

Nutrition Assistance Safety Net Activity: A Game of Chance

A Supplement to the Annual *Hike for Hunger*



Presented by



**The Vermont Campaign
to End Childhood Hunger**

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The Nutrition Assistance Safety Net: A Day in the Life of a Low-income Vermont Family

Object of the activity: This activity helps community members gain a deeper understanding of:

- The challenges faced by food insecure* families and individuals in Vermont.
- The array of food assistance programs that must be in place to create a strong nutrition safety net.**
- The opportunities communities and organizations have to create comprehensive, community-based solutions to hunger.

This activity is designed as a game of chance—because for Vermont’s most vulnerable populations, the strength of the nutrition assistance safety net in their communities is most likely beyond their control.

* **Food insecurity** is defined as the limited or uncertain availability of nutritionally adequate or safe foods, or limited or uncertain ability to acquire acceptable foods in socially acceptable ways.



** For this activity a **Strong Safety Net** is defined as a situation in which a family has access to sustainable, accessible, and nutritious food resources

- a **Fragile Safety Net** is one with unreliable resources or that is lacking one or more of the characteristics of a Strong Safety Net
- **No Safety Net** is one without any available food resources.

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Contents and activity preparation:

- Script for Facilitator (below)
- Description of each family member (below for Facilitator and on pp. 10-11)
- Scenes from daily life (pp. 4-9)
- 3 outcomes for each scene (pp. 5-9)
- Chance cards - Strong, Fragile, No Safety Net (p. 12)
- Chart to track strength of Safety Net (p. 13)
- Suggested discussion questions and further information (p. 14)

Before you begin, the facilitator prepares by cutting out character descriptions, scenes, outcomes, and chance cards. Display the safety net chart to record players' progress. Select 4 volunteers from the group to act as family members and help read character descriptions and scenarios.

Script

Facilitator: In the first step of the activity, we're going to introduce the players. Could each of you please read what's on your card?

[facilitator hands out descriptions]

The Carpenter Family

Mom (Mary Carpenter)

Mom is a 4th generation Vermonter who grew up in Middlebury. She was a very good student at Middlebury High School and her parents supported her dream of being the first in her family to attend college. Unfortunately, when she was a high school senior, her dad became disabled in a workplace accident. Mary put her college dreams on hold and started working as many hours as she could to help out with household expenses.

Since her kids were born she's been working twenty-five hours a week as a cashier at a gas station/quick mart for minimum wage: \$8.06 an hour. When the kids get a bit older she hopes to go to college at night so that she can become an elementary school teacher.

Dad (Mike Carpenter)

Dad grew up on a dairy farm in Cornwall. His older sister now runs the family farm. Although he knows he could earn more money if he moved to Chittenden County, it is important to him to live near the farm so that he is available to help out. He works as a delivery driver and installer for Otter Creek Awnings at \$9.00 per hour. Business has been slow so he feels lucky to get 35 hours of work

David Carpenter

David is a precocious 6 year old who is in 1st grade. He loves going to school and has demonstrated accelerated reading skills for his age.

Addie Carpenter

Addie is a 3 year old. She attends child care part time while her mom is at work. She is adding to her vocabulary everyday and she loves music.

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Looking at the math...

(Facilitator presents and explains calculations)

Mom = \$8.06 x 25 hrs x 52 weeks = \$10,478

Dad = \$9.00 x 35 hrs x 52 = \$16,380

Total income before taxes and deductions = \$26,858

Federal Poverty in 2009 for a family of 4 is \$22,050

The Carpenter's monthly income is \$2,238. At an annual income of \$26,858 they are at 122% of the poverty level.

Q. What is the federal poverty level?

A. The federal poverty level is a calculation of the minimum income necessary to meet minimal food and other basic needs, as set by the U.S. government.

Note to Facilitator:

This activity is meant to generate discussion of hunger issues in Vermont. After each scene, be sure to encourage players to ask questions and relate their own experiences.

Facilitator: In the next section of the activity, we're going to follow the Carpenters through some typical scenes from their daily lives. We'll ask one of you to read the scene, and then we'll draw a card to find out what happens next. [Select volunteer to read "morning" card.]



MORNING

David is six years old and in the first grade. Every morning he boards the school bus at 7:30 AM for his half hour ride to school. His mom has to leave early for her job as a cashier and often his dad is responsible for getting both children ready in the morning and driving his little sister to childcare. Many mornings David is not even hungry when he first wakes up. Some mornings, there is no breakfast at all.

PLEASE DRAW A CHANCE CARD

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MORNING

Strong Safety Net: David is lucky to attend a school that provides breakfast. He walks into his classroom bustling with activity as students are already drinking their milk and munching on Vermont apples and whole wheat muffins. By the time David is finished eating, he feels full, alert, and ready to start his school day.



MORNING

Fragile Safety Net: David arrives at school and goes straight to his class with no breakfast in his stomach. By late morning he is so miserable that he asks to go to the nurse. She recognizes that he is hungry, and offers him a pack of peanut butter crackers from the supply in her desk drawer. Visits to the nurse's office are common for children who don't eat breakfast—and even more frequent at the end of the month, when family resources are lowest.



MORNING

No Safety Net: David starts class with his stomach growling, since his school is one of the 22 in Vermont that do not offer school breakfast. By 10:00am his empty stomach and low blood sugar cause him to fidget and act out. His teacher doesn't know that these behaviors are often a symptom of hunger. David is sent to the principal's office and told not to return until he is ready to behave himself.

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LUNCH TIME

David's sister, Addie, is three years old. With two working parents she usually spends the day at her child care center until 2:30pm, when her mom gets off work. Since her dad dropped her off at 8AM she has had a hectic morning playing with blocks and drawing – and now she is hungry for lunch. It's a good thing that lunch time rolls around at 11:30am, just when she starts to get cranky, hungry, and tired.

PLEASE DRAW A CHANCE CARD



LUNCH TIME

Strong Safety Net: The director of Addie's child care center has recently enrolled in the Child and Adult Care Food Program (CACFP). Addie's lunch is a hot meal of tuna casserole, steamed broccoli, milk, and fruit salad for dessert. Addie has never eaten broccoli at home but as she watches the other preschoolers eating theirs, she decides to try it.



LUNCH TIME

Fragile Safety Net: Addie's day care center serves lunch, but to keep down costs the staff serves foods that are cheap and simple. Today the menu is a hot dog on a white bun with ketchup, Kool-Aid, and a cookie for dessert. It's filling, and the children enjoy it – but it does not provide the iron, calcium, Vitamin A and Vitamin C that are essential for preschool growth and brain development.



LUNCH TIME

No Safety Net: The childcare staff helps the children prepare the lunches they bring from home. Since it is getting close to the end of the month and the family's allotment of 3SquaresVT* benefits has almost run out, today Addie has brought a packet of instant oatmeal and a fruit roll-up.

* **3SquaresVT** (formerly Food Stamps) is a federal program that provides low-income individuals and households with money to buy food. Households receive monthly benefits to purchase food in the form of an **Electronic Benefit Transfer (EBT)** card that functions like a debit card.

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AFTERNOON

Because of an unexpected cold spell earlier in the month that required an extra refill from the fuel company, the family food budget was cut significantly and the cupboards at home are looking bare. On her way to pick up Addie from childcare, Mom thinks about what she can serve the family for dinner.

PLEASE DRAW A CHANCE CARD



AFTERNOON

Strong Safety Net: Fortunately, the food shelf is open. Students from the high school are fulfilling their community service requirements at the food shelf and the food shelf is bustling with the activity of teenagers stacking crates of just-delivered canned goods and produce from the Vermont Foodbank. Mom picks out some winter squash, spinach, and an assortment of proteins, such as tuna fish and peanut butter.



AFTERNOON

Fragile Safety Net: The food shelf is open, but Mom is disappointed to see that most of the food from the Christmas Food Drive is gone. She gets some pasta and canned garbanzo beans. She isn't sure what she will do with them or if her children will like them, but maybe they will try them if she can disguise them in pasta sauce.



AFTERNOON

No Safety Net: Mom visits the food shelf during the posted hours, but it is closed. The food shelf is run by local volunteers and it appears that someone missed their shift. Mom is frustrated that she has driven 20 minutes out of her way, used up gas, and is still without food for dinner. She thinks about driving to her sister's house to grab some dinner ingredients.

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EVENING

After his day at work as a delivery driver, Dad stops on the way home to buy some groceries.

PLEASE DRAW A CHANCE CARD



EVENING

Strong Safety Net: An outreach worker at the local food shelf attended a 3SquaresVT training last month. She implemented an outreach plan at her food shelf and worked with Dad to sign the family up for 3SquaresVT. With \$30 left on their EBT card*, Dad is able to pick up some milk and the kid's favorite snack, fresh oranges.



EVENING

Fragile Safety Net: Dad stops at the local mom and pop convenience store that is closest to his work in an effort to get home quickly and save gas. Unfortunately, they don't accept 3SquaresVT, so Dad uses the \$7 in his pocket for two cans of soup, a loaf of bread and a half gallon of milk.



EVENING

No Safety Net: Dad doesn't realize that the family is eligible for 3SquaresVT. He has \$7.00 to spend on food for the coming week. He goes to the discount grocery store and buys 8 packages of Ramen Noodles for \$1.00, several dented cans of soup, a pack of 8 hot dogs, and buns which will make two meals.

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DINNER TIME

Depending on how late Dad has to work, the family always tries to have a sit-down dinner together. What they eat for dinner is always dependent on what there is in the house.

PLEASE DRAW A CHANCE CARD



DINNER TIME

Strong Safety Net: With fresh produce from the food shelf and the items Dad brought home from the store, Mom is able to cook the kids' favorite Cooking for Life* recipe: Butternut Squash Lasagna with Spinach-Orange Salad.



DINNER TIME

Fragile Safety Net: The garbanzo beans and spaghetti are not a real hit, but the kids eat dinner to fill their stomachs. Mom is happy that she can provide a hearty meal, but she regretfully thinks that her family needs more fresh fruits and vegetables to stay healthy.



DINNER TIME

No Safety Net: The cupboards are pretty bare, so Mom tells everyone she is on a diet. Dad whips up some Ramen noodles for himself and the kids.

* **Cooking for Life** is a program of the Vermont Campaign to End Childhood and UVM Extension's Expanded Food and Nutrition Education Program that provides hands-on nutrition and cooking education for low-income Vermonters. Learn more about the program and Cooking for Life recipes at vtnohunger.org.

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Concluding remarks:

The purpose of this activity was to illustrate how a low-income family's food security is often a matter of chance and circumstance. Breakfast for a school-age child might depend on whether his school has a breakfast program. For a family relying on emergency food, it's a matter of luck whether the food shelf will have healthy food items on its shelves or be open at convenient hours. The odds are that even among eligible families, a few will not know they could be getting 3SquaresVT benefits.

Nutritious, healthy meals should not be a matter of chance but a certainty for low-income families. Although no safety net is perfect, communities can come together to help stack the odds against food Insecurity—through school meal programs, local food shelves, or distributing 3SquaresVT applications. For more information, contact the Vermont Campaign to End Childhood Hunger at 802-865-0266 or visit their website at www.vtnohunger.org.

Print this information out for each role. For durability it can be glued on to card stock.



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Chance Cards

- *Cut out cards and paste to card stock or cardboard*



STRONG SAFETY NET



FRAGILE SAFETY NET



NO SAFETY NET

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Template for Chart to Track Safety Net

- *draw this on a white board; or print out as individual score cards, or make a large poster board*
- *once an outcome for each scenario has been drawn, check it off on the chart, to record how the family fares over the day*



	STRONG	FRAGILE	NONE
Morning			
Lunch Time			
Afternoon			
Evening			
Dinner			

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Suggested Discussion Questions:

1. What type of food safety net exists in your community and what could you do to improve it?
2. What type of additional challenges do low-income families face in a rural state?
3. Why might hungry children choose *not* to participate in school breakfast or lunch programs? How could a school environment become more conducive to school meal participation?
4. What are the meal options like at your school, college, or university? How many servings of fresh fruits and vegetable are offered? Whole grains, etc?
5. Have you heard of the hunger-obesity paradox? Discuss how this may be affecting community health in our society.

Further Information:

- For more information about the Vermont Campaign to End Childhood Hunger and the community outreach toolkit, please visit www.vtnohunger.org.
- For more information on the health effects and impact of childhood food insecurity, explore the Oregon State learning modules at: <http://oregonstate.edu/instruct/dce/chi/>.
- For questions about 3SquaresVT (formerly Food Stamps), eligibility, and the application process, please visit www.vermontfoodhelp.com.