vulnerable across Vermont, having fewer options for free food, and further distances to travel for it. There are several organizations and programs seeking to address this gap, including those within the Coalition. In particular, Feeding Champlain Valley leads the way in this category with an extensive delivery system, digital ordering system (PantrySoft), and a pilot program for food lockers. Another great strategy is mobile pantries, which bring food to common gathering sites in communities like libraries, churches, town centers, and schools. This is a great way to get into remote communities without facing the high costs of individual delivery services. Furthermore, mobile pantries can preserve user choice by having an online ordering system.

Program List:

[Hunger Free Vermont](#)

[Vermont Foodbank](#)

[HOPE](#)

[Capstone Community Action](#)

[ACORN Food Hub](#)

[food security networks](#) (facilitated by Hunger Free VT)

[Venison for Vermonters](#)

[Farmacy Project](#)

[PantrySoft](#) (listed under Food Hubs, Online Market, and Deliveries)

Strategy C3.3: Bring food into places people already go

The Coalition should join existing efforts and help scale them. Successful examples already exist through school meal programs, childcare partnerships, clinic-based access, library pick up locations, and mobile distribution. Programs that address local food access are operated or supported by HOPE, Vermont Foodbank, Hunger Free Vermont, local school districts, and healthcare partners like Porter Medical Center. Rather than creating new delivery systems, the Coalition should help expand existing models and help replicate them in areas that do not have them yet. The programs mentioned above are scalable because, most importantly, they are successful, and making them more robust would allow more people to utilize them. Secondly, these programs are suited to expansion across Vermont because almost every town has at least one school, childcare center, health clinic, library, and some form of vehicular access (allowing mobile delivery). Additionally, these are places that the majority of the population frequents.

A promising new program within this strategy is school food pantries, an emerging program type across the country. Vermont Foodbank is leading the way in the state, as they plan on introducing four new school pantries over the next two years. This represents an improvement over their BackPack program, which offers more limited options for users and has only reached 13% adoption across the state. In contrast, school pantries allow children and/or parents to shop for their preferred foods, expanding choice and offering excellent access, as schools are a place that children are already going to.

Strategy C3.4 - Replicate successful local food spaces that build community ties and food sovereignty

The Coalition should take a shared leadership role by supporting existing efforts and helping develop new replicated models. Vermont already has strong examples of community-based food spaces like [ACORN Food Hub](#), [HOPE](#), [NOFA-VT programs](#), local gardens, and initiatives like Venison for Vermonters. These programs are effective because they do more than redistribute food. They create community, connection, reduce stigma, support local farmers, and give people more agency over how and where they access food. Through our interviews, the experts we talked to repeatedly pointed to programs that allow people to choose their own food, access culturally relevant options, and receive food in familiar community spaces, rather than through highly visible or restrictive systems. Examples include [HOPE's call-in ordering and home delivery system](#), [Feeding Champlain Valley's PantrySoft platform](#) with multilingual ordering and deliveries to child care centers and schools, school pantries that normalize food access for students ([Vermont Foodbank](#) is ramping down its backpack program but beginning to ramp up their school food pantry program), and [community meal programs in the Northeast Kingdom](#) that reduce both food insecurity and social isolation among seniors. Our interviewees also emphasized that programs like NOFA-VT's [Farm Share](#) and [Crop Cash](#), [ACORN's Farmacy](#), [gleaning networks](#), and [local food purchasing initiatives](#) help keep money circulating within Vermont communities and create stable market opportunities for local farmers and producers.

There cannot be a single statewide model, but localized communities could have more access to funding, technical support, and examples of successful programs that make local solutions easier to adapt and replicate. Interviewees consistently emphasized that Vermont's strength comes from small-scale, relational, community-driven approaches rather than top-down systems.

What are the next steps for *Coalition members* on this Strategy/Objective, in your opinion?

Strategy C3.1

Our recommendation for the next step is that the Coalition members should build a statewide engagement framework, informed by partners already implementing community-guided design and outreach: Hunger Free Vermont, Capstone Community Action, Feeding Champlain Valley, and HOPE. This framework could include sample surveys in both verbal, written, and digital formats, focus group discussion templates, multilingual outreach materials, compensation guidelines, and examples of successful feedback systems (like Vermont Foodbank's mobile delivery surveys, where volunteers walk down a line of cars waiting for pick up to ask questions/give surveys out).

Coalition members should also identify trusted members in schools, faith communities, immigrant communities, healthcare settings, and local towns to help disseminate feedback opportunities.

Strategy C3.2

For strategy C3.2, we recommend that Coalition members work with direct-service partners, like food shelf operators, to establish program add-ons, like home delivery, to match the needs of community users. The Coalition should also publish recommendations for the expanded use of prepared meals, delivery models, flexible hours, multilingual systems, and low-barrier benefit enrollment to address the varied needs of users.

Strategy C3.3

The Coalition should identify location-specific partners for expansion. Through our interviews, we found that local school districts, childcare providers, libraries, senior centers, shelters, and healthcare providers have been successful food pickup locations as people already go to these places on a regular basis. Additionally, Coalition members should document and publicize successful models already operating across Vermont so communities are not starting from scratch when designing local food access initiatives. This could include a shared website, newsletter, or annual statewide gathering where organizations can exchange ideas, highlight effective partnerships, and learn from programs that have already worked in similar communities. Creating a more formal space for communication would help build professional networks across regions and make it easier to replicate strong local models in places where food access remains limited.

Strategy C3.4

The Coalition's primary role here is not to build new programs from scratch, but to make it easier for communities to do what they are already doing well. This means compiling a living inventory of successful local food spaces across Vermont, capturing not just what they do but how they work and what makes them trusted, so that communities have a menu of proven approaches to draw from rather than starting from zero. It also means serving as a connector, helping smaller or emerging programs access grant writing support, technical assistance, and sustained funding that larger organizations take for granted. Peer-to-peer learning should be prioritized over top-down technical assistance, with the Coalition facilitating convenings and site visits so that leaders of established programs can share directly with emerging efforts. Across all of this, dignity, cultural relevance, and participant agency should serve as the core criteria for which models get elevated and replicated, consistent with what interviewees identified as the hallmarks of programs that actually work.

List of people you contacted

(Please include contact information and notes (date/context of contact/other relevant details) as much as possible)

- Megan Brakeley – Associate Director of the [Knoll](#)

- Chris Meehan – Chief Community Impact Officer at the [Vermont Food Bank](#)
 - Ivy Enoch – Director of Policy & Advocacy of [Hunger Free Vermont](#)
 - Sophie Springer – 3SquaresVT Specialist of [Hunger Free Vermont](#)
 - Anna McMahon – Associate Director of [Feeding Champlain Valley](#)
 - Lindsey Berk – Executive Director of [ACORN](#)
 - Sadie Bloch – Food Distribution Coordinator at [CVOEO Addison County](#)
 - Alicia Hughart – Food Hub Coordinator at [CVOEO Addison County](#)
 - Liz Scharf – Director of Community Economic Development of [Capstone Vermont](#)
 - Anna Freund – Food Programs Coordinator of [HOPE](#)
 - Abigail Serra – State Game Warden and Head of Venison for Vermonters at [Vermont Fish and Wildlife Department](#)
 - Katie Horner – [Postdoctoral Associate, Institute for Agroecology](#) at UVM
 - Nathan Hammer – [Firefly Fields Farm](#) Owner
 - Joanna Doren – Direct Markets & Local Food Access Director of [Northeast Organic Farming Association of Vermont](#)
 - Moxie Mehegan – Senior Manager of Food Access Programs at the [Vermont Food Bank](#)
 - Cindy – Middlebury Local Farm Owner/Resident
-

Area for Notes of conversations & links to important things

- [Interview Contacts & Meeting Notes](#): Middlebury students’ finalized list of people interviewed with the notes taken during the meeting
- [Informal: VT Programs, Who to Contact, Interview Q&A, Out of State Research](#): Middlebury students’ working document with some Vermont Food Security organizations and programs, a list of who they contacted, interview questions, and notes of each meeting, in addition to out-of-state programs that exist on these topics.
- [Vermont Food and Health Program Inventory - Farm to Plate](#)
- [Addison County Food Resource Guide](#)
- [2025 Champlain Valley Local Farm and Food Guide - ACORN](#)

IV. Limitations

The most pressing gap in our data collection is geographic, as our interview sample does not fully represent every region of Vermont. Although our research aimed to capture statewide perspectives, our strongest interview coverage came from organizations and individuals connected to Addison County, the Champlain Valley, and statewide food security organizations. We made efforts to address this geographic gap by speaking with stakeholders who work across Vermont, including representatives from the Vermont Foodbank and a Game Warden from the Vermont Fish & Wildlife Department. These conversations helped us better understand challenges in more rural and underserved regions, including Southern Vermont and the Northeast

Kingdom. However, because we were not able to interview as many community-based organizations or residents from these regions directly, our findings may still reflect a stronger understanding of food access work in central and western Vermont.

A second limitation is that our research relied more heavily on the perspectives of non-profit food security organizations and academics, all in the Champlain Valley area. Although these interviews were valuable because they helped us understand existing infrastructure, program design, coordination challenges, and statewide strategy, they cannot fully substitute for direct engagement with residents experiencing food insecurity. We only spoke with one community member who uses or may use these programs, meaning our findings are limited in their ability to fully represent the experiences, preferences, and barriers faced by program users themselves. Although we valued their local user input, it is necessary to address the limitation that one opinion is not necessarily representative of all community members. Future research would benefit from surveys, focus groups, listening sessions, or compensated interviews with program users and non-users, especially individuals from priority populations.

Finally, our research included limited farmer perspectives. While we spoke with Nathan Hammer, a local vegetable farmer in Bristol, we were not able to interview a broader range of farmers across different regions, farm sizes, and production models. Because Objective C3 focuses on local food access, farmer perspectives are important for understanding how food security goals intersect with farm viability, distribution infrastructure, pricing, labor, and seasonal production. A more complete analysis would include additional farmers and food producers, particularly those already participating in food access programs or interested in doing so.

V. Questions, Observations, and Recommendations

a. Questions and Observations

Our work has left us with an appreciation for the breadth and coordination already present within the Coalition and its member organizations' work. We have gained a deeper understanding of how complex the topic of food security is. With that in mind, the following observations and questions come from a place of curiosity and constructiveness.

One tension that repeatedly came to mind during this project is between scalability and local context. The C3 strategies rightly emphasize tailoring to the specific needs of communities, yet the goal of the Roadmap is inherently statewide. How can the Roadmap balance replicating successful, scalable models from different places, while also making sure that programs are rooted in the local context? While we have envisioned a statewide information-sharing network between organizations, we still wonder if there are other ways to share successful practices while also incorporating local context.

A related observation is regarding the role of food-insecure Vermonters themselves and their role within the Coalition. While it has been emphasized in our work that co-design leads to better outcomes for users, we are wondering how this principle could be applied to the Coalition itself. If priority populations could be integrated into the decision-making structure of the

Coalition, we posit that this could lead to better outcomes. Through our interviews and conversations, we have come to understand that Vermonters are very independent and prideful and oftentimes do not wish to accept external assistance or ‘handouts’ due to the idea that they “don't want to take it because someone else needs it more”. With this observation, how can the Coalition ensure that all Vermonters benefit from expanded and improved access to food programs? This will likely take efforts to reduce internal stigma among Vermonters and ensure that all Vermonters understand they are deserving of food security, regardless of their background.

In addition, we consistently flagged the interaction of other poverty-related problems with food insecurity. For example, Vermont’s housing, affordability, and lack of public transportation infrastructure all exacerbate and contribute to food insecurity. After being in this space for a few months, it becomes clear that food security by 2035 is not a realistic goal unless deep systemic changes are made to build out America’s social safety net. So our question is this: how do the C3 goals, and the Roadmap more broadly, connect to, or help build the case for, the broader structural changes necessary to actually achieve food security?

b. Recommendations for Next Steps

This project represents an early contribution to a much greater, ongoing effort. Of the 55 total strategies in Food Security in Vermont: Roadmap to 2035, our group addressed only four (C3.1-C3.4), leaving substantial work ahead. We recommend that future ENVS401 groups continue partnering with Carlin Molander, who has been a highly engaged and knowledgeable project partner, and turn their attention to objectives C1 and C2 (strategies C1.1-C1.3 and C2.1-C2.3). Further, we suggest beginning with objective C1: Integrate food access into town plans across Vermont, as strategy C1.1 is designated as a high-priority strategy in the Roadmap.

Sustaining this partnership also aligns well with the thematic flexibility of the ENVS401 Community Engaged Practicum. These potential projects could either continue with our course theme of environmental health and climate vulnerability or be intertwined with other themes. A Food Security C1 project could fit themes such as town planning, rural development, relational change, or environmental and structural innovation. A C2-focused project could connect to interdisciplinary collaboration, communication systems, or emergency response planning.

VI. Conclusion

Within the Middlebury College Environmental Studies Community Engaged Practicum of Spring 2026, ENVS401A, our group had the opportunity to work with Carlin Molander, our project partner working for the Vermont Food Security Coalition. Through extensive research, outreach, and many interviews, we were able to complete the master “What We Know” document for objective C3, strategies C3.1-C3.4 of the Food Security in Vermont: Roadmap to 2035. This master document will serve as the foundation for Carlin’s work when it comes to informing the Coalition's action steps to bring the roadmap to life.

This project made it clear that food insecurity in Vermont is not a singular problem with a singular solution. It is shaped by overlapping and deeply interconnected systems, including healthcare, housing, transportation, wages, geography, and social stigma that cannot be independently addressed. Through our interviews, secondary research, and engagement with organizations across the state, we developed a richer understanding of both the infrastructure that already exists and any gaps that remain. Vermont has many dedicated organizations, passionate advocates, and innovative programs working toward food security. The challenge lies in connecting, scaling, deepening, and funding what already works, while ensuring that the communities most affected have a voice in shaping solutions.

The C3 strategies work to prioritize community design, dignity, cultural values, and meeting people where they already are. Our work found that programs that reduce stigma, offer food in familiar and trusted settings, and are designed with input from users consistently demonstrate stronger outcomes. We also found that more work is needed in rural regions of Vermont, and that programs that succeed in one county may not succeed in another without local adaptation. The Coalition's work is crucial in reaching full food security in Vermont, but long-term success will depend on systemic change within the food system and beyond. We hope the master 'What We Know' document and the observations and recommendations included in this report can contribute to a state where every Vermonter has reliable, dignified access to nourishing food.

Finally, we are grateful for the generosity of every stakeholder who shared their time, expertise, and passion with us throughout this semester. The relational nature of Vermont's food system was one of the most striking findings of this project, and also one of Vermont's greatest strengths. We hope this work serves as a useful foundation for the Coalition, for Carlin, and for future ENV5401 student groups who may carry this effort forward.

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VIII. Appendix

Appendix A: Relevant Websites

Vermont Food Security Coalition Website: <https://www.vermontfoodsecurity.org/>

- This is the Coalition’s official website and landing page for advocacy, movement building, and communication. Recommendation to look at the Coalition’s 2026 policy slate linked on the landing page.

Farm to Plate Website: <https://www.vtfarmtoplate.com/vermont-food-security-roadmap-coalition>

- This is Farm to Plate’s website. The Roadmap was originally created and housed at Farm to Plate – this website is a helpful tool for understanding and navigating the Roadmap as a document.

Each Coalition Member’s “Our Work” (or similar) page:

- Hunger Free Vermont: <https://www.hungerfreevt.org/>
- NOFA-VT: <https://www.nofavt.org/>
- VT Sustainable Jobs Fund: <https://www.vsjf.org/>
- Intervale Center: <https://www.intervale.org/mission-vision>
- Land Access and Opportunity Board (LAOB):
<https://vhcb.org/land-access-opportunity-board/>
- Vermont Foodbank: <https://www.vtfoodbank.org/>
- Feeding the Valley Alliance: <https://feedingthevalleyalliance.org/>

Appendix B: Individuals Interviewed

- Megan Brakeley – Associate Director of the [Knoll](#) at Middlebury College
- Chris Meehan – Chief Community Impact Officer at the [Vermont Food Bank](#)
- Ivy Enoch – Director of Policy & Advocacy of [Hunger Free Vermont](#)
- Sophie Springer – 3SquaresVT Specialist of [Hunger Free Vermont](#)
- Anna McMahon – Associate Director of [Feeding Champlain Valley](#)
- Lindsey Berk – Executive Director of [ACORN](#)
- Sadie Bloch – Food Distribution Coordinator, [CVOEO Addison County](#)
- Alicia Hughart – Food Hub Coordinator at [CVOEO Addison County](#)
- Liz Scharf – Director of Community Economic Development of [Capstone Vermont](#)
- Anna Freund – Food Programs Coordinator of [HOPE](#)
- Abigail Serra – State Game Warden and Head of Venison for Vermonters at [Vermont Fish and Wildlife Department](#)
- Katie Horner – [Postdoctoral Associate, Institute for Agroecology](#) at UVM

- Nathan Hammer – [Firefly Fields Farm](#) Owner in Bristol, Vermont
- Joanna Doren – Direct Markets & Local Food Access Director of [Northeast Organic Farming Association of Vermont](#)
- Moxie Mehegan – Senior Manager of Food Access Programs at the [Vermont Food Bank](#)
- Cindy – Middlebury Local Farm Owner/Resident

Appendix C: Interview Questions

Our structure involved introductions of both parties, asking specifically what the interviewee works on within their organization and how they got there. Then we lead into prepared questions and follow-up questions. We used the questions above as a guide, but we allowed the conversation to flow organically, occasionally steering it back to the core concepts and questions prepared.

Standardized Questions Asked Across Interviews

- What is happening now that should continue?
- What is not happening now that should start?
- What is happening now that should stop?
- Any things we need to watch out for that you are aware of?
- Should the Coalition lead on this strategy or join an existing effort?
- What are the next steps for Coalition members on this Strategy/Objective, in your opinion?
- How can we better prioritize priority populations?

Questions on Gaps and Access

- Which populations are still not being reached, and why?
- What gaps currently exist in food access programs?
- Are there geographic areas that are underserved?
- How is outreach being tailored to different communities?

Questions on Program Design and Accessibility

- Should programs be implemented in places people already go (schools, healthcare,

childcare)?

- What barriers prevent people from accessing existing resources?
- How can programs better meet people where they are?

Questions on Coordination and Systems

- How well are programs currently coordinated across organizations?
- Are there overlaps or redundancies in services?
- Should coordination be led by the Coalition or existing networks?

Questions on Program Improvement and Reform

- Are there programs or systems that need major change or replacement?
- What aspects of the system create the biggest challenges for users?

Additional Context Questions

- What works well about current programs?
- Where are the biggest gaps or tension points?
- What previous plans or resources should we know about?

Working Towards Climate Justice through Storytelling and Communications

Middlebury College Spring 2026 ENVS 0401 Project by Ethan Campbell, Lauren Giuriceo, Olivia Maloney, and Daniel Rodriguez-Rey, in collaboration with Tom Morgan and Corey Hendrickson of Green Mountain Justice

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1. Contextualization: Homelessness and Housing Insecurity in Vermont

As of June 2025, there were at least 4,588 Vermonters experiencing homelessness, which included more than 1,000 children and 269 seniors (CVOEO, 2025). The number of Vermonters experiencing homelessness have increased by 200% since 2020, signalling that housing insecurity is a rising systemic issue. Out of the Vermonters that do currently have housing, about 1/3 of households are cost-burdened and pay more than the recommended 30% of their income on housing. This leaves little room for families to consistently put food on the table, pay electricity and heating bills, and to take care of medical concerns if necessary. Most extremely low-income households, or those in the 0-30 percentile range for the median income of the area, are seniors or those with disabilities (National Low Income Housing Coalition, 2026). Housing insecurity also disproportionately impacts BIPOC individuals above 45 years old, with 16% of BIPOC Vermonters 45 to 59 year olds experiencing housing insecurity as compared to 9% of white 45 to 59 year old Vermonters (Age Strong VT, 2025).

Understanding Vermont's approach to emergency housing requires situating it within the broader landscape of how neighboring states have addressed homelessness. States like New York and Massachusetts have pursued different policy strategies with their own limitations, against which we can meaningfully compare Vermont's approach.

New York has a legal right-to-shelter mandate that requires the state to provide shelter to individuals in need (Coalition for the Homeless, 2024). As a result, New York has the largest number of year-round emergency housing beds in the nation at 127,759, and the lowest percentage of unsheltered people of any state at 3.6% compared to 43.8% in the rest of the country (Office of the New York State Comptroller, 2025). However, this system is under strain as homelessness in New York doubled between 2022 and 2024. Now, waitlist times in New York for affordable housing can reach up to 51 months (USAFacts, 2025). In other surrounding states, such as Massachusetts, there is also a "right-to-shelter" mandate for the state to provide emergency shelter for families with children and pregnant people. However, the governor of Massachusetts recently placed more restrictions on this law, which means families are on longer waitlists and require proof of in-state residency (Mass.gov, 2025). Additionally, the use of motels and hotels as shelter was completely phased out in 2025.

Vermont has taken a different approach by relying on a motel voucher program, originally established during the COVID-19 pandemic using federal FEMA funding to house thousands of individuals across the state (Table 1). To qualify, applicants are required to be 65+, disabled, 19 or younger, pregnant, experiencing domestic violence, or displaced by a natural disaster. Once accepted, applicants may stay in a participating motel or hotel room for up to 80 nights, with an exception of winter nights from December 1st to March 31st, in which these nights do not count towards the annual total. Once a household uses up the allowed 80 day stay in the motel system, they are forced to leave and wait months for their renewed eligibility. Residents must also contribute 30% of their income to the motel room cost each month (Legal Services Vermont and Vermont Legal Aid, 2026). However, when federal funding for the program expired in 2023, lawmakers cut the motel voucher program's availability by half and reallocated funds toward shelter and affordable housing programs. (Berlin, 2026). While this reallocation continues to address the broader homelessness issue, it has left many Vermonters who previously relied on the program without immediate shelter options. Compared to Massachusetts, which eliminated motel-based shelter entirely, Vermont's scaled-back program still represents a more robust use of this housing strategy, though significant gaps still exist.

Those gaps become more apparent when examining Vermont's shelter infrastructure. Vermont's shelter system has capacity for 602 families, in which all spots were full at the time of the State of Homelessness in Vermont Report (2025). This is not enough to support the number of people in need. To add to this, the General Assistance Emergency Housing Program, administered by the Department for Children and Families to provide temporary shelter for those with no alternative options, has also faced significant cuts. This program was previously serving 2,200 individuals in March 2025 and decreased to 1,017 by July 2025 (CVOEO, 2025). This shows a shelter system that is both increasingly over-capacity and shrinking in breadth.

Given the variable and sometimes hostile climate of Vermont, shelters from extreme weather events are essential. There are state-sponsored extreme cold weather shelters that operate when the weather decreases below -10 degrees Fahrenheit. However, they are closed on days that do not meet this frigid temperature, so many experiencing homelessness are forced to endure the freezing winter temperatures. Currently, there are no official extreme heat shelters that Vermonters can use during the summer, but there is a list of available locations for cooling off.

Despite this reallocation of state funding, affordable housing in Vermont is not a quick and easy solution. According to the US Department of Housing and Urban Development, wait times for affordable housing could be anywhere between 13 to 53 months in Vermont, with

eligibility for housing assessed at both time of the application and when the applicant is finally selected from the waiting list (USAFacts, 2025). However, the low end of Vermont’s range is still much less than minimum waitlist times in surrounding states, which range anywhere from 20 months in Pennsylvania to 51 months in New York. Additionally, any applicant that does not meet the qualifications at the time of selection may have to restart the process. As of 2021, there were about 49 affordable and available rental homes for every 100 extremely low-income households (Vermont Housing and Conservation Board, 2021). Additionally, in 2021, Governor Phil Scott lifted the eviction moratorium that prevented landlords from evicting tenants if they were experiencing financial hardship from the pandemic (Ghatan, 2024). Once the ban was lifted, many Vermonters who were under financial strain were evicted.

Table 1: Timeline including notable state policies and large-scale events that have affected Vermont residents since the COVID-19 Pandemic hit the United States in 2020.

Vermont Policies on Shelter and Housing since COVID Pandemic	
March-April 2020	Motel voucher program begins in Vermont in response to pandemic
May 14th, 2020	Eviction moratorium begins to prevent evictions during the pandemic and to protect vulnerable populations who became unemployed
July 1st, 2021	General Assistance Emergency Housing Program expanded and restructured with new rules due to increased need during pandemic
July 15th, 2021	Governor Phil Scott lifted eviction moratorium and landlords began evicting tenants again
Mid-late 2023	Rollback of motel program; more limited access based on stricter eligibility
July 10-11th, 2023	“The Great Vermont Flood,” comparable to damages of Hurricane Irene in 2011. Many Vermonters displaced, especially those in low-lying areas
Early 2025	Cuts to General Assistance Emergency Housing Program, which is now serving less than half of its original clientele
2025-2026	Lawmakers propose bill to phase out motel voucher program over 2 years to focus on more regional/permanent housing systems

1.1 County-Specific: Housing in Addison County and Local Initiatives Combating Systemic Inequalities

Zooming into Addison County, Vermont, there is a serious concern of housing affordability. Fair market rent (FMR) for a two-bedroom apartment increased by 33% from 2021 to 2025, meaning that as of 2025, the FMR was \$1,410 (HUD, 2025). To meet these continued housing demands, Addison County must build 400 homes per year by 2030. While the county is working to address the problem, it falls significantly short, adding about 110 affordable homes per year (Addison Housing Works, 2025). This shortfall is concerning, as it will continue to drive up housing costs in the area and push out working and vulnerable individuals. About 24% of all Addison County homeowners are currently cost-burdened, meaning they are contributing more than 30% of their income to housing (United Way of Addison County, 2026).

According to United Way of Addison County, there were approximately 143 individuals experiencing homelessness in the county as of March 2025. To help these individuals, Addison County provides some essential services for shelter and transportation. The Charter House Coalition is an important service in the county that provides housing, food, and case management for residents experiencing homelessness. The Charter House is intentional about welcoming potentially stigmatized individuals such as formerly incarcerated residents and drug users. However, the coalition is currently only able to house 25 permanent residents, with six emergency housing spots available for shorter stays (McGinty, 2026).

Another resource available in Addison County is public transportation through Tri-Valley Transit. One quarter of the Vermont population is transit-dependent and may not be able to access medical care, food, or their place of employment without a form of public transportation (Tri-Valley Transit, 2026). Thus, Tri-Valley Transit provides these services through their Shuttle Bus System or through the Dial-A-Ride Program for vulnerable individuals who may not be able to access buses. This is a service that is extremely beneficial for those in Addison County who do not own cars, and is a step toward the kind of accessible infrastructure that is needed in such a rural place like Vermont.

Addison County Housing Coalition (ACHC) is a partnership of organizations, which includes the Charter House Coalition, that are committed to ending homelessness and supporting those experiencing housing insecurity in the area. Not only do these agencies work together to provide individuals with adequate resources, they also act as an advisor to the

Housing & Homelessness Alliance, which works to ensure people in Vermont have “safe, stable, and affordable homes” (“Home – Housing & Homelessness Alliance”, 2026).

1.2 Environmental Determinants of Health with Homelessness

The World Health Organization (WHO) defines Social Determinants of Health as “the conditions in which people are born, grow, live, work and age, and people’s access to power, money and resources,” all which have a significant impact on global, national, and local health inequities. The lower the socioeconomic position of an individual, it is often the case that health will worsen. These determinants are unjust, yet avoidable. It is seen as the fault of archaic policies and systems, and unfair social norms that are unfortunately still deeply ingrained in society.

Although Social Determinants of Health are widely recognized, Environmental Determinants of Health also significantly impact people’s health in Vermont. Environmental Determinants of Health refer to the physical surroundings and conditions in which people live, including access to clean water and sanitation, protection from the natural elements, air quality, and proximity to healthcare and other essential resources. Homelessness and housing insecurity increases exposure to negative environmental determinants of health due to an inability to access sufficient health resources and increased exposure to natural elements.

Compared to people with secure housing, people experiencing homelessness have disproportionately negative health outcomes including higher rates of addiction, physical and mental health problems, and even premature mortality. These factors can create a dangerous cycle in which living outdoors can exacerbate preexisting health conditions, while various health vulnerabilities may increase the likelihood of a person choosing to remain outdoors in harsher environments. Physical environmental conditions are a leading cause of illness and mortality in unhoused populations, with both extreme heat and cold leading to poor health and increased hospitalizations. Unsheltered populations are 200 times more likely to die from heat-related causes than sheltered people (Texas Homelessness Network, 2024).

Vermont’s climate of harshly cold winters and high seasonal variability, combined with one of the highest per capita rates of homelessness in the United States, poses a unique challenge to the state’s homeless population (Housing and Homelessness Alliance of Vermont, 2025). The climate – varying from extreme cold to extreme heat, dry seasons, flooding, and other severe storms – intensifies the effects of environmental determinants of health. As climate change intensifies and weather extremes become more unpredictable, these conditions

compound the many overlapping public health crises already faced by the unhoused and precariously housed, from addiction and mental illness to limited healthcare and food access, further deepening existing inequalities.

2. Project Overview

Green Mountain Justice (GMJ) is a nonprofit organization in Addison County that focuses on proximity-based action. This year-old organization is doing important work in the community by facilitating the formation of meaningful relationships between community members across a socioeconomic gradient. The network of members that make up GMJ is known as the Neighbor Care System, with the expectations that “Neighbors” will reciprocally care for each other in times of need – whether it be a ride to the airport or a doctor’s appointment, emergency child care support, guidance with housing application procedures, or anything else that may come up. In addition, GMJ’s Founder Tom Morgan works with the state of Vermont to ensure that Extreme Cold Weather Shelters are available to those who need them across seven different communities statewide. By reaching out to various shelters and working with the state to open new ones, GMJ is an essential piece for Extreme Cold Weather Shelters to function and accommodate more unhoused people.

As students who have completed multiple courses in the Environmental Studies Program at Middlebury, we recognize that Vermont’s most disadvantaged neighbors have important perspectives on environmental and systemic issues that should be valued with equal consideration to the current dominant narratives, but are often overlooked to maintain the status quo. The Environmental Studies Program integrates coursework on environmental policy and American history of environmentalism across diverse perspectives. These courses focus on framing systems in the United States through different lenses of race, class, gender, and economic status, which we believe has given us an adequate foundation for this work.

Currently, GMJ seeks to reach a broad audience of Vermonters. Its long-term goal is to inspire communities to replicate their Neighbor Care model across Vermont. However, based on our own conversations with peers and faculty members, it appears that not many community members are yet aware of this organization. Thus, for this particular ENVS 0401 project, our group was tasked with assisting GMJ with communications content as they work to expand their reach both in Middlebury and Addison County and throughout the broader state of Vermont.

Our project this semester focused on finding ways to center individual neighbors' stories and to support GMJ's effort to do so through their *Voices From the Edge* podcast series. The ultimate goal was to raise awareness of the systemic issues that these neighbors and community members are facing, consider climate change-related vulnerabilities, expose shortcomings of the existing systems, and call people to action through accessible and digestible testaments of community-building. We also felt that it was important to highlight the neighbors' resilience, despite experienced hardship. We wanted to find a method of spreading awareness and calls to action while still maintaining these neighbors' agency and dignity, so we decided upon social justice storytelling as our method.

3. Why Storytelling?

To accomplish our ultimate goal of raising awareness of the systemic issues Addison County community members face, especially regarding housing, we decided to employ storytelling as an impactful method to broadcast our message. Social justice storytelling is a narrative-driven approach to activism and education that amplifies marginalized voices, challenges dominant societal narratives, and impels action for equity, which is exactly what we seek to do with our media forms (McDowell and Cooke, 2022). It involves a two-pronged strategy to engage with the audience. The first is "calling out" injustice, which highlights the narratives that commonly go untold. These narratives are often systemic harms that the storyteller wants to bring attention to. The second prong is the "calling in" effect, through which the storyteller invites the audience to act. After exposing systemic injustice, the story should encourage and empower people to enact change for good, providing specific suggestions for action (McDowell and Cooke, 2022). The "calling in" aspect of social justice storytelling aims to create cohesion between audience members and other relevant stakeholders (the storyteller, the group enacting change) and generate momentum for the cause it advocates for.

Some specific techniques employed in effective social justice storytelling include perspectival ambiguity and counter-storytelling. Perspectival ambiguity is the shifting between pronouns used in the story. For example, if the story is told through a series of interview questions, using the first person "I", second person "you" in reference to the audience, and first person plural "we" to establish a collective can help draw the audience into the narrative. This encourages the viewer to deepen their empathy through reframing the story to see their own role (GSSW Communication Team, 2018). We employed perspectival ambiguity in our interviews and highlighted this technique throughout the video-making process. We prompted

our interviewees to tell raw, personal stories through the “I” perspective, and naturally, they embraced the “we” component to draw more into the community aspect. It is core to the GMJ mission to see ourselves and our neighbors as *one*. We then asked pointed questions about how others’ help is needed, and we received a range of suggestions targeted at audience members with different abilities to help. Therefore, we hope to “call in” as many community members as possible to see the value in Green Mountain Justice’s mission.

Counter-storytelling is the telling of disruptive stories that challenge the status quo and ties directly to the “calling out” aspect of social justice storytelling (McDowell and Cooke, 2022). In our project, the story we counter is the idyllic, small Vermont town narrative that usually describes Middlebury. While we, as college students, love the place and enjoy its beauty, community-focused ideals, and the accessibility to the outdoors, we recognize that Middlebury, Addison County, and Vermont, like any other place, has many imperfections and injustices. Vermont has a high cost of living (the tenth-highest in the United States) and steep taxes, which are a burden for many residents (Santarelli, 2025). Vermont is also a hostile climate with harsh weather, which is especially a burden on those facing homelessness. The rural environment makes it difficult to access public services like transportation, accessible healthcare, and support systems available to vulnerable community members. Where people of certain socioeconomic standing see the perks of winters cold enough for skiing, summers conducive to hiking and swimming, and embrace the rural aspects of Vermont life, these same factors pose great challenges to the marginalized community members of Middlebury and Addison County. Through this project, we hope to broadcast this dichotomy and challenge our audience to broaden their perspective and take action with Green Mountain Justice.

3.1 Storytelling to Address Homelessness

Storytelling to amplify the needs of people experiencing homelessness and housing precarity, helping to destigmatize homelessness. As experts in the Harvard T.H. Chan School of Public Health points out, the homelessness crisis in the U.S. “is exacerbated by a lack of empathy for unhoused people” (Roeder, 2025). Those experiencing homelessness due to short-term disruptions – whether that be a natural disaster, economic setback, family instability, or sudden personal crisis – often need immediate, targeted support to regain stability. However, those whose homelessness stemming from longer-term structural barriers or chronic challenges typically require sustained, comprehensive interventions and tend to gain less support. These differing conditions show how a variety of aid and support types and systems are needed in any

given situation, though current federal funding policy tends to increase emphasis on transitional housing for temporary homelessness cases (“Types of Housing Support”, 2019). Stigma surrounding the chronically homeless population is at the heart of this discrepancy, as blame for their lack of housing is put on the individual rather than an unforeseen or happenstance event. Storytelling is a tool to rework that narrative. Disseminating media and creating space for these stories and bringing authentic stories to people’s attention has helped address stigma around mental health challenges, racial inequality, and LGBTQ+ rights, disability, and other issues (Barber et al., 2024). So, storytelling can play a pivotal role in dismantling some of the existing stigma.

Additionally, storytelling exposes the essential role the audience’s attention and listening plays in social change. Effective storytelling evokes feelings of sympathy or empathy, togetherness, and motivation. Through engaging with stories, audience members have the opportunity to reflect upon preconceptions and challenge their perceptions, opening the door for change.

3.2 Storytelling to Address Social Stigmas on Social Media

Recently, storytelling has been a useful tool to promote awareness and empathy for societal stigmas. Many movements, such as ones promoting awareness, support, and acceptance of mental health challenges, employ storytelling through many forms of media. Storytelling tells a personal, humanizing, and authentic perspective that brings these topics to life. It can take many forms, such as video, photography, printed media, and more.

We have interacted with a few non-profit organizations in the mental health awareness space through their impactful social media presences, namely The Hidden Opponent and Morgan’s Message. These organizations expand conversations about mental health and publicize resources through content creation and by sharing the stories of followers. These include testimonies, stories of struggles and hope, collaborating with well-known figures (influencers or celebrities), and publicizing the founders and boardmembers. Thus, these foundations further their mission through crafting stories of impact and giving ideas for tangible outreach audience members can do, including fundraising events, tabling, discussion forums, and more.

Upon researching the social media presence of non-profit organizations aimed to help homeless populations, there were few examples with as prominent accounts as organizations in other social stigma spaces. Organizations combatting homelessness are often more local than national, as to help people in close proximity. They may also be more action-based rather than awareness based, unlike the mental health cause. Some accounts we looked into include those of WeHOPE and Vegas Stronger, leading service providers for California and the Las Vegas area, respectively, in addition to local Vermont and Addison County organizations ACORN and COTS.

To use storytelling to impel local action for those experiencing homelessness on social media, organizations similar to Green Mountain Justice publish similar content. This content includes authentic, mostly unedited photos and videos with accompanying narratives in captions. The organizations also use their accounts for relaying urgent messaging, whether that be the availability of a cold weather shelter or other service, as well as to give periodic updates on their work to stakeholders and followers. While they do not boast as many followers as other, national non-profit's social media platforms, these smaller-scale organizations work on the local level and succeed at mobilizing their communities for their cause. Please see our social media guide for more information on how to best leverage social media in the smaller, local non-profit space.

4. Project Preparations

4.1 Developing Our Project Scope

Initially, as our target audience was intended for younger people, we decided to focus our attention on media forms like Instagram, YouTube, and TikTok because of their popularity and outreach. Within this research, we determined how to create posts, determining the number of hashtags for Instagram posts and other suggestions for Green Mountain Justice to distribute this media. As we got further into the process of developing a vision for media dissemination, we discussed with professors what media forms they have seen that have been effective in the community. Through this process, we decided to create a variety of physical media forms that could be distributed throughout the community for people to see. These include a newspaper article and a zine created by local artists that would both be distributed in the local newspaper.

This article and zine was distributed to 36 buildings and businesses around Middlebury. This was done to both reach younger audiences on social media while also reaching a broader local audience in Middlebury and the greater Addison County.

Through this multifaceted approach of social media content creation and physical media dissemination, we aim to reach a broad audience and create a wide range of resources for Green Mountain Justice for future use.

4.2 CITI Training and Formal Research

The first step in this process for us to ensure that care and efficiency went into our work was to complete the Collaborative Institutional Training Initiative (CITI) Program training on Social and Behavioral Research. Because this project involved conducting interviews with individuals experiencing homelessness and housing insecurity- populations considered vulnerable in research contexts due to heightened risk of exploitation, coercion, or harm, this training was a necessary foundation before any direct engagement with GMJ neighbors could begin. The CITI program equipped us with an understanding of the ethical responsibilities that come with this work, including how to conduct interviews in ways that are non-exploitative, non-coercive, and free from bias. Completing this certification ensured that our engagement with GMJ neighbors was handled with care and that the methods we used met established standards for ethical research with vulnerable populations.

After completing the CITI training, our group began the research process to gain valuable background information that would influence our interview question design and the messaging of our media. We first looked into all available resources provided by GMJ about the organization itself, which included their website pages, blog posts, campaigns and community events, as well as resources on shelter and tenant policies in Vermont and the GMJ strategies provided for us by Tom. This helped us develop an idea of GMJ's tone and style of messaging, so we could ensure that the content we produced felt like it was coming from GMJ and not an outside source. We also learned more about some of the organization's neighbors by listening to the *Voices from the Edge* podcast series. By listening to these podcasts, we gained a clearer understanding of the circumstances of each neighbor. It opened our eyes to the fact that no situation is permanent, no matter how secure one feels. This added another layer of connectivity into our interview process and drove us to prioritize empathy and connection as takeaways from our videos and interviews. In addition to GMJ-centric research, we also examined recent climate disasters in Vermont and their impacts to vulnerable communities (Kunkel, 2022; Duffort, 2023).

The 2023 floods that swept through Vermont, for example, displaced many low income families, as affordable housing tends to be concentrated in floodplains. This flood amounted to 2.2 billion dollars in damage and 10 deaths. However, this flood is just one example of the 25 federally declared climate disasters in the state from 2011 to 2024 (Rebuild by Design, 2024).

Additionally, we researched the systemic and relational nature of poverty. We learned that housing instability, one marker of material poverty, is usually intertwined with medical issues, financial scarcity, and food insecurity. This intersectionality poses a multidimensional and complex issue that many social systems seek to address, and coordination is an essential step in the process. For example, the Vermont State Housing Association, which manages rental subsidies and landlord relief, and the Charter House, which provides emergency shelter and navigation services for people experiencing homelessness, operate under the umbrella of the Vermont Balance of State Continuum of Care, and their goals align to reduce homelessness efficiently ("About VSHA", 2026). Charter House helps connect those under their care with resources and case managers from the Vermont State Housing Association to find more longer-term housing solutions. While imperfect, as wait times are long and there is an affordable housing shortage in Vermont, collaborations like these show the ongoing efforts to remedy these issues ("2026 Vermont Housing Profile", 2026). Researching existing state-sponsored initiatives helped us to understand the major stakeholders and actors already involved in helping alleviate homelessness in Vermont. From here, we could understand where further work is needed and situate GMJ in this ecosystem.

While reading through the GMJ resources and getting a sense of the available resources for Vermonters experiencing homelessness, we also decided to collect information from meetings with professionals aligned in this field. We talked with Professor Amy Redman about her qualitative research process for the Vermont Department of Health and the storytelling process that her students used to create a narrative slideshow. We also met with Allison Carruth, who provided her opinion on our project deliverables using her own background of storytelling and content creation through the Blue Lab. We also decided to gather the perspectives of other students participating in this work by talking to board members of the Charter House Coalition Student Organization. They gave us valuable feedback about the kinds of media they thought would reach younger generations, as well as the best ways to approach conversations with marginalized individuals.

5. StoryMap

To consolidate all of the media created this semester into one accessible location, we built a Storymap website that serves as a central hub for our project deliverables. Our Storymap houses the short video series, zine pages, social media posts, and all media created throughout the semester. This makes it easy for anyone (GMJ staff, future students) to navigate and access our work in one place.

The Storymap is designed to be a lasting source for GMJ, extending the scope of our project beyond this semester and serving as a reference for anyone interested in GMJ storytelling. Any content created throughout the semester but not ultimately published to social media will still live on the Storymap, meaning nothing goes to waste. GMJ retains full access to the site and can download, repurpose, or share individual assets as needed in the future. Our hope is that this archive of media supports GMJ long after the semester has ended and that they can build upon what we've created, as needed, to fit the growth of the organization.



Green Mountain Justice

Media Repository

Daniel Rodriguez-Rey, Olivia Maloney, Lauren Giuriceo and Ethan Campbell
Draft

Zine Pages

This section contains the individual pages of the GMJ zine created this semester, which explores climate vulnerability, housing insecurity, and systemic barriers facing Vermonters across the seasons. The pages were designed by student artists at Middlebury College and overlaid with narrative text developed by our team. They can be downloaded and printed to reproduce physical copies of the zine, shared digitally, or repurposed as standalone graphics for social media or other communications materials.

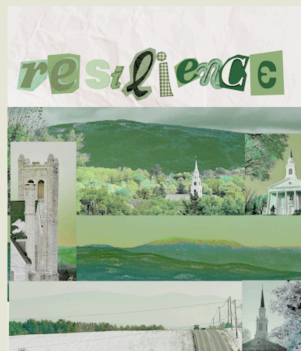


Figure 1: Screenshots of the GMJ StoryMap website repository. [Link to site here.](#)

Example graphics for website resources:

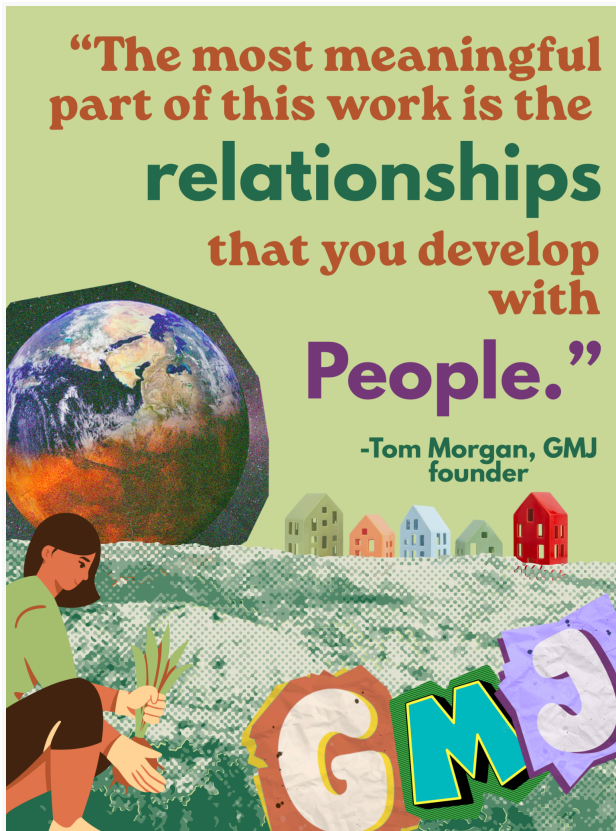


Figure 2: Example graphic developed for multi-media usage.

6. Social Media Guide

A central goal for our project was to ensure that the work we did this semester would continue to benefit GMJ long after the course ended. With that in mind, we developed a comprehensive Social Media Strategy Guide as a resource that any future volunteer, student team, or GMJ staff member can pick up and use independently.

The guide opens with a set of ethical principles specific to social media storytelling (covering consent, dignity, and the risks of extractive content creation) grounded in GMJ's existing commitment to proximity and authentic relationship. These principles are intended to anchor any future content decisions, regardless of platform or format.

From there, the guide addresses each of GMJ's current and recommended platforms in turn. The Instagram and Facebook section covers content types (quote graphics, infographics, event documentation, Stories, and volunteer spotlights), recommended posting frequency, hashtag strategy, audience engagement practices, and account setup tips. The YouTube section makes the case for long-form storytelling as a trust-building tool, outlines the free YouTube Nonprofit Program available through Google for Nonprofits, and provides guidance on channel organization and video content types suited to GMJ's capacity. The TikTok section explains why the platform is especially valuable for reaching younger Vermonters and Middlebury students, and introduces the TikTok for Good program available to nonprofits.

Finally, the guide concludes with some templates made on Canva. These templates are designed to lower the barrier to posting, giving whoever manages GMJ's social media a concrete starting point rather than having to build visual assets from scratch.

7. Short Video Series

One of the deliverables that we had identified early and were committed to creating since the start of this semester was a short video series with GMJ affiliates. Our objectives of the video series were to give voice to marginalized neighbors and other members of the Neighbor Care Network ecosystem, hear from their perspective on how the network fills voids in the community, increase awareness of the network, and discuss the intersection of precarious housing conditions and environmental change.

To begin the interview process, we sought a range of perspectives willing to share their experiences with the public. We identified Tom Morgan, founder and executive director of GMJ, Dr. Gordon Gibson, the GMJ treasurer and a neighbor care neighbor, and another community

member participating in the Neighbor Care ecosystem, as individuals to interview. These individuals were chosen based on information gathered from conversations with Tom, experiences at Neighbor's Table, and availability of interviewees during this semester's work period. We wanted different perspectives of GMJ and reasoned that these individuals would provide a wide array of information and beliefs about the organization. Permission and consent was verbally confirmed by the interviewee, however our content was also an extension of the contractual agreement between neighbors and GMJ that has already been established for the *Voices from the Edge* podcast.

Our next step in the process was to develop interview questions that would give us structural support for our conversations with neighbors. We wanted these interviews to feel as organic as possible for both parties, but we thought it was appropriate to give ourselves and the interviewee some guidance for the direction of the interview.

Our questions list underwent numerous iterations of revisions as we consulted experts on the matter of storytelling and human-subject research. To begin the drafting process, we met with fellow students who head the Charter House Coalition Student Organization at Middlebury College to hear about their experiences with people experiencing housing insecurity in Middlebury. As part of their Charter House involvement, they share a weekly dinner with house residents, so we sought their insight into engaging in respectful and authentic conversations. To avoid unwantedly personal conversations for their residents, they informed us of common questions they fall back on, some responses that may be unexpected to us, and emphasized that a listening ear goes a long way. We kept this perspective in mind as we drafted our questions.

We also gained feedback from Professor Kate Crawford and Tom Morgan. After speaking with them, we made our questions shorter and more concise with more plain language. While we were discussing complex ideas and viewpoints, we learned to ask more open-ended questions to allow the conversation to reach complexity on its own. We also needed to leave space for our interviewees' narratives to come through rather than collecting the exact information we wanted to hear. This advice allowed us to make more free-flowing, fruitful, and genuine connections.

The meetings with Professor Christopher Klyza and Professor Peter Ryan were helpful in further developing the language we used. Terms like "privilege" do not carry the same definition for all people and can be an identifier term. Professor Klyza warned us to use them carefully depending on the audience. Additionally, terms like "intersectionality" are used frequently in conversations on Middlebury's campus, but people in the broader community may

not be as familiar with meanings when referencing identity or overlapping conditions. We refined our questions based on these recommendations, as well.

Finally, we met with Allison Carruth and Professor Amy Redman who provided valuable expert insight. Allison's expertise includes storytelling about environmental issues while also highlighting marginalized voices, so hearing about her tactics on preserving identity and authenticity was instrumental. She advocated for us to maintain the "raw" production style, similar to GMJ's existing social media platforms for continuity's sake and continual capture of the grassroots initiative. Our conversation with Professor Redman about her experience creating the Vermont Department of Health's *Heat and Houselessness Storytelling Project* with previous ENVS 0401 sections influenced our strategy for gathering quotes. She emphasized asking questions that beg for stories as an answer and asking for elaborations when applicable. We gained a lot of detailed perspective through this method, so her advice was instrumental.

Because this project involved personal stories about housing insecurity, community care, failings of the existing systems, and environmental vulnerability, we approached the interviews with an ethics of consent, care, and narrative control. We understood that storytelling with people experiencing precarious housing conditions can risk extraction, misinterpretation, or emotional discomfort if not handled carefully, so we approached these interviews as collaborative efforts. Our interviewees had the right to decide what they wanted to share, how personal they wanted to get, and whether their story can be publicly posted. Our approach drew on principles common to human-subject research and social media consent, as well as what we learned in the CITI research training, including voluntary participation, clear explanation of use, minimizing harm, and allowing participants to guide the depth of disclosure. Before filming, we explained our purpose of the project, the intended audiences, and the possible platforms for the final videos, including GMJ's website, YouTube, Instagram, and Facebook. The ultimate decision of what will be posted is up to Tom.

During the filming and production of our interviews, we were able to work off of our questions list while improvising new questions that fit into the context of the conversation. We shared the interview questions with interviewees ahead of time so they could prepare answers if desired, but we also followed the interviewee's lead as they shared personal stories with us. This was a great opportunity to inquire more about the pieces of their life that they were interested in telling us. Through this process, we developed a clearer understanding of the purpose that each interviewee served in the short video series. As founder, Tom provided deep clarity about GMJ's values, the community it works in, the needs it fills, and future directions. His

perspective will bring GMJ to life for the audience, giving background and context for the succeeding videos.

Dr. Gibson offered perspective not only of another executive member of GMJ but also that of a Neighbor Care provider who has been in the GMJ community since its inception. From this conversation, viewers will discover the personality of people in the community helping fellow individuals through fostering networks of connection. The audience will see the multidimensional benefits of connecting with community members, extending support when needed, and how impactful Neighbor Care is to all those involved.

Finally, the Neighbor Care neighbor we interviewed shed light on Neighbor Care in action. They will provide viewers with authentic stories of their reality, their perspective on existing or failing systems in Vermont communities, and the impact of GMJ on everyday lives of people facing precarious housing situations in Addison County. We wanted to amplify their voice through this series, leaving space for neighbors to reach viewers with whatever message they see fit. These interviews took place at the Fenn House, Green Mountain Justice's home base, a safe space that neighbors frequently meet.

Upon interview completion, we assessed the best use of raw content. Videos were filmed on a personal iPhone for convenience and comfortability of the interviewee, but files were quickly transferred onto Google Drive and deleted off of personal devices. We decided to create short videos with overarching themes such as "What is Green Mountain Justice and How to Get Involved," as well as "Relationship of GMJ Neighbors to Vermont." These videos are compilations of the interviews that touch on this theme. Other videos were more focused on the individual being interviewed and their personal stories. The raw content was also used to highlight impactful quotes from our interviewees for social media posts and for StoryMap imagery. This StoryMap will hopefully be available on the GMJ website for the public to access. We collaborated together as a group and relied on support from Community Partner Corey Hendrickson for guidance, advice, and creative influence.

This video series could be available on Youtube in the future, and it was designed with adaptability of formatting in mind so that shorter snippets of it could also be posted on Instagram or Facebook. We anticipate the video series furthering GMJ's mission of amplifying the stories of Vermonters that are traditionally unheard and underrepresented. We wanted this video series to further GMJ's mission of connecting Vermonters of all walks of life into one reciprocal community, along with highlighting the voices and experiences of the neighbors across the socioeconomic spectrum and how their experiences in the GMJ network compared to one another. We examined their motivations, takeaways, and understandings of how climate change

affects groups of people differently. However, through this process we also connected with neighbors through stories and anecdotes they were willing to share from their personal background.

7.1 Interview Structure

Here is our question guide that gave our interviews preliminary structure:

Interview with Tom Morgan, Founder of GMJ:

- How did GMJ and the Neighbor Care program come to be, and what need in the community does the organization seek to fill?
- What are the biggest challenges does GMJ as an organization face?
 - Are these challenges Middlebury or Addison County-specific, or more far-reaching?
 - Also, if you don't mind answering, what about the biggest challenges you face as an individual in this space?
- Looking towards the future, what are some imminent next steps in your work?
 - Does environmental change play a role?
- If someone is learning about GMJ for the first time today, what message do you hope they take away?
 - Do you mind sharing some advice to viewers looking to make a difference through community building?

From this interview, we learned that one of Tom's goals with GMJ is to combat the "outsourced care" norm – where people often view philanthropy and monetary donations to charity as the best way to give back, rather than engaging with others and dedicating their time to forming relationships – that allows Vermont to have one of the highest per capita rates of homelessness despite its progressive reputation. He emphasizes that these stories are designed to be eye-opening for the privileged, urging them to move from a state of "tribal" comfort to one of "proximal" relationships with those in need. Ultimately, Tom seeks to replicate the neighbor care model statewide, establishing third spaces where the marginalized and socioeconomically privileged neighbors can be in relation with one another and help each other reciprocally rather than transactionally.

Interview with Neighbors (with variations more specific for each interviewee):

- For those in the audience who have not heard your *Voices from the Edge* podcast, do you mind giving us a brief introduction to yourselves?

- Would you be willing to share an extreme weather condition, like a cold snap, heat wave, extreme storm, that may have impacted you while experiencing housing insecurity?
 - Is there a particular moment that comes to mind?
- Did you feel supported by Vermont's resources for people experiencing homelessness?
 - How could things have gone better?
 - Are there specific resources that support you when you experience those extreme temperatures or conditions? What barriers are in place?
- If you were to imagine a more equal community and Vermont in the future, what would that look like?
 - How can the people listening to this recording help make that happen?

From this interview, we heard from the neighbor's stories across their lifetime – about times in adolescence experiencing freedom and seeking the outdoors, cross-country travel, troubles of parenthood, and other impactful episodes of their life. Their story exposes the failures of the current social systems, especially pertaining to those who do not fit traditional binary constructs. They appreciated the opportunity to be part of this project to tell about the ups and downs that have led to their current situation. (This key takeaway section is kept short intentionally to maintain anonymity and confidentiality of privileged information.)

Interview with Dr. Gordon Gibson, GMJ Treasurer and Neighbor Care Provider:

- How did you become involved with GMJ?
 - What do you see as the most impactful effects GMJ has on the community?
 - Do you mind sharing a particular moment if one comes to mind?
- How has being a Neighbor Care neighbor impacted you?
 - What have you gained?
 - Do you mind sharing any examples?
- Does environmental change play a factor in the work the Neighbor Care program does?
 - Causing additional challenges or worries?
 - If so, how do you and the program adapt?
- What advice or information do you have to share to someone just hearing about GMJ and their Neighbor Care Network?

From this interview, we learned to critique the “transactional” nature of traditional social services. Gordon argues that our storytelling project does work to foster a relationship-based response to honor the dignity of neighbors in distress. He illustrates the intersectionality of environmental disasters, noting that while the privileged can more easily adapt to environmental challenges, such as floods or extreme cold, the marginalized are left to face life-threatening conditions on their own, with sometimes no place to go. Through his work with Green Mountain

Justice, Gordon learned the importance of deep listening, emphasizing that standing alongside someone in their despair is the foundation of true community care.

Here are some screenshots that display our video format:



Figure 3: Image taken from video interview with Tom Morgan as he discusses the facets of Green Mountain Justice and the nature of his work.



Figure 4: Image taken from video interview with Setty Provenger as they discuss what they love about Vermont in the “Two Vermonts” video. This compares policy issues in the state to reasons why people love living here.

8. Zine

A zine is a noncommercial, often homemade publication that is usually devoted to a specialized subject. They are typically made from folding pieces of paper together, which makes this model easily reproducible. Zines have been created by Middlebury College students before, and they have gained popularity among students as a medium for transferring information in a creative way within the community over the past decade.

Our objective with the GMJ zine was to disseminate an eye-catching piece of physical media to reach an audience of a wider age range. We distributed the zine in all of the local businesses and campus buildings that receive the Middlebury Campus newspaper. It centered on seasonality in Vermont and the different challenges that people experiencing homelessness or precarious housing situations may face in each season. This narrative then discusses a few systemic issues that these populations face and the intersection of policy and climate. Finally, the story narrows in to focus on the GMJ mission and ends with a call to action for readers: to get involved with organizations like GMJ talk and to their community members to build connections across socioeconomic differences.

Another important facet of the zine component of our project is that student artists at Middlebury College were involved in the creation of its pages. We reached out to multiple departments and organizations on campus, and artists signed up to help us design about a dozen pages. We purposely kept the scope of each page broad enough for artists to take their own creative direction based on what the description meant to them. Artists were provided with an incentive of a \$15 gift card to Haymaker Bun Company, which we found extremely helpful in gathering interest for this project.

Once the page designs were all submitted, we overlaid a narrative that we developed onto each page. The narrative is a mixture of simple climate and policy statistics and a more creative storytelling tone that follows the themes of each page. This narrative was adapted to better fit the design of the pages, depending on artistic choices made by each individual. Both Tom Morgan and Professor Crawford were involved in the polishing of the language and messaging of the narrative text.

After overlaying narrative text onto each page in CANVA, we compiled the pages onto one document following available online zine templates and printed them onto sturdy pieces of 8.5"x11" paper. We folded and cut these papers in a specific way to create a pocket booklet. Ethan distributed almost 200 of these copies along with the campus newspaper to 36 buildings across Middlebury Campus and in town.

Within the Storymap Website, we also included a digitized version of the zine. Storymaps allowed us to be creative with the display of our content, and the zine pages were formatted in a slideshow to mimic pages flipping. Storing the zine in a website allows GMJ to download individual pages and reuse them in many different ways (with appropriate credit to the artist).

8.1 Zine Narrative

Here is our narrative text that was overlaid on page designs:

Page 1: Temperatures in Vermont have risen almost 3°F since the beginning of the 20th century. Inescapable heat equals increased health risks. Some must choose between paying for air conditioning or other needs. There are no extreme-heat shelters for unhoused individuals.

Page 2: A cycle of flooding and drought; too much water or not enough. Many affordable housing developments were built in floodplains, with water damage lines marking the height of past devastation on their siding.

Page 3: Nearly 2 in 5 Vermonters face hunger on a weekly basis, revealing the inadequacy of the state's support plans and the growing need for help. Food insecurity is a systemic issue and is often exacerbated by housing insecurity, job instability, and family dynamics. (The artists chose to create their own narrative integrated into their page for this topic)

Page 4: Emergency cold shelters are only required to open when windchill temperatures reach below -10°F. High costs and staffing shortages mean that shelters are hesitant to open below 0°F. "Vermont thinks it's safer for them to sleep outside than it is for them to sleep in the same beds they slept in last night."

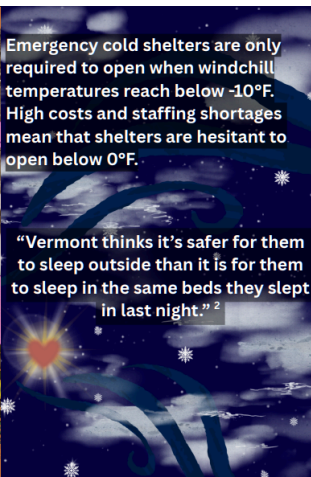
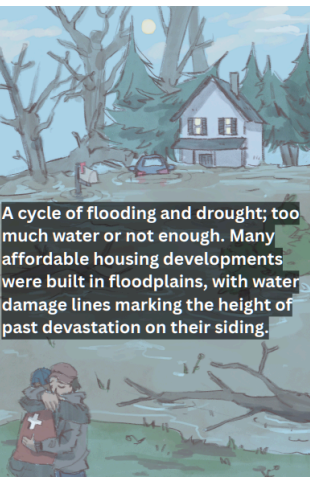
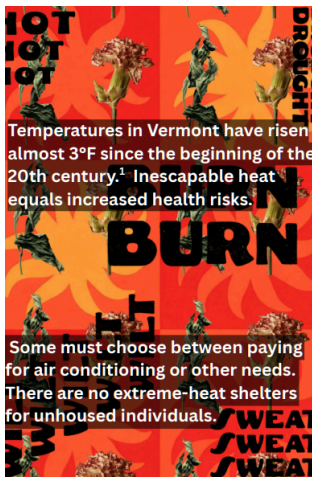
Page 5: As the climate changes, livelihoods of many housing insecure families who rely on natural resources may be jeopardized. More extreme weather leads to more property damage and health risks, with reduced financial ability to recover and adapt.

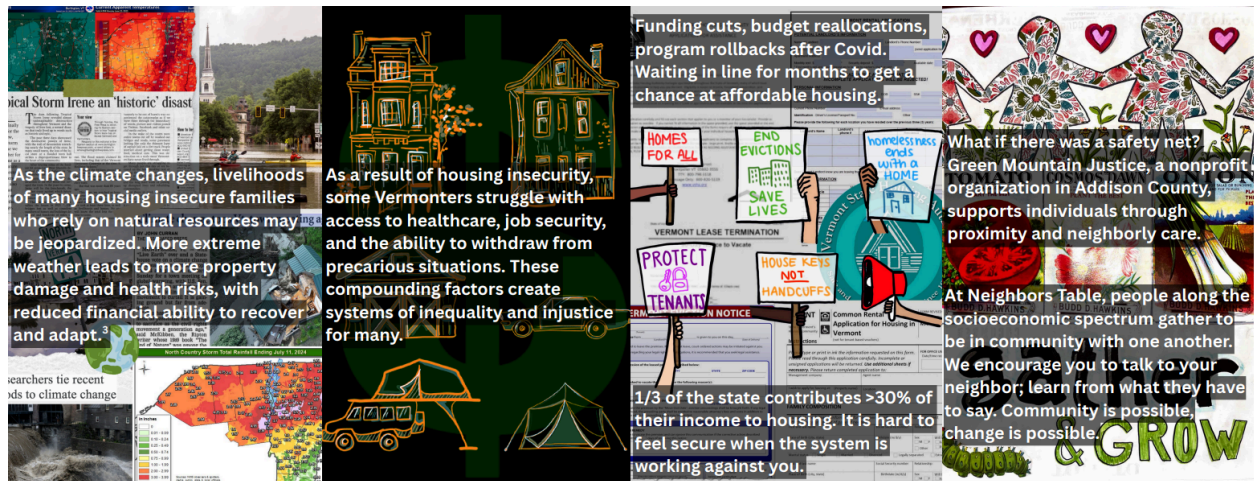
Page 6: As a result of housing insecurity, some Vermonters struggle with access to healthcare, job security, and the ability to withdraw from precarious situations. These compounding factors create systems of inequality and injustice for many.

Page 7: Funding cuts, budget reallocations, program rollbacks after Covid. Waiting in line for months to get a chance at affordable housing. A third of the state is cost-burdened, contributing 30% of their income to housing. It is hard to feel secure when the system is working against you.



Page 8: What if there was a safety net? Green Mountain Justice, a nonprofit organization in Addison County, supports individuals through proximity and neighborly care. At Neighbors Table, people along the socioeconomic spectrum gather to be in community with one another. We encourage you to talk to your neighbor; learn from what they have to say. Community is possible, change is possible.

8.2 Zine Pages





This zine was created by Middlebury College ENVS401 students for GMJ. Learn more and access our references here:

Artists:
 Cover: Meg Simon
 Page 1: Phoebe Fritz
 Page 2: Alexandra Lee
 Page 3: Eleanor Karr and Lena Chow
 Page 4: Lauren Giuriceo
 Page 5: Brooke Dolan
 Page 6: Galea Danita
 Page 7: Evie Happel
 Page 8: Bella Sheckleton

Figure 5: Zine pages as they appear on the CANVA document before printing. Original file can be found [here](#).

9. Newspaper Article

An op-ed, short for “opposite the editorial”, is a concise essay in which an outside contributor gives a strong, informed opinion on a public opinion on an issue in a newspaper or digital publication. Op-eds are effective in conveying public opinion and raising awareness around issues. The Middlebury Campus is a local newspaper that is sent around campus as well as local businesses around Middlebury.

When deciding the structure of the op-ed, our conversation with Tom Morgan was essential. He advised that we address systemic issues in Vermont first to get the readers attention and then place GMJ in that space. To do this, we conducted research on a variety of

social issues in Vermont that impact housing security and relate to GMJ. These issues include housing and eviction bills in Vermont, environmental health disparities, and access to healthcare. In doing so, we were able to address systemic issues that GMJ focuses on when conducting their work.

After this, we introduced GMJ and the work they do in the community, creating proximity and close relationships in the community. Additionally, with the help of the Middlebury Campus, we included as many quotes from our interviewees as possible to get at the essence of the work. These quotes represent the experiences that neighbors have in Vermont, and the experiences of board members Tom and Gordon. These quotes help bring a personal touch to the opinion piece.

When considering why writing the op-ed, I remember Professor Klyza speaking to us about social movements and what he remembers as memorable. He mentioned that physical means of media, specifically something in the newspaper would be interesting. He had never heard of GMJ and wanted to learn more in the newspaper. Alongside the zine, our group thought an op-ed would be a great way to reach a broader audience consisting of Middlebury College students as well as the broader Middlebury community.

9.1 Article Submission

Green Mountain Justice provides care to Vermont's unhoused population

Ethan Campbell

Contributing Writer

Vermont has the fourth-highest rate of unhoused people per capita, at a rate of over 55 people per 100,000 people. This is two times the national average, with the state currently being short 36,000 affordable housing units. In communities like Middlebury, people are often shielded from this reality; however, some community members are forced to contend with unstable housing situations.

In Vermont, systemic and structural barriers prevent some residents from obtaining secure housing. Average hourly wages in Vermont are lower than in other New England states, and the state's rural geography poses challenges in accessing services and resources. Together, these factors can prevent those facing income constraints from accessing healthcare or other basic service needs. Additionally, weather events such as extreme temperatures and the 2023 flooding, further upend housing security, which is often linked to other forms of economic hardship, such as food insecurity and limited access to essential health services.

Addison County-based organization Green Mountain Justice (GMJ) centers their efforts around the humanity of those living on the margins through care, connection, and collaboration. They carry out this mission through their Neighbor Care Neighbors Network, curating a network of

community outreach and support for the county and the broader Vermont area. GMJ hopes to expand this network and model of care to other counties in Vermont, furthering their reach and message.

“Our mission is to raise the voices and the narratives of our marginalized neighbors. We focus on the needs of the marginalized neighbors and we work around the values of Unitarian Universalism. So the values of interdependence, justice, equity, generosity, pluralism, and transformation”, Tom Morgan, founder of Green Mountain Justice, said in an interview with the Campus.

Currently, many housing policies which, if enacted, would pose significant challenges for those facing housing insecurity, are being considered by the Vermont legislature. For example, Bill H. 772 would remove tenants’ right to a jury trial in eviction cases, allow a landlord to evict a tenant who protested changes to a current lease, and reduce, and sometimes eliminate, the required notice period before the tenant’s termination date. Additionally, within the same bill, the eviction process would be reduced from 21 days to five days, drastically increasing evictions in the state.

Vermont is in a unique position as the seventh coldest state in the country. As climate change intensifies, warmer polar temperatures push frigid air towards the Northern states, intensifying cold snaps in Vermont. Vermont’s Cold Weather Shelter Program, which is designed to support community-based emergency shelter operations, requires shelters to open their doors only when temperatures are forecast to be at or below -10 degrees Fahrenheit. As Vermont’s winters become more intense, people facing housing insecurity will be at greater risk from these adverse weather conditions.

Extreme weather events are not limited to cold snaps. Exacerbated by climate change, summers are becoming warmer, and rivers are flooding more frequently. People experiencing housing insecurity lack access to refuge spaces from the heat or rain, facing significant health risks.

The Neighbor Care Neighbor Network is rewarding work that challenges beliefs and stigmas and creates lasting relationships amongst its volunteers.

Morgan reflected on his personal experience being involved with GMJ. This outreach process has had a lasting impact on both those who conduct it and those who receive support.

“The most meaningful part of this work is the personal relationships that you develop with people – we have been so fortunate in Green Mountain Justice to have established some amazing relationships and stay with those relationships and really journey with people,” Morgan said.

For Morgan and other members of GMJ, the relationships formed with community members are the most important work to bridge the gap between disadvantaged members of our Vermont community and those who are more privileged.

As one of the first members of the Neighbor Care Network, he recognizes the importance of showing up for others and the power of listening to other people’s stories.

It takes courage and intention to create these connections. GMJ calls upon the Middlebury community to act. A local community member and Neighbor Care neighbor advises community members to “just show up, you know, say hi, but just listen and observe and ... connect the dots.”

Gordon Gibson, one of GMJ's board members, describes his work connecting with neighbors as some of the most challenging yet rewarding he has ever done. He has learned to be patient and compassionate, standing by neighbors in some of their most pressing times of need.

“It's not a service-based response to need. It's more of a relationship-based approach to stand with individuals in their time of extreme distress and help them connect and establish meaningful relationships,” Gibson said.

College students, professors, and citizens can be present in their community and connect with local community members by getting involved with GMJ.

“Be brave enough to discuss these challenging conversations around marginalization and injustice. Justice starts in our community, and it starts with simple actions. Reach out to Green Mountain Justice if you are interested in becoming a Neighbor Care Neighbor volunteer to form meaningful connections with members of our community and create real change,” Morgan said.



GREEN MOUNTAIN JUSTICE PROVIDES CARE TO VERMONT'S UNHOUSED POPULATION

By ETHAN CAMPBELL
Contributing Writer

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The Neighbor Care Neighbor Network is rewarding work that challenges beliefs and stigmas

also attended, excited by the festivities in the Marble Works parking lot.

“We just stumbled across this place because we were at the plant shop, and the guy at the front told us that there was a little event over here. And then we saw people painting rocks

the annual... get, there's a constant rotation. So, week to week, you never know what you are going to find. The ladies there are also really easy to chat with – super nice and helpful.”

and creates lasting relationships amongst its volunteers.

Morgan reflected on his personal experience being involved with GMJ. This outreach process has had a lasting impact on both those who conduct it and those who receive support.

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Figure 6: A photograph of our article on page four of the Middlebury Campus's last spring 2026 edition (published May 7th, 2026).

10. Questions and Observations

One observation that we had after specifically working with communications for a nonprofit organization is the difficulty in identifying a target audience and then implementing specific strategies to capture more of this audience. This proved especially challenging when trying to think of ways to reach a younger audience without changing the authentic feel or main objective of GMJ's existing social media. To account for this challenge, and after consulting resources from the Center for Community Engagement, we employed different modes of media, which we thought was an effective way of reaching different audiences. Therefore, we recommend maintaining narrow focus on an audience group and embracing that a one-size-fits-all media approach does not capture the entirety of the intended audiences, in reality. We are curious whether GMJ would look into creating a volunteer or board position that is just for marketing or media purposes in the future. This could perhaps provide a way for GMJ to have a consistent online presence while developing their own unique posting style over time with this position.

In addition, we recognize that GMJ is an organization that is centered around relationship building within a community, but we are curious about the justice and advocacy side as well. Jerome's episodes of the *Voices from the Edge* podcast briefly discuss how he has visited the state house and written op-eds as testimonies to his experiences as an individual who experienced homelessness in Vermont. We wonder if the Addison County community would be interested in hearing more of the specifics about his process in advocacy, as well as the specifics of policy and advocacy by the GMJ board and other Neighbor Care Neighbors. Our interview with Dr. Gordon Gibson also shed light on the ways that GMJ helped a specific family avoid eviction. Perhaps in the future GMJ could consider providing more Vermont policy-specific information or interviews on their site to get people more engaged in the intersection between community-building and advocating for one another. We understand that there are issues with revealing personal/sensitive information for the purpose of anecdotes, thus the information provided would likely have to remain as generalized as possible.

Another curiosity we have about Green Mountain Justice is how integrated its initiatives are with the Champlain Valley Unitarian Universalist Society. While it can be valuable in some senses to steer more independently from a religious or faith-based organization (though GMJ is

based out of the CVUUS campus), coordination with the church could bolster relationships and community building in Middlebury. Also, from what we understand, the CVUUS organization is very open, accepting, and broad in faith. Since Green Mountain Justice's mission is so greatly rooted in loving and providing for neighbors and community members, there could be equally mission-driven overlap between the two organizations.

11. Recommendations for Next Steps

One of our immediate recommendations for future work on this project would be to continue interviewing GMJ neighbors, specifically those who may not typically get the chance to broadcast their voice to an audience. During our time this semester, we were only able to sit with and interview one non-board participant of the GMJ Neighbor Care Network. GMJ's existing consent framework, in which neighbors provide both verbal and written permission before participation, retain the ability to request modified use of their stories, and may retract consent at any time, is a meaningful way to center neighbor agency throughout this process. We recommend that this continues to guide any future interview or media work, and that it be strengthened in conversation with neighbors themselves as this piece of the project grows.

Another initiative we may suggest is the use of advertisements on social media to gain a wider audience. We've created the social media poster templates, highlighted important quotes and initiatives, and thought about multi-media ways to reach Middlebury campus and the community. However, one guaranteed way to reach more users online would be ads through platforms such as Instagram or Facebook, which could extend the reach of content that neighbors have already chosen to share publicly.

In addition, we recognize that there are more ways this type of communications project could highlight marginalized voices and perspectives with neighbor agency at the center. For example, during our interview with the Neighbor Care neighbor, they had mentioned that during their cross-country travels, they had taken photographs and written poems about the experience. This is something that they were one day hoping to publish. We know that other individuals in the Neighbor Care Network have their own creative outlets, and we think that a project like this could be an excellent avenue to highlight their work in all its mediums. Perhaps this would look like a book with artwork, writing, and poetry, or a website, or an in-person gallery. This is an idea that could be fleshed out more fully by talking to more GMJ neighbors to see what passions they'd be willing to share and if this sounds like an interesting idea to them. This project should be neighbor-led, with students and volunteers serving a supporting role.

In terms of engaging with the Middlebury College students, Green Mountain Justice could spearhead a club formation, though this recommendation requires thought about power dynamics and accountability. The Charter House Coalition club at Middlebury offers a useful model, as does the Community Friends organization, where students are paired with younger community members for mentorship and connection. A Green Mountain Justice club could be an extension of the Neighbor Care Network, involving gatherings with paired-up individuals and bigger group meetings, similar to Neighbors' Tables. This would prioritize proximity-based relationships by opening up the space for interested students to enter the GMJ ecosystem. However, in order to avoid extractive dynamics in which students gain meaningful experiences and neighbors bear the emotional labor of that relationship, this model would need to be built with neighbor input and leadership from the beginning. The club would be accountable to GMJ neighbors and not just run adjacent to them, with structures that ensure the students are entering the GMJ Neighbor ecosystem on the community's terms.

12. Conclusions

This report outlines a comprehensive strategy to support Green Mountain Justice's efforts to give platforms to voices of marginalized community members and to increase visibility to the Middlebury College student body. Through methods of background research on Vermont's homelessness support systems, environmental and social determinants of health, strategies for social justice storytelling, and surveying pathways of analog media dissemination, we developed four deliverables to help further Green Mountain Justice's mission. Our zine, short videos, social media guide, and The Campus op-ed highlight challenges and injustices Middlebury community members in the GMJ ecosystem face and engage with audiences of multiple demographics. Though the maintenance of these social and analog media presences will require upkeep beyond the duration of the semester, we have compiled a database and set a precedent for some novel communications methods that the organization can refer to in the future.

We hope that our work helps GMJ increase awareness of the organization on the college campus and involve younger audiences in Addison County. The database compiled and recommendations provided show that there are many novel ways to creatively tell people's authentic and moving stories to increase compassion and relationship formation. We hope that our ideas offer a platform from which GMJ can continue to innovate and grow as an organization in the meaningful work they do. Going forward, GMJ serves as a framework for proximity- and

relationship-based advocacy for neighbors around the state and beyond. Bolstering GMJ support and awareness in Addison County, increasing neighbor participation, is an essential step to scaling their operations so that others replicate the Neighbor Care Network model in other communities.

13. Acknowledgements

The completion of this project would not have been possible without our Community Partners, Tom Morgan, the Founder of Green Mountain Justice, and Corey Hendrickson, Storyteller for Green Mountain Justice. We would like to thank them for their continued guidance and support throughout the project. We also want to extend our thanks to those who helped guide our process: Professor Amy Redman, Allison Carruth, the students of the Charter House Coalition Student Organization all had diverse backgrounds on the topic of proximity-based community work, and it was beneficial for us to gather advice from both students and professionals. We are grateful to our professor, Kate Crawford, who provided ample support and feedback throughout our process to keep us on the right track to meet our objectives. Finally, we wanted to thank the neighbor Setty Provenger with whom we had a wonderful conversation that opened our eyes to the diverse lenses of Addison County and the vibrant life experiences that our neighbors have had, and continue to have.

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Middlebury
College

Bending the Arc Towards Justice: A Course in Practicing Proximity

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May 18, 2026

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Project Background and Introduction

Green Mountain Justice (GMJ) is a Vermont-based community justice ministry that is at the forefront of social equity, environmental justice, and community resilience. Founded in 2024 by Tom Morgan, the organization seeks to bring visibility to the experiences and struggles of **marginalized neighbors** across Vermont. GMJ works where marginalizations are overlapping: “poverty intersecting with mental health challenges, being BIPOC compounding housing discrimination, disability meeting rural isolation”¹. In a society where structural inequities and historical marginalization persist, GMJ works within gaps that often remain unaddressed by traditional systems of support. Unequal access to resources, opportunities, and decision-making power is not the result of inherent differences between groups, but of systems that advantage some while placing others in marginalized positions, leaving them underrepresented and unsupported.

*A “**marginalized neighbor**” is not simply someone experiencing hardship, but someone who has been structurally and socially pushed to the edges of society. GMJ describes marginalization as a process that reflects being “de-centered,” excluded from the spaces where power, resources, and belonging are concentrated.*

Through restorative justice circles, advocacy, environmental justice initiatives, and programs like Vermont’s cold weather shelters, GMJ works to meet immediate needs while

*In this context, **proximity** is defined as the degrees of closeness (social, relational, and experiential) between individuals and unhoused or precariously housed members of the community.*

simultaneously building stronger relationships across communities. Central to the organization’s philosophy is the principle of **proximity** that fosters meaningful social, relational, and experiential closeness between individuals who might otherwise remain separated by housing status, race, class, disability, or other structural barriers.² GMJ strives to cultivate a society that moves beyond “us” and “them” and instead cultivates

relationships grounded in dignity, curiosity, and mutual care. GMJ also facilitates the Neighbor Care Neighbors (NCN) program, a network of community members with a goal of creating stronger relationships across borders, and hosts Neighbors Tables every first Sunday of the month: open conversations that create space for connection, dialogue, and mutual support. By fostering relationships, amplifying marginalized voices, and addressing intersecting inequities, GMJ envisions a Vermont where justice, opportunity, and care are shared across all communities.

Addressing inequity, poverty, and housing insecurity in Vermont has never been more urgent. The Point-in-Time (PIT) count, an annual nationwide assessment of individuals experiencing homelessness, provides a snapshot of this growing crisis. According to the 2024

¹ "Green Mountain Justice." *Green Mountain Justice*.

² Stevenson, Bryan. “Bryan Stevenson Delivers Powerful Message about ‘Proximity’ at Institute for Social Concerns Lecture in Downtown South Bend.” The Klau Institute for Civil & Human Rights, University of Notre Dame, 15 Oct. 2024, The Klau Institute for Civil & Human Rights.



Vermont report, a collaboration between the Housing and Homelessness Alliance of Vermont (HHAV), the Chittenden County Homeless Alliance, and the Vermont Balance of State Continuum of Care, an average of 3,458 Vermonters were unhoused on any given night³. The HHAV documented that between 2020 and 2024, there was a 300% increase in homelessness across the state. Within this crisis, disparities are as prevalent as ever. Individuals and communities facing systemic barriers, including racial and ethnic minorities, people with disabilities, those experiencing mental health challenges, and low-income rural populations, often encounter compounded obstacles to safe and affordable housing, a greater risk of eviction, and limited access to social services. For example, Black Vermonters are 5.6 times more likely to be unhoused than white Vermonters, while Indigenous and other historically marginalized groups similarly experience disproportionately high rates of housing instability, poverty, and systemic neglect.⁴ These disparities reflect deep-rooted structural inequities, underscoring the urgent need for targeted programs, community support, and policy interventions that address both immediate needs and the underlying causes of inequality.

Responses to homelessness and poverty are often organized around addressing immediate and highly specific needs: emergency shelters provide temporary housing, food pantries address hunger, healthcare systems treat injuries and illness, and state assistance programs offer forms of financial support. These services provide critical support and are often life-saving. However, many scholars and community organizations have increasingly recognized that homelessness and marginalization are rarely the result of a single unmet need and therefore cannot be solved through isolated interventions alone.⁵ Housing insecurity is frequently intertwined with mental health challenges, disability, addiction, transportation barriers, childcare access, food insecurity, unemployment, and environmental vulnerability, creating layered and overlapping forms of instability that are difficult to navigate individually.

For many individuals experiencing housing insecurity, one of the greatest challenges is not simply accessing support, but navigating the fragmented systems designed to provide it. Affordable housing applications, SNAP benefits, Medicaid enrollment, disability services, childcare assistance, and emergency shelters often operate through separate institutions with different eligibility requirements, timelines, paperwork systems, and expectations. Many neighbors from the Green Mountain Justice community, have shared their stories on the organization's Voices from the Edge podcast, describing the process as exhausting, confusing, and emotionally draining.⁶ Rather than experiencing support systems as coordinated networks of care, individuals are often required to repeatedly retell traumatic experiences while moving between disconnected institutions that address only one aspect of their situation at a time.

³ Chittenden County Homeless Alliance and Housing & Homelessness Alliance of Vermont. *2024 Vermont's Annual Point-in-Time Count of Those Experiencing Homelessness*. June 2024.

⁴ "2025 State Advocacy." *Housing & Homelessness Alliance of Vermont*, 24 Oct. 2023.

⁵ Sharland, Scott. *Reframing Homelessness in Vermont: A Systemic Approach to Homelessness Policy Advocacy in Windham County Vermont*. SIT Digital Collections, 2017.

⁶ *Green Mountain Justice: Voices from the Edge*. RedCircle,

Within this context, Green Mountain Justice’s emphasis on proximity-based and relational community building represents a relatively uncommon approach. While many organizations focus primarily on short-term volunteering or transactional forms of aid, GMJ emphasizes sustained relationships between community members across lines of housing status, race, class, and social privilege. The organization’s work is grounded in the belief that long-term community resilience requires more than emergency intervention alone; it also requires trust, mutual recognition, shared accountability, and the rebuilding of social relationships that systems of inequality often fragment or erase. Although **trauma-informed** and relationship centered approaches to justice work are gaining increasing recognition, they remain far less common than models centered primarily on service delivery.⁷

Trauma-informed approaches, such as the SAMHSA framework's principles of safety, trustworthiness, peer support, and empowerment, recognize how experiences of trauma shape behavior, trust, communication, and emotional responses. These practices emphasize dignity and empowerment, and work to avoid re-traumatization, particularly in community and social service settings where marginalized neighbors may have experienced repeated systemic harm.

At the same time, research in environmental justice increasingly shows that climate change intensifies existing social inequalities rather than affecting all communities equally. Across the United States, low-income communities, unhoused individuals, communities of color, older adults, and people with disabilities often face disproportionate exposure to flooding, extreme temperatures, poor air quality, disaster-related displacement, and indirect environmental health risks such as mold, water contamination, and deteriorating housing conditions, while possessing fewer resources for preparation and recovery.⁸⁹ These dynamics are especially significant in rural states such as Vermont, where housing shortages, aging infrastructure, and geographic isolation can heighten climate vulnerability. Understanding climate change through a justice-centered lens therefore requires examining not only environmental hazards themselves, but also the systems that determine who bears the greatest burden of those hazards.

To create stronger relationships between the privileged and the marginalized communities of Vermont, Tom Morgan drafted a program, which is still in the conceptualization phase, named “Bending the Arc Toward Justice: Proximity, Equity, and Transformation”. The mission of the program is as follows:

⁷ Center for Substance Abuse Treatment. "Trauma-Informed Care: A Sociocultural Perspective." *Trauma-Informed Care in Behavioral Health Services*, Treatment Improvement Protocol (TIP) Series, no. 57, Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, 2014.

⁸ U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, "EPA Report Shows Disproportionate Impacts of Climate Change."

⁹ Vermont Climate Council. *Vermont Climate Action Plan 2025: Health Chapter (Draft)*. Vermont Agency of Natural Resources, 2025.

“To prepare neighbors of privilege to authentically connect with, care for, and collaborate alongside marginalized community members through trauma-informed, justice-centered practices rooted in proximity, dignity, and interdependence.”¹⁰

The program is envisioned as a three-session training, totaling 8.5 to 10.5 hours, designed to equip neighbors of **privilege** with the knowledge, skills, and relational tools to engage meaningfully alongside marginalized neighbors.

As students partnering with GMJ, as well as Dr. Margaret Miles, an Assistant Professor of Social Work at Vermont State University Castleton, and her Social Work Program class, our goal was to help translate this vision into a program that could actually be implemented. Tom brought a deep knowledge of the community, the mission, and the urgent need this training addresses. But the specific structure of how each session would unfold, what activities participants

Privilege is the often unrecognized benefit of existing within systems that provide security and opportunity to some while marginalizing others. Importantly, privilege is not always self-evident. What one person identifies as a structural advantage, another may not recognize as such, or may experience alongside their own forms of hardship. This is why proximity and honest self-reflection matter: understanding privilege requires grappling with perspectives beyond our own, and sitting with the discomfort that definitions of advantage and disadvantage are not universally shared.

would engage in, and how content would be taught, remained to be developed. A key question that arose at the start of this project was, who exactly, will participate in this program? Understanding who the “neighbors of privilege” are that GMJ hopes to reach, what assumptions, prior knowledge or prejudice they might bring in, and what barriers might prevent participation are essential to building a program that actually works. This gap is what motivated the creation for the “Survey on Proximity and Belonging.” While the survey has yet to be implemented, its purpose is to begin answering these critical questions. A program cannot be built for participants who remain unknown. This being said, to start the development of a program, we researched into pre-existing methods for privilege-to-marginalized training models, conversations with individuals facilitating similar programs, and learning directly from community members' experiences, we developed teaching approaches to enhance engagement and deepen the training's impact.

As environmental studies students, we also recognized that the challenges facing Vermont's marginalized communities cannot be fully understood without addressing the role of climate change. Vermont's changing climate, marked by record floods, such as the flood in the summer of 2023, increasingly intense cold snaps, dangerous heat waves, and degraded air quality from fires in Canada, compounds the vulnerability of these community members. For example, 60% of all the manufactured home communities in the state are in floodplains, meaning that many of Vermont's most precariously housed residents are also among the most physically exposed to climate disaster.¹¹ The recognition of these inequities drove us to propose and develop

¹⁰ "Green Mountain Justice." *Green Mountain Justice*.

¹¹Munson, Kristen. "After the Floods." *UVM News*, University of Vermont, 30 Nov. 2024.

an additional session within the “Bending the Arc” program, which we have named “Unequal Storms: Who Bears the Burden of Climate Change in Vermont.” This session connects the environmental and the systemic, helping participants understand climate change not just as an ecological issue, but as a justice issue.

The pages that follow outline the research that guided our approach, the teaching approach and activities we developed to support the implementation of ‘Bending the Arc’, our new proposed session on environmental harms, and the progress tracking system for course participants, all of which reflect our commitment to supporting GMJ's vision of a more just and proximate Vermont.

Project Methods

Organization Familiarization

The first step of this project was gaining a deeper understanding of the Green Mountain Justice organization and the community it serves. Along with meaningful conversation with Tom Morgan, our group also participated in different events run by Green Mountain Justice, one of which was Neighbors Tables. Neighbors Tables are a monthly dinner gathering where neighbors, unhoused or precariously housed individuals, and other members of the Green Mountain Justice community come together and share food and stories. Our goal in attending these sessions is building genuine relationships and developing a grounded understanding of the organization and the people at its center. These gatherings gave us direct exposure to the kinds of relationships and community dynamics that the Bending the Arc program aims to cultivate. We also had the opportunity to join a Zoom session of Neighbor Care Neighbors, a safe space where neighbors gather to speak openly. While we were not permitted to attend in person, listening in offered real insights into the day-to-day concerns and priorities of community members. Beyond direct engagement, we learned more about the organization from the Green Mountain Justice website and their podcast series, *Voices from the Edge*, which features interviews with neighbors sharing their experiences navigating a system that has largely failed them.¹²

Survey Development and Iteration

We developed the Survey on Proximity and Belonging to better understand community interest, perspectives, and needs surrounding proximity-based work so that the course could reflect participants’ actual questions, experiences, and concerns rather than assumptions about what communities need. As we worked on the project, we became increasingly aware that we were not experts in this work ourselves. While Tom Morgan brought extensive experience and knowledge to the project, we recognized the importance of gathering additional perspectives and lived experiences that could help Green Mountain Justice better understand how potential

¹² *Green Mountain Justice: Voices from the Edge*. RedCircle

participants think about proximity, belonging, relational care, and community engagement across differences.

The survey is intended to generate insight into how participants interpret and emotionally engage with concepts central to the Bending the Arc Toward Justice program. It may also help GMJ identify areas where potential participants feel challenged, disconnected, uncertain, or resistant, allowing facilitators to adapt future iterations of the course. More broadly, the survey is designed to support GMJ's long-term goal of fostering relational and community-centered approaches to justice work.

The development of the Survey on Proximity and Belonging has been an iterative and collaborative process that evolved significantly through multiple stages of feedback and revision. In our initial draft, we were especially focused on generating questions that would return substantive insights, not just statistics or surface-level data, but deeper information about thought patterns, perceptions, and lived experiences. We aimed to better understand how people relate to and make meaning of connections across differences.

Our first round of feedback came from Tom Morgan, Margaret Miles, Kate, and Margaret's class at Vermont State University, all of whom prompted substantial revisions. Later in the process, Tom also connected us with several neighbors whose feedback on the survey proved especially valuable. Early critiques highlighted issues of language, including unintentionally deficit-based phrasing, as well as concerns surrounding tone and framing. Some questions felt overly clinical or extractive, while others unintentionally positioned respondents in relation to unhoused community members in ways that risked reinforcing distance or "othering." In response, we worked to shift the survey toward a more relational approach aligned with Green Mountain Justice's emphasis on dignity, mutuality, and curiosity rather than observation or evaluation.

This process required us to think more critically about how even small wording choices can shape responses and reinforce (or challenge) underlying assumptions. For example, we revised questions to avoid "othering" language, clarified ambiguous terms, and reframed prompts to invite reflection rather than judgment. We also worked to make the survey more accessible by simplifying language and ensuring that questions could be clearly understood by a broad audience.

Feedback from neighbors also pushed us to think more deeply about the broader structural realities surrounding housing and community care in Vermont. One neighbor emphasized that housing inequity is not limited to a single economic group and described recurring challenges that continue to place strain on the broader community. These conversations encouraged us to think more carefully about how aware participants are of these systems and how prepared they feel to engage with them relationally. As a result, the survey evolved to capture not only participants' level of interest, but also their understanding of proximity, their lived experiences, and what forms of support or learning they would need from a course like this.

The current version of the survey reflects these revisions, but it is still a work in progress. We recognize that designing a survey on a topic as complex and sensitive as proximity and



belonging requires ongoing input from those with lived experience. We anticipate continuing the cycle of feedback, revision, and refinement before arriving at a final version that all partners feel comfortable distributing.

Ultimately, while the process has been more complex than we initially anticipated, we believe the survey will generate valuable insights into how people understand and experience connections across differences. These insights will help inform both the design of the course and broader efforts to foster more relational, community-centered approaches to justice work.

Teaching Strategy Recommendations for Bending the Arc

Once we had a solid grounding in Green Mountain Justice's mission, we turned our attention to the Bending the Arc Towards Justice program. While the program's existing outline is thoughtful and comprehensive, we felt that a new perspective could help bring useful additions, particularly on how the program's material is taught and delivered. Our approach to developing teaching recommendations drew on three main sources: our own experiences as fourth-year undergraduates, academic literature on pedagogy and social justice education, and direct conversations with educators and other community members.

Our group sought out the opinions of educators and community members with backgrounds in Middlebury community engagement, social work, and teaching practices which could be useful to Bending the Arc. We spoke with Marc Lapin, an environmental studies professor at Middlebury, Jason Duquette-Hoffman from Middlebury's Center for Community Engagement, and Amy Morsman from Middlebury's Center for Teaching and Learning. We also had the chance to speak with Margaret Miles from Vermont State University, Jerome Hazelwood, a neighbor and Middlebury community member, and Rachel Siegel, Founder and Director of Towards Liberation LLC. Towards Liberation is a Vermont-based DEI organization that offers workshops and coaching on anti-racism education and equity work.¹³ Each of these conversations has brought new and different perspectives on our teaching strategies and the most effective ways to facilitate this program.

Our group also utilized various pieces of literature to strengthen our knowledge on community engaged teaching. We have reviewed a range of sources on adult education, diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI), facilitation, and community-based learning. This includes work on trauma-informed teaching, experimental learning, and how to structure conversations around identity and privilege. This range was then narrowed down into a select number of sources we deemed useful for the program. A useful text we have encountered has been Diane J. Goodman's *Promoting Diversity and Social Justice*, which focuses on how to reach and educate people from privileged backgrounds who are new to thinking about systemic inequality. Goodman's framework strongly informed how we thought about sequencing the Bending the Arc Towards Justice content.

¹³ Toward Liberation LLC, "DEI Workshops, Cohorts, Coaching in Vermont."

Our teaching recommendations are organized session by session. Each of the three existing sessions will receive guidance on approach, teaching style, and learning objectives. In the first session, the strategies lean towards a narrative-first approach, leading with personal storytelling and identity reflection before introducing data or historical analysis. Other strategies will include small group work, sharing true stories, discussions, and field-based learning. The emphasis is on keeping sessions interactive rather than lecture driven. Overall, we found Session 3, “Walking the Talk,” which emphasizes hands-on learning, to be more comprehensive in its teaching structure. Instead of reinventing the session’s teaching methods, we added more detail and clarity on top of what Tom had in mind. We understand that the course’s content can be potentially uncomfortable, so we want to make sure that the course structure is approachable while still being effective.

Bending the Arc Learning Map

The idea for a non-linear rubric emerged during a meeting with Jason Duquette-Hoffman, who raised an important question: how can participant growth in a course like this be meaningfully understood or “tracked” without reducing it to a traditional, linear evaluation system? This question prompted us to rethink what assessment could look like in a course centered on proximity, relationship-building, and personal transformation. Rather than developing a standard rubric with fixed criteria and outcomes, we designed a modular, non-linear system made up of “skill hexagons,” each representing a different area of learning and practice.

The development process was iterative and shaped through multiple conversations with Green Mountain Justice collaborators and Middlebury faculty and staff. Feedback from Amy Morsman at Middlebury’s Center for Teaching, Learning, and Research (CTLR) helped us think through the relational and reflective dimensions of the framework, particularly the role of peer discussion and facilitator check-ins in supporting participant growth. These conversations also helped us think through the tension between structure and openness within justice-oriented education. We wanted the framework to provide enough guidance to help participants reflect meaningfully on their growth while avoiding a rigid assessment structure that could unintentionally flatten complex interpersonal learning into simplified outcomes or rankings. Feedback from CTLR conversations encouraged us to think about reflection as a relational and iterative process rather than an individual measure of achievement.

We also consulted with Sarah Lohnes Watulak and Tom Woodward from Middlebury’s Office of Digital Learning and Inquiry (DLINQ) while exploring how to actualize the visual and organizational aspects of the Learning Map. These conversations focused on balancing accessibility, usability, and technological complexity for a small nonprofit organization. Rather than creating a highly technical digital platform, we ultimately decided to prioritize simplicity and accessibility by designing printable graphic-based materials that could function as PDFs, physical handouts, or editable Canva resources. This approach aligned with our broader goal of



creating a tool that would require minimal outside technical knowledge for both facilitators and participants.

Throughout the development process, we consistently returned to several core principles: growth in justice-oriented work is non-linear, reflection should be ongoing rather than evaluative, and the framework should support humility, dialogue, and continued engagement rather than mastery or competition.

Development of a New Climate Justice Session

In addition to the teaching strategy work and survey, our group has developed an entirely new session for the Bending the Arc curriculum. As Environmental Studies majors at Middlebury College, we recognize that the challenges facing Vermont's houseless or precariously housed population cannot be fully understood without addressing climate change. Climate impacts impact all, but especially those who cannot easily adapt or recover, like people experiencing houseless or precariously housed situations. We hope, as mentioned in the introduction, that this session's content can properly address this topic. Beyond our coursework, the Vermont Department of Health's climate and health findings have been an important resource when making this session. Their data on heat-related illness, air quality, flooding, and other climate-driven health impacts have offered strong Vermont-specific evidence for the class. As with the three preceding sections in the Bending the Arc Toward Justice program, "Understanding Our Context," "The Practice of Proximity," and "Walking the Talk," this new session will also have core teaching methods attached separately. This will walk facilitators through each activity, the reasoning behind it, and how to lead it well.

Findings/Recommendations 1: Environmental Disparities in Vermont Session in Bending the Arc Toward Justice

Session 4: Disproportionate Climate Impacts

"Unequal Storms: Who Bears the Burden of Climate Change in Vermont"

Duration: 1 Hour - 2 Hours

Learning Objectives:

Participants will be able to:



1. Understand the Basic Foundations of Climate Change^{14 15}

- Define climate change as long-term shifts in global temperature and weather patterns, largely driven by human activities (burning fossil fuels).
- Differentiate between climate and weather:
 - Weather = Short-term conditions
 - Climate = Long-term patterns
- Explain Greenhouse Effect: Gases like carbon dioxide trap heat in the atmosphere and warm the planet.
- Recognize that climate change is not just environmental, but it is deeply connected to human socioecological systems and inequality
- Understand how access to resources, stability, and protection shapes the severity of climate impacts.
- Identify the importance of analyzing climate through both scientific and systemic lenses.

2. Examine Vermont-Specific Climate Impacts^{16 17 18 19 20 21}

- Identify key climate impacts in Vermont:
 - Reduced Air Quality (Wildfire smoke)
 - More intense and unpredictable cold snaps
 - Hotter summers and heat waves
 - Flooding (major and increasing issue in Vermont)
 - Drought and agricultural stress
 - Food and waterborne illnesses
 - Mental health impacts (climate anxiety, disaster trauma)
 - Heightened mosquito and tick populations (Lyme disease).
 - Cyanobacteria (blue-green algae blooms)
- Recognize the growing frequency of extreme precipitation events and the central role of flooding in Vermont.
 - Vermont flooding disproportionately damages:
 - Housing
 - Other infrastructure (roads/transportation)
 - Local businesses

¹⁴ United Nations, "What Is Climate Change?"

¹⁵ U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, "Climate Change."

¹⁶ Vermont Climate Council, "Climate Justice & Equity."

¹⁷ U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, "EPA Analysis Shows 2022 Decrease of Toxic Chemical Releases in Vermont."

¹⁸ Duggan, "Lake Champlain in Crisis."

¹⁹ Finno, "As Tick Populations Rise in Vermont."

²⁰ Vermont Climate Council, *2025 Vermont Climate Action Plan*.

²¹ Vermont General Assembly, *Act 153*.

- Understand how climate impacts create cascading effects (Flooding housing loss → financial stress → mental health strain/impacts)
- Examine Vermont's Important Climate Policy/Plans:
 - [2025 Vermont Climate Action Plan](#)
 - [Act 153](#)

3. Analyze the Disproportionate Impacts on Vermont's Low-Income Communities^{22 23}

24 25

- Identify populations in Vermont most vulnerable to climate impacts, including:
 - Unhoused or precariously housed individuals
 - Immigrants (especially undocumented)
 - Outdoor workers (farmworkers, road crews)
 - Unhoused individuals
 - Older adults and people living alone
 - People with chronic illness or disabilities
 - People living in floodplains or unstable housing
- Explain how limited capacity to prepare, respond, and recover drives disproportionate impact.
- Apply prior learning on *systems that perpetuate rather than solve problems* to climate contexts.
- Recognize climate change as a multiplier of existing inequalities.

4. Connect Climate Change to Structural Inequality^{26 27 28 29}

- Examine how policy often fails to center the needs of the most vulnerable populations.
- Identify structural shortcomings in Vermont policy:
 - Fails to center the needs of the most vulnerable
 - Is designed around "average" populations, not high-risk ones
 - Can unintentionally reinforce inequality
- Analyze how policy gaps can lead to:
 - *** Policy gaps can include zoning regulations, infrastructure upkeep, and emergency response reactions ***
 - Unequal disaster response
 - Unequal recovery timelines

²² Vermont Department of Health, "Climate and Health."

²³ Skala, "How Climate Change and Environmental Policies Affect Impoverished Communities."

²⁴ Vermont Climate Council, "Climate Justice & Equity."

²⁵ U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, "EPA Report Shows Disproportionate Impacts of Climate Change."

²⁶ Skala, "How Climate Change and Environmental Policies Affect Impoverished Communities."

²⁷ Vermont Climate Council, *2025 Vermont Climate Action Plan*.

²⁸ Vermont Climate Council, "Climate Justice & Equity."

²⁹ U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, "EPA Report Shows Disproportionate Impacts of Climate Change."

- Long-term displacement or poverty traps
- Evaluate structural factors that shape climate vulnerability, including:
 - Housing systems
 - Affordable housing often located in flood prone areas
 - Economic inequality
 - No savings = no recovery buffer
 - Labor systems
 - Outdoor and essential workers face highest exposure
 - Healthcare access
 - Limits the ability to treat climate-related illnesses

Key Content:

- Foundations of climate change
- Vermont's changing climate
- Types of climate impacts
- Social vulnerability within Vermont
- Disproportionate exposure and risk
- Capacity to prepare, respond, and recover
- Structural inequality and climate risk

Teaching Methods: ³⁰

- Place-based learning/Field trips
- Case study analyses
- Group discussions
- Systems mapping exercise
- Personal reflections on proximity
- Utilize ecoAmerica's 15 steps on effective climate communication

Session Outcomes:

Participants will:

- Understand climate change as both an environmental and justice issue
- Identify how climate impacts are distributed unequally in Vermont
- Recognize the connection between structural inequality and climate risk
- Develop awareness of personal proximity to climate impacts

³⁰ ecoAmerica, *15 Steps to Create Effective Climate Communications*.

Findings/Recommendation 2: Teaching Methods for “Bending the Arc Toward Justice”

Below, we present the deliverables for the developed teaching methods for the "Bending the Arc Toward Justice" training program. Developing these methods required more than simply matching content to activities; it required thinking carefully about how people learn, how they change, and what it takes to move someone from intellectual understanding to genuine empathy and action. Through our research into pre-existing privilege-to-marginalized training models, our own experience in academia, as well as conversations with Amy Morsman of the Middlebury Center for Teaching and Learning, Jason Duquette-Hoffman from the Center for Community Engagement, and Rachel Siegel from Toward Liberation, we gained insight into what actually gets people engaged, what makes the material land, what moves people to genuinely care, and what creates the conditions for lasting change rather than a fleeting moment of awareness. Drawing on these findings, we developed the specific activities, discussion structures, and overall flow for each session of the training.

Our conversations with educators and community practitioners consistently pointed to one core insight: effective social training in this space is much less about content delivery and more about creating the space where people are willing to be changed. Amy Morsman emphasized that the participants will not have unlimited patience, which is why we suggest shortening the sessions and prioritizing depth in fewer moments over broad coverage across many. Additionally, everyone who we spoke with suggested that a large part of the program be focused around self reflection. People like to talk and think about themselves, and if you can harness that motivation and turn it around into the community, relationships will inevitably be formed. All of the involved partners, including Tom, Margaret, Amy, Rachel, and Jason, also pushed us to envision the physicality of the training. For example, we received a recommendation for Amy to open the first session as a pot-luck, in order to reduce the formality of the space and allow participants to connect with each other over a meal, enacting the proximity principle before it is ever named. Immersive elements such as videos, short audio clips, and physical readings are also included in these sessions to create the collaborative and interesting environment that passive instruction cannot. Finally, we built in self-guided rubrics and writing activities in the sessions which allow the participants to track their progress and be accountable for their own development. Taken together, these design choices reflect a belief that transformation is not something a training does to participants, but something participants do together when the right conditions are in place. The teaching methods we present below are not a curriculum in the traditional sense, they are an invitation to show up differently, and a structure designed to make that showing up possible.



CORE TEACHING METHODS FOR: “Bending the Arc Towards Justice”

Note: All parts of the teaching methods that are pulled from the original document created by Tom Morgan are in italics.

Session 1: Understanding Our Context

"The Landscape of Marginalization: How We Got Here and Where We Stand"

Duration: 2 - 2.5 hours

Core teaching approach:

Start where people are. Build empathy through storytelling before moving to statistics. This session draws on Cheryl A. Hyde’s framework for critical self-reflection on power and privilege. Hyde argues that before community practitioners can effectively engage across differences, they must first examine their own cultural identity. These include values, attitudes, beliefs, practices, and rituals that shape who they are and how they move through the world.³¹ Her framework is well suited to Bending the Arc because it was designed specifically for practitioners entering proximity-based community work. Historical context grounds participants in *how we got here*; self-reflection activities help them locate *where they stand* within those systems and where they might contribute to changing them.

Suggested modification: We suggest shortening this session to two hours in order to preserve participant engagement. We also suggest making this first session a pot-luck, where participants bring in an item of food to share. In accordance with Amy Morseman from Middlebury College’s CTLR, bringing people together over food promotes discussion and a less formal feel, which will only enhance the impact of the session.

1. Program Intro - 10 minutes

- Welcome participants and introduce the program’s mission: *“To prepare neighbors of privilege to authentically connect with, care for, and collaborate alongside marginalized community members through trauma-informed, justice-centered practices rooted in proximity, dignity, and interdependence.”*

³¹ Hyde, Cheryl A. "Challenging Ourselves: Critical Self-Reflection on Power and Privilege." *Community Organizing and Community Building for Health and Social Equity*, edited by Meredith Minkler, 4th ed., Rutgers University Press, 2021, pp. 431–440.

- Briefly orient the participants to the program’s structure and what to expect. Make sure to highlight that this is not a lecture series, but it is relational, experiential, and it asks participants to show up personally, not just intellectually.
- Introduce the guiding values of the program (interdependence, justice, equity, transformation, generosity, pluralism).
 - **Interdependence** — *Honoring the web of all existence*
 - **Justice** — *Dismantling systems of oppression*
 - **Equity** — *Centering the needs of the marginalized*
 - **Transformation** — *Personal and systemic change through proximity*
 - **Generosity** — *Sharing presence and resources*
 - **Pluralism** — *Celebrating diversity*
- Introduce the idea of *proximity* in relation to social work.
 - Proximity - the degree of closeness, social, relational, and experiential, between participants and unhoused or precariously housed neighbors.

2. Activity 1: Cultural Identity Check-In - 20 minutes

- **Facilitator note:** Hyde (2004) argues that locating ourselves across identity dimensions is the necessary first step toward understanding systemic dynamics. This activity sets the tone for the session by grounding participants in their own identity before asking them to analyze systems beyond themselves.
- Setup: Before the session begins, place a worksheet at each seat labeled “My Cultural Landscape.” Participants will complete this privately, and it is never shared. (Figure 1 in the appendix provides an example worksheet that can be modified to better fit this session. This figure is from Cheryl A. Hyde’s framework)
 - The worksheet prompts: List where you fall across these dimensions. There are no right answers.
 - **Race/ethnicity** - how you identify racially or ethnically
 - **Gender identity** - including how you experience and express your gender
 - **Class background** - both growing up and where you situate yourself now, recognizing these may differ significantly
 - **Sexual orientation** - how you understand your patterns of attraction and identity
 - **Religion or spiritual tradition** - including the presence or absence of religious/spiritual affiliation
 - **Physical or mental ability** - including visible and invisible disabilities or chronic conditions
 - **Educational background** - the level and type of education you have accessed

- These dimensions are drawn directly from Hyde's Cultural Identity Inventory, adapted here to use more accessible, conversational language appropriate for a community training setting rather than an academic one.
- After an intro for the program, participants briefly map their own identity on their worksheet. This is not shared, just meant to help reflect.
- Then, reflect on these questions
 - Which of these dimensions do you think about most often in your daily life? Which do you rarely think about?
 - Which dimensions have opened doors for you? Which have created barriers?

3. Jerome's Story - 15 minutes

- **Facilitator note:** Stories are the entry point that statistics can never be. Jerome is a neighbor whose story appears in GMJ's *Voices from the Edge* podcast series. His experience as a BIPOC man navigating homelessness in Vermont puts a human face on the statistical realities that the participants will encounter in the next activity. By beginning with Jerome, we are asking participants to feel the human weight of what those statistics represent. Goodman argues that people from privileged backgrounds often default to only intellectualizing systemic problems in order to stay distant from them.³² Presenting Jerome's story closes that distance. Before participants can meaningfully engage with data about houselessness, racial disparity, or systemic inequality, they need to feel the human weight of what those numbers represent. Jerome's story does that work.
- Begin with Jerome's story as a lived narrative. Read his story out loud or play sections of the podcast. This is more powerful than reading the story on paper.³³
- After the story, give participants 3 minutes to do some personal reflection based on the following questions:
 - What do you notice? What do you feel? What do you wonder?
 - Have participants jot down notes.
- Then open it up to a full group discussion, allowing the conversation to unfold without a rigid agenda.

4. Historical Context - 20 minutes

- **Facilitator Talking Points for Time Periods**
 1. *Colonial Period* - The Abenaki people lived on this land for over 12,000 years before European contact. As European settlements expanded, the Abenaki were pushed off their ancestral lands, many fled to Quebec, while

³² Goodman, Diane J.. *Promoting Diversity and Social Justice : Educating People from Privileged Groups, Second Edition*, Taylor & Francis Group, 2011. *ProQuest Ebook Central*.

³³ Goodman, Diane J.. *Promoting Diversity and Social Justice : Educating People from Privileged Groups, Second Edition*, Taylor & Francis Group, 2011. *ProQuest Ebook Central*.



others assimilated into surrounding communities, often hiding their heritage to avoid discrimination. The Abenaki remained marginalized for much of Vermont's history, only becoming recognized by law in 2006.³⁴

2. *Industrial Period* - As Vermont industrialized, economic power began to concentrate at the top and race shaped who could access it. Black Vermonters had relatively easier access to loans and mortgages at the turn of the century, but by mid-century white lenders had stopped loaning money to Black people as part of a larger nationwide backlash.³⁵
 3. *20th century* - Although Vermont was not formally redlined, there are still examples of racial segregation in the form of exclusionary housing covenants, written into property titles to prevent them from being sold to or occupied by members of a given race. The negative impact of this denial of wealth-building is multigenerational, a Black family denied homeownership after World War II affects three or more generations of that family's descendants.^{36 37}
- Historical timeline analysis
 - Small groups each receive an era of Vermont history (*colonial, industrial, 20th century*).
 - Leave the analysis of the present for the following section.
 - Participants trace specific threads (housing, race, land, labor, etc.) and share what each of these may have looked like during that time.
 - Participants may not know all of the information and that is ok. This activity is meant to challenge them and help them think through how these threads have been created.
 - The facilitator then weaves these eras together and shows how one led to the next to lay out the historical context of marginalization.

5. Current Vermont Realities - 5-10 minutes

- After the historical timeline, the facilitator presents the current data as a direct inheritance of everything the participants just traced.
 - *Identify Vermont's paradox: progressive reputation vs. highest per capita homelessness*
 - *Understand 300% increase in homelessness since 2019 and root causes*
 - *Recognize food insecurity, housing instability, and substance use challenges locally*

³⁴ "Uncovering Vermont's Indigenous Heritage." *The Wildflower Inn*.

³⁵ Corwin, Emily. "Remembering Vermont's 19th Century Black Communities." *Vermont Public*, 19 June 2020.

³⁶ "Segregation in Vermont Continues Through Restrictive Housing Policies." *Vermont Housing Finance Agency*, 19 Feb. 2021.

³⁷ Cramer, Christina. "Homeownership and Economic Opportunity for BIPOC Vermonters." *Vermont Housing Finance Agency*, Apr. 2022.

- *Examine how Black Vermonters are 5.6 times more likely to experience homelessness than white Vermonters*
- *Understand Vermont has the 5th highest homeownership gap between Black and white residents in the nation*
- *(Note: These statistics are pulled directly from the content sheet that Tom Morgan developed)*

6. Vermont's Motto - 20 minutes

- **Facilitator Note:** This activity uses Vermont's state motto as an entry point for participants to examine the gap between the state's stated values and the lived realities of its most marginalized residents. It works best positioned after the Current Vermont Realities data section, so that the statistics are fresh in participants' minds as they engage with the motto.
- **Defining "Current Reality":** Before opening the discussion, the facilitator should briefly anchor what is meant by current reality in this context. This is not a random concept, it is the specific Vermont data participants just reviewed. The facilitator could say something like: "When we talk about current reality, we mean what we just looked at together: a 300% increase in homelessness since 2019, Black Vermonters being 5.6 times more likely to be unhoused than white Vermonters, and Vermont having the 5th highest homeownership gap between Black and white residents in the nation. That is our current reality. Now let's examine if that actually holds against our state motto"
- "Freedom & Unity" discussion
 - Participants review the "Freedom & Unity" op-ed series.³⁸ Excerpts from the series are printed out before the session.
 - Discussion questions:
 - Where is this motto honored in Vermont?
 - Where do we see it broken?
 - Based on the statistics, who is experiencing freedom?
 - Who is experiencing unity?
 - "have people compare their vision of an ideal world with our current reality".³⁹

7. The Myth of Scarcity - 10 minutes

- **Facilitator Note:** The goal here is not to make participants feel guilty, but to help them recognize the narrative they have likely absorbed, and to see it as a choice, not a fact. Goodman argues that people from privileged backgrounds often internalize scarcity thinking as common sense.

³⁸ "Care & Connect." *Green Mountain Justice*.

³⁹ Goodman, Diane J.. *Promoting Diversity and Social Justice : Educating People from Privileged Groups, Second Edition*, Taylor & Francis Group, 2011. *ProQuest Ebook Central*.

- Introduce the concept: the narrative that there is simply "not enough". There is not enough housing, not enough resources, not enough support. This idea is often used to justify inaction and abandonment of vulnerable neighbors.
- Key talking points
 - This myth of scarcity justifies the prejudice, greed, and inaction that scarcity has created in our relationship with money and the rest of the human race. For generations it has protected institutionalized racism, sexism, and social and economic discrimination against marginalized communities.⁴⁰
 - An opinion writer for the Harvard Crimson notes that when we believe the economy is zero-sum, we come to believe that helping another person comes at our own expense. In this sense helping our neighbors escape poverty becomes a disservice to the wealthy, rather than an expression of compassion and justice.⁴¹
 - The reality: Vermont needs 24,000–36,000 additional homes by 2029. That is not a scarcity of possibility. It is not a scarcity of physical resources, it is a scarcity of political will.⁴²

8. Intersectionality - 15 minutes

- Introduce the concept: legal scholar Kimberlé Crenshaw coined the term "intersectionality" in 1989 to describe how overlapping identities compound experiences of oppression.
 - Possibly show a clip of TedTalk.⁴³
- Key talking points:
 - Intersectionality is “a lens, a prism, for seeing the way in which various forms of inequality often operate together and exacerbate each other. It is not simply that someone faces racism, or poverty, or disability, it is that these forces intersect and create something more than the sum of their parts.”⁴⁴
 - “It's not simply that there's a race problem here, a gender problem here, and a class or LGBTQ problem there. Many times that framework erases what happens to people who are subject to all of these things.”⁴⁵

⁴⁰Rohr, Richard. "Myth of Scarcity." *Center for Action and Contemplation*, 6 July 2018.

⁴¹ Gilbert, Matthew B. "Breaking Down the Scarcity Mindset." *The Harvard Crimson*, 1 May 2020.

⁴² 2024 Vermont Housing Needs Assessment

⁴³Crenshaw, Kimberlé. "The urgency of intersectionality." *TED*, 2017.

⁴⁴Steinmetz, Katy. "She Coined the Term 'Intersectionality' Over 30 Years Ago. Here's What It Means to Her Today." *Time*, 20 Feb. 2020.

⁴⁵ Crenshaw, Kimberlé. "Kimberlé Crenshaw on Intersectionality, More than Two Decades Later." *Columbia Law School*, 8 June 2017.

- Return to the Vermont data: a BIPOC Vermonter who is also unhoused, has a disability, and is a single parent is not facing four separate problems. They are standing in an intersection, hit from multiple directions at once. Consider what that actually looks like: a BIPOC Vermonter, they are 5.6 times more likely to be unhoused than their white neighbors, and face compounded barriers to homeownership and wealth-building rooted in Vermont's history of exclusionary housing. As an unhoused individual, they are navigating confusing systems of shelters, applications, and eligibility requirements that demand they retell traumatic events. This is what intersectionality looks like not as a theory, but as a daily lived reality, and it is precisely why proximity-based, trauma-informed approaches that see the whole person, rather than isolated needs.
- **Activity 2: Intersection Mapping - 10 minutes**
 - In small groups, participants receive a brief anonymous neighbor profile
 - These profiles can be created by the facilitator before the session begins and can be tailored to how they want the conversation to flow.
 - Groups identify the overlapping systems affecting that person (housing, race, health, labor, family structure, etc.) and map how they compound one another.
 - Groups share out; the facilitator draws connections across the profiles to show patterns.

9. Understanding Trauma - 15 minutes

- **Facilitator note:** This section will produce some discomfort but will also allow for growth. Extensive time is not needed for this section as trauma will come up a lot throughout the entire course.
- Introduce the concept: before participants can show up effectively alongside their neighbors, they need a basic understanding of what trauma is, how it shapes behavior, and why it matters in this work.
- Trauma talking points
 - According to Substance Abuse and Mental Health Administration, trauma results from an event, series of events, or set of circumstances experienced by an individual as physically or emotionally harmful or threatening, and that has lasting adverse effects on the individual's functioning and physical, social, emotional, or spiritual well-being.⁴⁶

⁴⁶Center for Substance Abuse Treatment. "Trauma-Informed Care: A Sociocultural Perspective." *Trauma-Informed Care in Behavioral Health Services*, Treatment Improvement Protocol (TIP) Series, no. 57, Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, 2014.

- Those who are part of groups who have experienced any form of historical, racial, systemic, and intergenerational trauma can experience re-traumatization from any source of exclusionary practice, microaggression, or hateful language. This means our words, assumptions, and tone matters more than we think.⁴⁷

Session 2: The Practice of Proximity

"Getting Close: Trauma-Informed Care and Dignified Connection"

Duration: 1.5 - 2 hours

Suggested modification: We suggest trimming the length of the session down to around 2 hours.

Core teaching approach:

In session 2, participants will move away from acknowledgement and into practice. By this session, the participants have been exposed to the systems that produce marginalization, and session 2 builds on this understanding by helping participants understand how to move towards people and have relationships with people all across their community, rather than moving away from them. The core pedagogical goal of this session is to help participants learn how to develop relational skills, emotional awareness, and trauma-informed practices which all help to develop true proximity

This session is heavily grounded in Bryan Stevenson's "Proximity Principle" which highlights the idea that we cannot solve problems that we are afraid to get close to. Across his work, Stevenson argues that social justice work is impossible without physical, relational, and emotional proximity to suffering. Across distances, stereotypes, fear, and abstraction can be created instead of meaningful connection.⁴⁸ The activities in this session will prioritize experiential learning, active listening, and self reflection, all of which are crucial to relationship building in the community.

1. Activity 1: What Does Proximity Mean? - 20 minutes

- Setup large pieces of paper around the room, one with each of the following prompts written on them.
 - When have you truly felt seen and heard by someone?
 - When have you felt invisible to someone?
 - What keeps people distant from suffering?

⁴⁷Institute on Trauma and Trauma-Informed Care. "What Is Trauma-Informed Care?" *University at Buffalo School of Social Work*, University at Buffalo.

⁴⁸Stevenson, Bryan. "Bryan Stevenson Delivers Powerful Message about 'Proximity' at Institute for Social Concerns Lecture in Downtown South Bend." *The Klau Institute for Civil & Human Rights*, University of Notre Dame, 15 Oct. 2024, *The Klau Institute for Civil & Human Rights* .

- What makes authentic connection difficult?
- Participants will rotate silently through each sheet of paper writing down their responses.
- Afterwards, the facilitator will lead a debrief session where participants share some of their responses.
- Some guiding questions for the facilitator:
 - What patterns emerged across the responses?
 - What fears show up regarding proximity to suffering?
 - Why does distance feel safer?

2. Introduction of Bryan Stevenson's Proximity Principle - 15 minutes

- Introduce Stevenson as an American lawyer, social justice activist, and law professor at the NYU Law School⁴⁹
- Introduce his four principles of justice work.
 - Proximity
 - Changing the narrative
 - Hopefulness
 - Willingness to do uncomfortable things⁵⁰
- Focus specifically on proximity. Key talking points:
 - Proximity can be defined as the degrees of closeness (social, relational, experiential) that individuals have with other members of their community who may be suffering.
 - Stevenson argues that many social systems still harm people because those that come from privilege distance themselves from the harm.
 - It is impossible to meaningfully address homelessness, trauma, addiction, or poverty from a distance.
- Pair the participants up to discuss proximity in more detail. Some guiding questions:
 - What is your understanding of proximity?
 - What questions do you have about proximity?
 - Where in life do you experience proximity?
 - Where do you experience distance?

3. Activity 2: Transactional vs. Relational Care - 20 minutes

- **Facilitator Note:** The discussion of transactional and relational care is not meant to shame transactional care. Immediate aid matters as well. The goal is to help

⁴⁹ Stevenson, Bryan. *Equal Justice Initiative*, eji.org.

⁵⁰ Stevenson, Bryan. *Just Mercy: A Story of Justice and Redemption*. Spiegel & Grau, 2014.



participants understand that justice-centered proximity requires sustained human connection.

- The purpose of this activity is to help participants understand and distinguish the difference between relationships that are only transactional versus those that create relationships.
- Participants are paired up and given scenarios on a notecard
- Example scenarios:
 - Giving money to someone on the street without conversation
 - Sitting with a neighbor during a panic attack
 - Dropping off food anonymously
 - Helping someone navigate a housing application over several weeks
 - Listening to someone's story without trying to fix it
- Each pair discusses for two or three minutes whether their scenario represents a transactional relationship or a relational one.
- The facilitator then poses the following discussion questions:
 - What makes care relational?
 - Sustained presence
 - Mutual vulnerability and exchange
 - Seeing the person, not the need
 - Connection beyond the transaction⁵¹
 - Why can transactional care still feel emotionally “safe”?
 - Maintaining distance is comfortable
 - Limits risk
 - What risks come with relational care?
 - Crossing boundaries
 - Power imbalances emerge

4. Introduce the SAMHSA Framework - 10 minutes

- The facilitator introduces the SAMHSA framework, which can be found on the ‘Bending the Arc’ content document. The facilitator also explains that trauma is something that shapes the nervous system, behavior, communication, and trust.⁵²
- Key talking points for trauma:
 - Trauma is not a single event; but the lasting impact of overwhelming experiences
 - Trauma changes how people respond to certain situations

⁵¹ Our conversation with Jason Duquette-Hoffman

⁵² Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration. "Strategic Prevention Framework." *SAMHSA*, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services.

- Many behaviors society labels as “difficult,” “irrational,” or “uncooperative” are actually adaptive survival responses.⁵³
- Introduce SAMHSA’s Six Principles
 - *Safety*
 - *Trustworthiness & Transparency*
 - *Peer Support*
 - *Collaboration & Mutuality*
 - *Empowerment, Voice & Choice*
 - *Cultural Responsiveness*

5. Engaging Specific Marginalization Forms - 15 minutes

- **Facilitator Note:** This mini-lecture from above does not need to be a comprehensive training on any of these topics. It is an introduction developed to raise awareness and appropriate humility throughout the participants. Since each marginalization form could have its own training entirely, point participants to resources that can help them engage deeper with each form.
- Purpose: Inevitably, participants will arrive to ‘Bending the Arc’ with varying forms of familiarity to marginalization forms. This section does not attempt to make participants experts. It orients them to the particular Vermont context, names what they do not yet know, and builds enough literacy to avoid causing harm through ignorance.
- The facilitator introduces the following forms of marginalization in Vermont:
 - Racism
 - Ableism
 - Gender bias
 - LGBTQ+ marginalization
 - Barriers for formerly incarcerated neighbors
 - Barriers for veterans

6. Closing Activity: Leaf, Branch, Root - 20 minutes

- **Facilitator Note:** Session 2 has covered a significant amount of emotionally and conceptually dense material. This closing activity is designed to give participants a second to breathe, process, and leave with something concrete. This should feel grounding, not like a task.
- Setup: Hand each participant a single sheet of paper and a pen. Ask them to draw a simple tree (a leaf, a branch, and a root) or provide a pre-drawn template. Each part of the tree corresponds to a different layer of reflection:

⁵³ Center for Substance Abuse Treatment. "Trauma-Informed Care: A Sociocultural Perspective." *Trauma-Informed Care in Behavioral Health Services*, Treatment Improvement Protocol (TIP) Series, no. 57, Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, 2014.

- **Leaf** - Something from today that is still floating around in your mind. A question you are still sitting with, or something that hasn't fully landed yet.
- **Branch** - Something from today that connected to something you already knew or believed. A moment where the material met your own experience.
- **Root** - One specific thing you are taking with you. Not a vague intention, but something concrete, a behavior, a habit, a conversation you want to have, or a practice you want to start.
- Each participant should take 4-5 minutes to reflect on a few topics:
 - Proximity in your community
 - Transactional vs. relational care in your community
 - Trauma-informed care
 - 2 or 3 aspects of their own lives that they can change to improve their impact on their communities' proximity to suffering.
- Then, before closing, ask if anyone wants to share their root just their root with the group. Keep this voluntary and brief, no more than two or three people. The facilitator closes by naming one of their own roots from the session, modeling the vulnerability the program asks of participants.

Session 3: Walking the Talk

"From Understanding to Action: Real Scenarios and Community Practice"

Duration: 2-3 hours

Core Teaching Approach: Session 1 and 2 built the foundation and session 3 is where this learning gets tested. This session is built on the assumption that conceptually understanding the right thing and doing the right thing, in the moment, are not the same skill. The point of this session is not to make participants experts, but to put them in situations close enough to reality where they can feel their instincts pull them. The end goal is to strengthen these instincts and point them in the right direction.

1. Opening: Orientation to the Day - 10 Minutes

- **Facilitator note:** Participants may come into Session 3 with energy, anxiety, and maybe a desire to prove they get it. Naming that openly might take some of that pressure off. The opening should make it clear that getting things wrong in here is part of how learning works.
- Open with a brief framing that names what the session is, and what it is not. This is not a how-to guide. This session provides a chance to practice making decisions in realistic scenarios, but also a space where no real harm can be done.



2. Scenario-Based Learning: Small Group Cases with Facilitated Debrief (Examples of Scenarios are Found in Bending the Arc Session 3) - 25 Minutes

- **Facilitator note:** The most important part of this exercise is the gap between what participants say they would do and what their instinct actually was. Push gently on that gap. This should be where the savior complex shows up most clearly and most usefully. Participants will have a hard time resisting a pattern they cannot see.
- Sessions Include:
 - *Scenario A: Housing Crisis*
 - *Scenario B: Cross-Cultural Care*
 - *Scenario C: Substance Use & Recovery*
 - *Scenario D: Mental Health Crisis*
 - *Scenario E: Systems Navigation*
 - *Scenario F: Family Complexity*
- Print each scenario on its one-page handout. Keep the prompts open-ended. Avoid giving groups a clean “right answer” to discover.
- Groups of 4-5 should work through one scenario at a time. Each group gets 15 minutes with a specific case and the following prompts:
 - What is actually being asked of you here?
 - What is your first instinct? What would you think of doing in the next ten minutes?
 - Whose dignity is at stake, and how do you protect it?
 - What’s the difference between helping and fixing in this situation?
 - Where does this exceed what one person should be doing alone?
- Bring the group back for a 15-20 minute debrief after each scenario. While you are bringing them back together, let participants lead the discussion. Letting them to discuss without a set structure allows for more raw emotions and reactions to be shared with the group.

3. Fishbowl Discussion on the Hardest Scenario - 25 Minutes ⁵⁴

- **Facilitator note:** The fishbowl works because it gives participants permission to watch the dynamics rather than performing themselves. People who have been quiet can often have some of the sharpest observations once the pressure is off them to participate. Mental Health Crisis and Cross-Cultural Care are good candidates for the fishbowl treatment.
- After two or three rounds of small group work, choose the scenario that produced the most disagreement and run it as a fishbowl. Five participants sit in a circle

⁵⁴ Facing History and Ourselves, "Fishbowl Discussion Teaching Strategy."



surrounded by everyone else. They will discuss the case for around ten minutes while everyone else observes silently.

- After the fishbowl, the outer circle should reflect. They should go over anything the inner circle didn't and anything else that is on the top of their mind.
- Then swap a few outer circle participants for the inner circle ones. A second round will then start on a different case.

4. Role Rotation: Practicing Both Sides - 20 Minutes

- **Facilitator note:** This is an activity that people may resist most, but also learn the most from. Being the person on the receiving end of help is unfamiliar to most participants in the room and that unfamiliarity is the lesson. Make sure not to skip this even when it feels awkward. The awkwardness is the point.
- After the fishbowl, run one short scenario as a role play in pairs. One participant plays a neighbor in a difficult moment. The other plays the volunteer/community member. Keep it brief, no more than five minutes per pairing
- Then swap roles and run it again with a different prompt
- Debrief in pairs first, then as a full group. Good questions to ask:
 - What did it feel like to be on the receiving end of help?
 - What did the helper do that landed well? What landed poorly?
 - What did you notice about your reactions in either role? Were you surprised by either?

Break - 10 Minutes

5. Guest Voices: Conversation with Neighbor Care Network Members - 25 Minutes

- **Facilitator note:** This is the moment in the session where everything participants have been hearing in abstract becomes a face and a voice. It also keeps the curriculum honest. If everything participants are learning sounds clean and resolved, something is being left out. Guests are, in a way, corrective to the course. They should feel free to disagree with parts of the curriculum and offer constructive feedback. This will give participants the most realistic information.
- Bring in two or three current Neighbor Care Network community members and, if appropriate and consented, one or two neighbors. It is important to note that this is not a panel. It is a conversation.
- Open with a single prompt similar to: "Tell us about a time when something didn't go the way you expected, and what did you learn from it?"
- Let the conversation move organically from there. Participants can ask questions and guests will answer, if they feel comfortable doing so.

6. Community Resource Mapping Exercise - 15 Minutes

- **Facilitator note:** This exercise will hopefully surface a useful frustration. Participants will see how broken and uncoordinated these systems actually are, maybe wanting to fix it on the spot. This would be the right reaction to have, and is also the reaction that would channel long-term commitment rather than one-off action. Use this as a bridge into the advocacy section.
- In small groups, participants map Vermont's social service ecosystem on large sheets of paper. This can include but is not limited to housing services, mental health, recovery, food access, legal aid, and immigration support. Draw connections between organizations and mark where the gaps are. Then, mark where people could get negatively bounced between systems.
- Each group presents their map briefly and the facilitator should pull out certain patterns. The group, as a whole, should go over these patterns and discuss.

7. From Story to Systems: A Discussion - 10 Minutes

- **Facilitator note:** This is the most theory-heavy part of the session. Participants are probably ready to think structurally by this point. The concrete examples from the resource mapping make the theory land harder than if it was in a vacuum.
- Frame the move from proximate care to systemic advocacy with a question:
 - "You've now been close to these stories/situations. What do you want to do with it?"
- Discuss the difference between speaking about someone and speaking with them. Discuss what it means to amplify a voice without taking it over.
- Walk participants through how proximity, story, advocacy, and policy connect, and where each stage could possibly go wrong.

8. Advocacy Practice: A Concrete Action - 10 Minutes

- **Facilitator note:** Keep this short and concrete. The goal is for participants to feel the difference between vague advocacy and specific advocacy. The more times they do this the better. They will write better letters once they have written a bad one.
- Choose on of the following based on what's currently active in Vermont:
 - Draft a one-page letter to a state legislator about a current bill. This should be grounded in one of the day's scenarios
 - Practice giving a two minute legislative testimony. This should have peer feedback.
 - Draft talking points for a community meeting
- Whatever the activity, the action should center a real story, name a specific ask, and avoid generic moral language.

9. Personal Action Plan - 20 Minutes

- **Facilitator note:** The action plan matters not because anyone will collect it, but because writing a commitment down makes it harder to walk away from. The fourth prompt about maintaining encouragement is one of the most important. Participants will most likely feel overwhelmed or discouraged at one point or another. It is important to have a plan for how to handle it properly.
- Twenty minutes of individual writing, guided by these prompts:
 - What is one specific commitment you are making coming out of this training?
 - What is the first concrete step, and when will you take it?
 - Who is going to hold you to it?
 - What practice will you use to maintain encouragement when this work gets hard?
- This is not shared publicly. It is for the participant.

10. Peer Accountability Pairings - 5 Minutes

- **Facilitator note:** While this part is the most simple, it is still crucial to the session. People who do this work alone have a higher chance of not staying committed. A single check-in partner is enough to change a participant's engagement trajectory.
- Each participant pairs with one other participant in the room. They exchange contact information and agree to one check-in within the next month. The check-in does not need a structure. It just needs to happen.

Session 4: Disproportionate Climate Impacts (Teaching Methods)

“Unequal Storms: Who Bears the Burden of Climate Change in Vermont”

Duration: 1 Hour - 2 Hours

Core Teaching Approach: Participants need to feel Vermont's changing climate as something happening around them before the session asks anything of them. Place-based grounding and personal proximity come first. The system lens comes after.

Part 1: Foundations of climate change

1. Where Do You Stand? A Proximity Mapping Exercise - 10 Minutes

- **Facilitator note:** This gets climate impacts to become personal in the very beginning. The same storm lands differently depending on what someone has

access to. It should be a goal to give participants the space to figure this out themselves. Let this realization and tension sit. You'll come back to it.

- **Setup:** Before the session, place a sheet of paper at each seat with a simple prompt: "Think of a time when weather or an environmental event affected your daily life. This could include but is not limited to your work, your home, your health, or your plans. Write a few sentences reflecting this experience."
 - Participants should complete this privately for 2-3 minutes. There is no pressure to share unless participants want to.
 - After the opening, ask the room: "Do we think everyone has been affected the same way? Who might these events impact the most, and why?"

2. Climate vs. Weather: Quick Conceptual Framing - 5 Minutes

- **Facilitator note:** Don't linger too long here. Understanding these definitions is an important start, but if the group already knows this, move on quickly.
- Spend 5 minutes on a quick pair and share or call-and-response on a question similar to this: "When I say it's been a weird winter, am I talking about climate or weather? What is the difference?"
 - After hearing the participants ideas, land on the general definitions:
 - Weather = What is happening outside today
 - Climate = The pattern of weather decades in a given area
 - Then cover the greenhouse gas effect simply: gasses like CO₂ trap heat in the atmosphere, similar to how a blanket holds warmth. Human activity, especially burning fossil fuels, accelerates this blanket effect.

3. Climate is Not Just an Environmental Issue: Brief Discussion - 10 Minutes

- **Facilitator note:** Most people walk in thinking of climate as an environmental issue. This is the moment to widen that before the session goes any further.
- Ask: "When you hear 'climate change,' what comes to mind first?"
- Then ask some people to share. After a few responses, pull the frame wider. Mention how climate change can easily impact everyday aspects of life. This includes housing, labor, healthcare, and savings. Who can afford to leave when a storm is coming? Who works outside with no option to stay home?
- Frame what follows in the section as looking at climate through both a scientific and a systemic lens.

4. A Vermont Story: Local Climate Impact Case - 15 Minutes

- **Facilitator note:** This is the conceptual hinge of the whole session. We are moving on from the question of "who gets hit the hardest" to "why." The prepare/respond/recover frame is simple and should hopefully stick with people.

- Choose a recent Vermont flooding event. The July 2023 flooding in Montpelier and Barre works well, as does Hurricane Irene. Tell it as a story, not a summary, centered on a specific household or community rather than damage totals.
 - For Irene, the story of Rochester or Pittsfield being cut off from the rest of the state for days works well, especially for showing how rural Vermonters can be left without resources during climate disasters.⁵⁵
- Read the story aloud or play a short clip if you have one. Follow with 3 minutes of quiet individual reflection:
 - Ask them what they notice: Who was most affected in this story, and who wasn't?
 - What they feel: Where does this story land for you emotionally?
 - What they wonder: What questions does this raise about why some Vermonts were hit harder than others?
- Open to full group discussion and let it go where it goes. Once it winds down, bring in Vermont-specific climate data as context for what people discussed.
 - This could include statistics on the number of heat waves, cold snaps, or floods in recent years and whether the frequency rates have increased.

5. Vermont's Climate Impact Landscape: Facilitated Walkthrough - 15 Minutes

- **Facilitator note:** The cascading effect piece of this puzzle is an important one not to skip. Participants need to see that climate impacts do not stop off at something like property damage. Oftentimes, these impacts can set off a chain reaction that falls hardest on people who are already stretched thin.
- Put Vermont's key climate impacts up and ask participants to react rather than just walking through the list yourself.
 - Main climate impacts are listed out in the "Examine Vermont-Specific Climate Impacts" section in Bending the Arc Towards Justice's session 4: Disproportionate Climate Impacts.
- If people are slow to react, ask if anyone has run into one of these impacts more than the others.
- Spend extra time, if possible, on flooding as Vermont's central and growing threat. Say something to the lines of: "flooding doesn't just damage a house. What happens next? And after that?" Let participants build that chain out loud. Write it on the board if you can.
- Also look upstream from these impacts. Who lives in susceptible flood plains to begin with? Why is this?

⁵⁵ O'Connor, "What Tropical Storm Irene Can Teach Vermont 10 Years Later."

6. Who is Most Vulnerable?: Small Group Brainstorm - 10 Minutes

- **Facilitator note:** When participants build the list themselves first, they are more invested in what comes next. This strategy also tends to surface assumptions worth talking through.
- Before showing participants the session list, ask small groups who they think gets hit the hardest by climate impacts, and why?
- Have a group share out and then put the session list up.
 - *Session list found under “Analyze the Disproportionate Impacts on Vermont’s Low-Income Communities” section of Session 4.*
- Talk about differences in the participants lists and the session list. What is surprising about those comparisons, what are some of the components they missed?

7. The Three-Part Framework: Prepare, Respond, Recover - 10 Minutes

- **Facilitator note:** This is the conceptual hinge of the whole session. It moves the question from “who gets hit” to “why.”
- Introduce the idea that disproportionate impact is not just about who is in the path of a storm, but about who has the capacity to prepare, respond, and recover. Use a concrete example.
- An example can look like this: “Two neighbors, same street, same flood. One has savings, a car, family nearby, and paid time off. The other has none of those amenities. This is the same event but can have very different outcomes.”
- Then ask: “What does capacity look like? What do people need to prepare, get through, and recover in these situations?”
- Take some time, and let participants name what that looks like and then tie it to factors like housing stability, savings, labor conditions, and healthcare access.

8. Systems Mapping: Who Gets Hit Hardest and Why? - 20 Minutes ⁵⁶

- **Facilitator note:** This is where the story and the structure come together. A participant-made map makes the system more visible than a story alone could. The system that turns a weather event into a years-long crisis for some people and an inconvenience for others.
- Small groups of 3-4 get a large sheet of paper and a prompt:
 - “Pick one Vermont climate impact. Map it out, who is most affected and why? What systems of policies shape that? What comes next?”
- Groups should then be able to trace the question to vulnerable populations, structural barriers, cascading effects, and the human toll, including stress, grief, displacement, and long-term mental health impact. If groups are struggling, help lead them in the right direction.

⁵⁶ Cianconi et al., "Climate Change and Mental Health," 2096.



- In the debrief, tie back to the structural factors in the curriculum:
 - Housing: Affordable housing is concentrated in flood-prone areas
 - Economic inequality: No savings means no recovery buffer
 - Labor: Outdoor and essential workers carry the highest risk of exposure
 - Healthcare: Limited access means climate-related illness may go untreated
 - Trauma and mental health: Floods, fires, and displacement are traumatic events. Research shows that between a quarter and a half of people who live through extreme weather develop mental health symptoms. This can include PTSD, depression, and anxiety. The groups facing structural barriers above tend to carry the heaviest mental health burden too.

9. Policy Gap Discussion: Who Is This Written For? - 10 Minutes

- **Facilitator note:** Keep the excerpt short. The goal is getting participants to realize who many laws are designed for, and whom they leave out.
- Share a short excerpt from a piece of climate policy or literature. The 2025 Vermont Climate Action Plan or Vermont’s Act 153 could be a good place to start.
- Pairs or small groups discuss:
 - “Who is centered here? Who might be missing?”
 - “What would this look like if it were designed around the most vulnerable Vermonters, not just the general population?”
- Debrief as a full group, piecing together the structural shortcomings. These could include policy built around Vermont’s general population, the gaps that leave the most vulnerable out, or how policy can quietly reinforce the inequalities it is trying to fix.

10. Closing Reflection: Personal Proximity - 5 Minutes

- **Facilitator note:** Climate communication tends to stick when people can tie the big picture to something in their own life or community. This reflection does that without forcing it.
- Close with a short individual written reflection. This will not be collected.
 - Prompt should be something along these lines: “Where do you sit in relation to Vermont’s climate impacts? What protects you? What leaves you exposed? Who around you is most exposed?”

Findings/Recommendations 3: Bending the Arc Learning Map

Bending the Arc Leaning Map

Because Bending the Arc centers relational growth, proximity, and long-term engagement, we found that a traditional linear rubric did not align well with the goals of the program. In response, we developed a modular “Learning Map” framework built around skill hexagons. Each hexagon represents a specific area of learning or practice connected to a broader learning goal such as self-awareness, factual and systems knowledge, practical skills, proximity in practice, or reflection. Rather than functioning as a pass/fail assessment, the map is intended to support structured reflection and facilitator observation over time. Participants would engage with different skill areas throughout the course and demonstrate growth through repeated practice, participation, reflection activities, peer discussion, and community engagement.

Importantly, the purpose of the map is not to suggest mastery. One of the central ideas guiding this framework is that growth in justice-centered and proximity-based work is ongoing and non-linear. Participants may feel more confident in some areas while recognizing increasing complexity in others. In many cases, deeper engagement may actually increase awareness of what still needs to be learned. For this reason, hexagons are not intended to represent complete expertise. Instead, they signify meaningful engagement with a particular skill area and a demonstrated willingness to continue developing that practice.

The Learning Map also responds to a practical challenge within the structure of the course itself. Because the sessions contain a large amount of emotionally and conceptually complex material, participants may struggle to process, organize, and retain the various concepts introduced throughout the training. The map therefore functions not only as a reflection tool, but also as an orienting reference framework that participants can revisit throughout the sessions. Facilitators can use the map to help participants identify which ideas, conversations, or activities resonated most strongly, where confusion or discomfort emerged, and which areas may require additional engagement or follow-up resources.

Learning Goals Overview





The Learning Map is organized around five broader learning goals that reflect the multiple dimensions of proximity-based justice work. These categories intentionally move between internal reflection, interpersonal practice, and structural understanding.

Self-Awareness: This learning goal focuses on participants' ability to critically reflect on their own identities, assumptions, emotional responses, privileges, and biases. Because proximity-based work requires participants to recognize how their own positionality shapes interactions with others, self-awareness serves as a foundational component of the course.

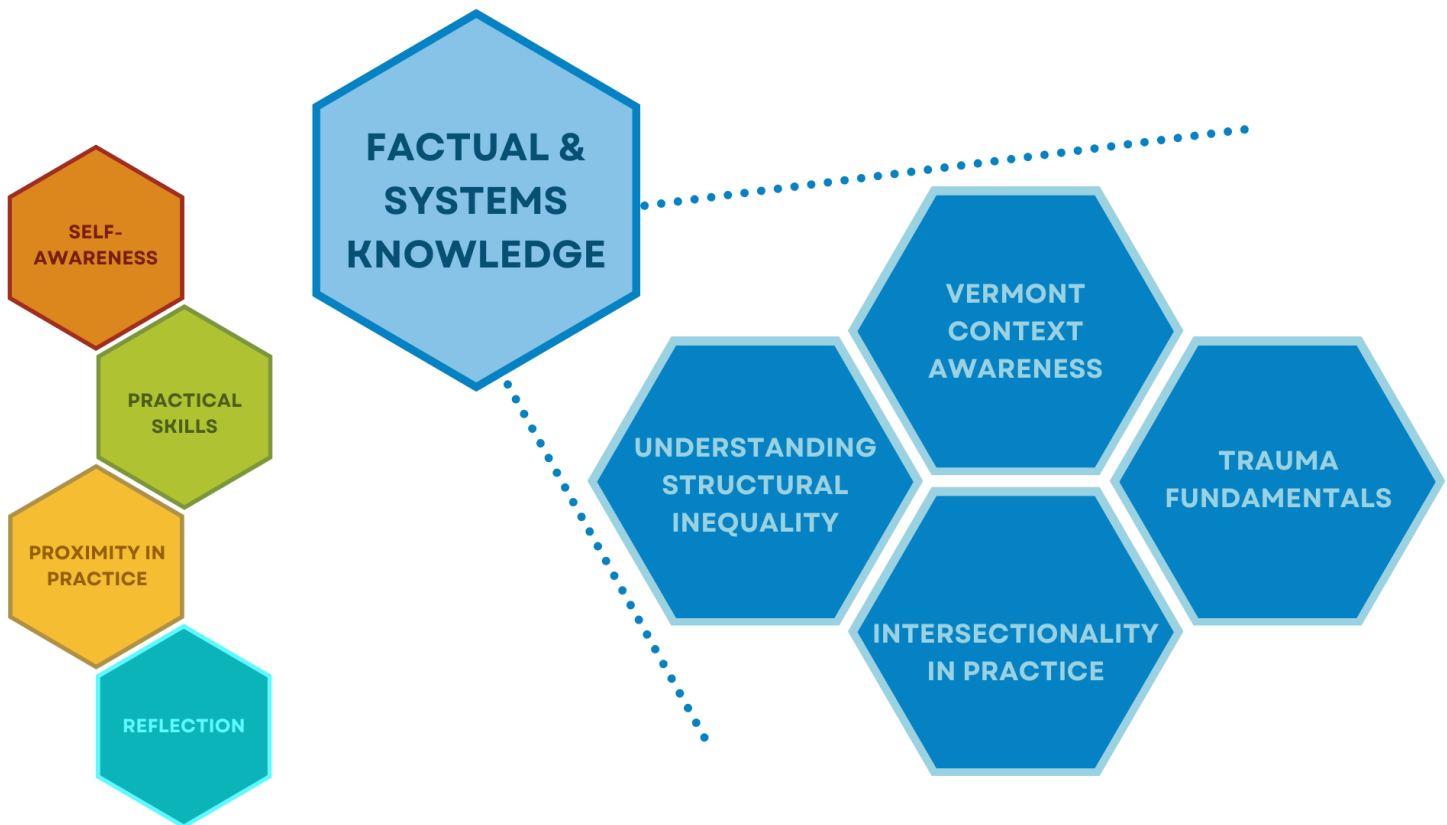
Factual & Systems Knowledge: This category focuses on understanding the broader structural conditions that shape marginalization, including historical systems, public policy, structural inequality, trauma, and intersecting forms of oppression. The emphasis is not simply on memorizing information, but on helping participants move beyond individual explanations for poverty and housing insecurity toward systemic analysis.

Practical Skills: This learning goal centers the interpersonal and communication skills necessary for trauma-informed and dignity-centered engagement. These skills include active listening, navigating difficult conversations, and practicing forms of communication that build trust rather than reinforce harm.

Proximity in Practice: This category focuses on the application of course concepts through sustained relational engagement. Rather than viewing justice work as transactional or charity-based, this learning goal emphasizes consistency, relationship-building, and meaningful participation in community spaces.

Reflection: Reflection functions as an ongoing process integrated throughout the course rather than a single isolated activity. This category encourages participants to critically examine their experiences, process mistakes and discomfort, integrate feedback, and identify how their understanding evolves over time.

Skill Hexagons and Areas of Practice



Each learning goal contains multiple “skill hexagons” representing specific areas of engagement and practice. These hexagons are intentionally designed to represent ongoing development rather than expertise or mastery.

For example, under Factual & Systems Knowledge, participants may engage with skill areas such as:

- Understanding structural inequality
- Recognizing intersectionality in practice
- Vermont-specific context awareness
- Trauma fundamentals

Importantly, facilitators should not interpret these hexagons as binary indicators of whether a participant “has” or “does not have” a skill. Determining readiness for a hexagon would ideally be a collaborative and iterative process rather than a single self-assessment or facilitator judgment. Participants could initially identify areas where they feel growth occurring through self-reflection activities, while facilitators and peer discussions would provide additional opportunities for feedback, clarification, and challenge. This structure helps address a central tension within justice-oriented education: participants may initially overestimate or



underestimate their understanding of a topic, while deeper engagement often reveals additional layers of complexity. For this reason, hexagons are intended to remain flexible indicators of ongoing engagement rather than fixed indicators of mastery.

This distinction is especially important because participants may enter the course with very different levels of familiarity or confidence regarding topics such as structural inequality, trauma, or housing systems. Someone new to this work may initially feel highly confident in their understanding of a topic, while deeper engagement may later reveal additional complexity and nuance. Conversely, participants with prior experience may become increasingly aware of gaps or limitations in their own understanding as conversations deepen. The Learning Map is therefore designed to emphasize humility, openness, and continued practice rather than certainty or expertise.

Learning Goals & Skills

As part of developing this Learning Map, we began identifying key learning goals and corresponding skill areas that reflect the intentions of the course. The following categories and skills represent our current thinking and are meant to serve as a working framework that can be refined and expanded through continued feedback and collaboration.

Self-Awareness

- Recognizing Personal Bias
 - Identifying assumptions about poverty, homelessness, etc.
 - Catching reactions in real time
- Awareness of Privilege
 - Understanding one's position within systems of power
 - Recognizing how privilege shapes interactions
- Comfort with Discomfort
 - Ability to stay present in emotionally challenging situations
 - Not withdrawing or shutting down
- Identifying Savior Complex Tendencies
 - Recognizing "fixing" vs. relating
 - Letting go of control or superiority
- From Charity to Mutuality
 - Seeing relationships as two-way, not one-directional
 - Valuing presence over "helping"
- Dignity-Centered Thinking
 - Seeing inherent worth in every person
 - Avoiding dehumanizing narratives



Factual & Systems Knowledge

- Understanding Structural Inequality
 - How systems (housing, healthcare, policy) create and sustain marginalization
 - Recognizing patterns vs. individual blame
- Intersectionality in Practice
 - Understanding overlapping identities and compounding marginalization
 - Applying this lens to real people, not just theory
- Vermont Context Awareness
 - Local realities (housing crisis, racial disparities, etc.)
 - Awareness of gaps in services
- Trauma Fundamentals
 - Basic understanding of trauma and its impacts on behavior
 - Recognizing intergenerational and structural trauma

Practical Skills

- Active Listening
 - Listening without interrupting, fixing, or redirecting
 - Reflecting back understanding
- Trauma-Informed Communication
 - Using language that builds safety and trust
 - Avoiding harm or re-traumatization
- Navigating Difficult Conversations
 - Talking about race, class, trauma with care and honesty

Proximity in Practice

- Initiating Connection
 - Starting conversations in respectful, human ways
 - Not avoiding interaction
- Sustaining Relationships
 - Returning, following up, building consistency
 - Moving beyond one-time interactions
- Showing Up in Community Spaces
 - Participating in shared environments (meals, gatherings, etc.)
- Responding to Real Situations
 - Applying skills in unpredictable, real-world contexts



Reflection

Reflection is intended to function as an ongoing and structured practice integrated throughout the course rather than as a single concluding activity. After sessions or major activities, participants could engage in brief written reflections, peer conversations, facilitator check-ins, or guided discussion prompts connected to their Learning Map hexagons. These reflections are designed to help participants process discomfort, identify patterns in their thinking and behavior, recognize areas where they feel challenged or uncertain, and track how their understanding evolves over time.

Reflection practices may include:

- Identifying moments of discomfort, defensiveness, or uncertainty
- Recognizing patterns in assumptions or reactions
- Processing mistakes and thinking through how to respond differently in the future
- Integrating facilitator, peer, or community feedback
- Identifying areas requiring continued growth or engagement

Rather than evaluating participants on whether they arrive at a “correct” conclusion, reflection within the Learning Map is intended to support honesty, humility, accountability, and long-term relational growth.

FACTUAL & SYSTEMS KNOWLEDGE

UNDERSTANDING STRUCTURAL INEQUALITY

How systems (housing, healthcare, policy) create and sustain marginalization

Recognizing patterns vs. individual blame

INTERSECTIONALITY IN PRACTICE

Understanding overlapping identities and compounding marginalization

Applying this lens to real people, not just theory

VERMONT CONTEXT AWARENESS

Local realities (housing crisis, racial disparities, etc.)

Awareness of gaps in services

TRAUMA FUNDAMENTALS

Basic understanding of trauma and its impacts on behavior

Recognizing intergenerational and structural trauma

SELF-AWARENESS

RECOGNIZING PERSONAL BIAS

Identify assumptions about poverty, homelessness, etc.

Catch reactions in real time

AWARENESS OF PRIVILEGE

Understanding one's position within systems of power

Recognizing how privilege shapes interactions

COMFORT WITH DISCOMFORT

Ability to stay present in emotionally challenging situations

Not withdrawing or shutting down

IDENTIFYING SAVIOR COMPLEX TENDENCIES

Recognizing "fixing" vs. relating

Letting go of control or superiority

FROM CHARITY TO MUTUALITY

Seeing relationships as two-way, not one-directional

Valuing presence over "helping"

PRACTICAL SKILLS

ACTIVE LISTENING

Listening without interrupting, fixing, or redirecting

Reflecting back understanding

TRAUMA-INFORMED COMMUNICATION

Using language that builds safety and trust

Avoiding harm or re-traumatization

NAVIGATING DIFFICULT CONVERSATIONS

Talking about race, class, trauma with care and honesty

PROXIMITY IN PRACTICE

INITIATING CONNECTION

Starting conversations in respectful, human ways

Not avoiding interaction

SUSTAINING RELATIONSHIPS

Returning, following up, building consistency

Moving beyond one-time interactions

SHOWING UP IN COMMUNITY SPACES

Participating in shared environments (meals, gatherings, etc.)

RESPONDING TO REAL SITUATIONS

Applying skills in unpredictable, real-world contexts

REFLECTION

REFLECTION

Think about your experiences and growth, are you noticing any patterns over time?

REFLECTION

Learn from Mistakes. Owning missteps without defensiveness and adjusting behavior.

REFLECTION

Integrating Feedback. Listening to others (especially those with lived experience)



Facilitator Use and Long-Term Applications

Beyond its role during the course itself, the Learning Map also has potential value as an ongoing framework for continued reflection and program assessment. Facilitators could use recurring patterns within participant reflections and check-ins to identify:

- Concepts that consistently create confusion or discomfort
- Areas where additional resources or curriculum expansion may be needed
- Skills participants feel least prepared to apply in community settings
- Areas where participants demonstrate meaningful relational growth

This information could help Green Mountain Justice refine future iterations of the course while also offering insight into how effectively the training prepares participants for sustained engagement within GMJ volunteer and community spaces. Additionally, participants could revisit the Learning Map after the training concludes as they continue engaging in community work. In this sense, the framework aligns closely with Green Mountain Justice's broader vision of sustained, relational, and transformative engagement rather than short-term or transactional involvement.

Ultimately, the Learning Map reflects an attempt to create an assessment structure consistent with the core values of *Bending the Arc Toward Justice*: dignity, humility, interdependence, reflection, and ongoing practice. Rather than measuring success through completion or expertise, the framework instead emphasizes participants' willingness to remain engaged in the long-term work of proximity, relationship-building, and justice-centered community care.

Figures

TABLE A3.1.
Cultural Identity Inventory

<i>Cultural Dimension</i>	<i>Manifestations</i>	<i>Interactions</i>	<i>Domination/ Subordination</i>	<i>Vantage Points</i>
Indicate for each (note any conflict concerning this identifier)	What values, actions, or messages are associated with the dimension?	Does the effect of this dimension interact with any other dimension? How so?	If dominant—what privileges do you have? How have you responded? If subordinate—what have you been denied? How have you responded?	How do you understand this aspect of yourself? How do you think or experience the way others see you?
Gender				
Race				
Class				
Sexual orientation				
Citizenship				
Religion				
Physical/mental ability				
Other?				

Review and reflect on your inventory. Consider these questions:

1. What are your overall reactions to this information (any affirmations, surprises, points of confusion)?
2. Does any dimension stand out as particularly important to your overall cultural identity and why?
3. What have you learned about yourself? What next steps in this process do you see yourself taking?

Figure 1 depicts Hyde’s version of a cultural identity worksheet. This worksheet was created by Hyde but can be modified for the preferences of the session moderator.



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We have neither given nor received unauthorized aid on this assignment.

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