

Vermont First Innovation Grant

Overview:

The Vermont First Innovation Grant aims to strengthen local food systems by supporting Vermont farmers and food producers in supplying **local** food products ([per Vermont Act 129](#)) to University of Vermont Dining Services and Sodexo's other Vermont First accounts.

The program provides financial support to Vermont farmers and food producers to enter and/or scale within the Sodexo institutional supply chain.

Projects will be aligned with at least one of the Vermont First Values:

1. Support Vermont's local economy through the creation of inclusive market opportunities accessible for local producers, including diverse-owned and small-medium scale farm and food businesses.
2. Create opportunities for employees to engage with Vermont First and contribute to our local communities.
3. Contribute to an environmentally sustainable food system through food purchases and reducing food waste.
4. Cultivate intentional collaboration and transparency to build a diverse, equitable, and inclusive food system and work to remove structural barriers in participation and decision-making.

Recipients of the grant will typically join the Sodexo institutional supply chain through one of the following approved vendors:

- o Black River Produce/Reinhart
- o Farrell Distributing
- o Food Connects Food Hub
- o Intervale Food Hub
- o UNFI (United Foods)
- o *Alternative partnership pathways may be considered on a case-by-case basis.*
- A letter of support from an approved vendor is required with the application.

The grant supports:

- Existing partners

**For more information, please review our
FAQ page*

- Innovation/development for products not in the Vermont First supply chain
- Scaling of products currently in the Vermont First supply chain
- New partnerships
 - Onboarding support for farmers and/or food producers (*could include innovation and/or scaling*)

A live and recorded informational session will be held annually prior to the application deadline. See **Application Timeline** section below for more details.

Funding:

- Total annual funding available: **\$50,000** (through Sodexo/UVM Dining Services Contract)
- Project awards: **\$10,000 - \$15,000** per applicant
- Smaller awards (less than \$10,000) may be considered on a case-by-case basis
- Awarded projects have **one year** from award payment to expend funding and submit deliverables

Funding may be used for:

- Equipment and packaging
- Technical assistance
- Audits or certifications
- Infrastructure investment

Funding may *not* be used for:

- Events and marketing
- Transportation
- General overhead costs
- Recurring purchase of ingredients

Eligibility:

Funding is open to Vermont farmers, food producers, food hubs, supply chain service providers, and technical support providers.

- Priority given to the following:
 - Minority owned businesses (BIPOC, women, veteran, LGBTQIA+, first generation)
 - Non-profit entities
 - Applicants who have not previously received the Vermont First Innovation Grant
- Priority products (high demand/low current supply products)
 - Baked goods and mixes
 - Fluid milk
 - Fruits & vegetables production (processed vegetables and season extension)
 - Poultry (chicken, turkey)
 - Value-added products

**For more information, please review our FAQ page*

- Low-priority products:
 - Beverages (including sweetened beverages, alcoholic beverages, coffee)
 - Ground Beef
 - Processed beans
 - Yogurt

Application Timeline:

- Application announced: **July 27, 2026**
- Information session: **August 19, 2026; 3:00-4:00pm**
 - *Find the teams link or recording on our website*
- Application opens: **August 17, 2026**
- Application deadline: **October 30, 2026**
- Awardees notified: **December 18, 2026**
- Award publicly announced: **January 11, 2027**
- Funds dispersed: **February/March 2027**

Awardees must submit a summary of how funds were used and measurable outcomes within one year of fund distribution (February 2028). Projects with unused funds are not eligible for future grants.

Evaluation Criteria and Review Process

- Vermont First Program Manager/UVM Dining Services Sustainability Manager will receive applications and share with Vermont First Executive Committee for preliminary review using the rubric guidelines.
 - The rubric can be found on the “Innovation Grant” page of our website under “Awards and Affiliations”.
- Selected projects will be shared with UVM University Housing and Dining Services (UHDS) leadership for final consideration.
- Awardees will:
 - Be notified via email of the grant status
 - Receive funding through UVM UHDS via check
 - Participate in an initial meeting with Vermont First Team to review and confirm project goals, budget, timeline, and deliverables

**For more information, please review our FAQ page*

- Non-selected applicants will:
 - Be notified via email and receive rubric-based feedback.

For questions contact: sydney.howard@sodexo.com, Vermont First Program Manager

Application

** To be filled out on Microsoft forms*

Purpose: The purpose of the Vermont First Innovation Grant is to strengthen local food systems, more specifically, to aid Vermont farmers and food producers in offsetting costs related to entering the Sodexo institutional supply chain and/or to support innovation and product development.

Timeline:

- Application opens: August 17, 2026.
- Application deadline: October 30, 2026
- Awardees notified: December 18, 2026
- Funds dispersed: February/March 2027

Award Amount: Grants would be awarded in the amount of \$10,000-\$15,000, based on the scope of the project.

Vermont First Values:

1. Support Vermont's local economy through the creation of inclusive market opportunities accessible for local producers, including diverse-owned and small-medium scale farm and food businesses.
2. Create opportunities for employees to engage with Vermont First and contribute to our local communities.
3. Contribute to an environmentally sustainable food system through food purchases and reducing food waste.
4. Cultivate intentional collaboration and transparency to build a diverse, equitable, and inclusive food system and work to remove structural barriers in participation and decision-making.

1. Project Title:

2. Name of Business:

3. Name of Applicant and Position:

**For more information, please review our
FAQ page*

4. Address:

5. Email:

6. Phone Number:

Demographics:

7. Do you identify with any of the following groups (*check all that apply*):

- Woman-owned
- BIPOC-owned
- Veteran-owned
- LGBTQIA+ owned
- First Generation
- Non-profit
- Other

8. Have you previously received the Vermont First Innovation Fund? (yes/no)

9. Are you currently working with Sodexo? (yes/no):

10. Type of Business

- Farmer
- Food Producer
- Food Hub
- Supply Chain Service Provider
- Technical Support
- Other

Project Details

11. Dollar Amount requested? (\$10,000-\$15,000 for a one-year grant)

12. What will these funds be used for? (How will these funds support your involvement in institutional markets or overcome roadblocks to enter institutional supply chain/markets).

13. Category of food that this project will support:

- Bakery
- Beverage

**For more information, please review our
FAQ page*

- Meat
- Dairy
- Produce
- Groceries
- Poultry

15. Describe at least one measurable outcome of your completed project:

16. Describe how your project and/or organization aligns with Vermont First Values (*at least one* value):

17. Optional: Is there anything else you would like us to know about your project?

18. Upload a document with the budget outlining project costs (personnel, supplies, equipment, other direct and indirect costs) and the timeline:

19. Upload a letter of support from a Sodexo Approved Distributor:

**For more information, please review our
FAQ page*