

# Newsletter



## VRGA President Recognized by Consumer Brands Association



Consumer Brands Association has honored VRGA President Erin Sigrist with the 2023 Excellence in Government Affairs award, presented during this year's annual Food Industry Association Executives meeting.

The award, which is given each year to outstanding state association executives in recognition of their partnership with Consumer Brands and its members, recognized Sigrist for her work with the Attorney General on a delay in enforcement on Act 36 of 2021, which would have resulted in food products being pulled from grocery store shelves.

### Sponsor VRGA!

We look forward to working with our Champions in the coming year to support our work in representing retail and the food industry in Vermont in 2024. Sponsors are essential to our work in supporting our members. Click [here](#) for more information on our available levels of sponsorship or reach out to [karin@vtrga.org](mailto:karin@vtrga.org).

## Unemployment Insurance Taxable wage Base to Increase

The Vermont Department of Labor has announced the determination of the 2024 Unemployment Insurance (UI) Taxable Wage Base. Effective January 1, 2024, the Taxable Wage base will increase from its current level of \$13,500 to \$14,300. An increase of \$800. Employers pay unemployment contributions based on initial wages earned annually by each of their employees up to a certain amount. This is known as the Taxable Wage Base. Under the new Taxable Wage Base, employers will pay UI contributions on the first \$14,300 an employee earns in calendar year 2024.

## THANK YOU ANNUAL SPONSORS

### CHAMPION



### SUPPORTING



### SUSTAINING



# Legislative and Regulatory

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## Vermont House Speaker: Retail Crime Legislation Coming in January

Vermont Retail crime has exploded across the state and country. Speaker of the House, Jill Krowinski has signaled that the House will be considering legislation that would address retail theft by converting multiple misdemeanors committed within close succession into a felony charge. We have yet to see the language, but VRGA proposed legislation similar to this in 2017 and 2018. We will be requesting member experiences and financial impacts you have experienced in the coming days.

## Vermont Implements Ban on Mercury-Containing Lightbulbs Starting 2024

Starting January 1, 2024, four-foot, general purpose, fluorescent lightbulbs and GU-24 twist based CFLs (compact fluorescent lightbulbs) cannot be sold in Vermont. This restriction on sale does NOT include any specialty lighting, such as germicidal UV purifier and sanitizer light bulbs. The sale restriction is on general purpose, indoor/outdoor, residential and business bulbs only. Learn more about the restrictions on sale [from VT DEC](#). Thinking about switching your business to LEDs? [Through the end of the year only, get point-of-sale discounts on high-quality lighting from Efficiency Vermont.](#)

## Minimum Wage Will Increase to \$13.18

Starting from January 1, 2024, Vermont's minimum wage will increase to \$13.66 per hour, starting January 1, 2024. This is an increase of \$0.48 from the current rate of \$13.18. Tipped wage will increase from \$6.28 to \$6.84 per hour. The annual wage adjustments are made in accordance with Vermont law.

## Small Businesses Will Face New Reporting Requirements Starting Jan. 1

Effective January 1, 2024, a new reporting obligation will mandate certain small businesses to submit a Beneficial Ownership Information (BOI) Report to the U.S. Department of Treasury's Financial Crimes Enforcement Network (FinCEN). This regulation addresses concerns related to money laundering, terrorism financing, tax fraud, and other illegal activities. The law requires every corporation, LLC, or similar entity created under state or tribal laws to file a BOI report unless exempt. Entities created in the U.S. and subject to reporting are termed "domestic reporting companies," while certain foreign entities registered in the U.S. are labeled "foreign reporting companies." Non-compliance may result in severe penalties. VRGA is working with attorneys to better understand how this impacts our small members. To learn more, [here's a brief overview.](#)

### Pre-Session General Legislative Update Call

Tuesday, December 12 @ 11am

[Register in advance for this meeting](#)

### 2024 Session General Legislative Update Call

Beginning January 9, 2024 @ 11: every other Tuesday during the Legislative Session

[Register in advance for this meeting](#)

# Association News

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## SNAP Hot Foods Survey

Our partners at Hunger Free Vermont are trying to learn about the impact and benefits of the temporary ability for retailers to accept SNAP benefits for the purchase of hot and hot prepared foods in response to the July 2023 catastrophic flooding. Please take just a couple of minutes to [complete this very brief form](#) to help inform efforts to improve SNAP for customers and businesses!

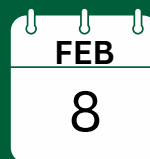
**We are looking for a Vice President to join our team!**  
**Please [click here for the job description and requirements](#).**  
**Email [erin@vtrga.org](mailto:erin@vtrga.org) with inquires.**



## 2024 Scholarship Program

Annually, VRGA grants scholarships of \$1500 to 10 students attending a two or four-year college or university. VRGA members are encouraged to promote this opportunity among their employees. A poster for display in stores can be accessed by clicking [here](#). For detailed application requirements and the application form, please visit the provided link. The deadline for applications is April 26, 2024. For additional information, contact [info@vtrga.org](mailto:info@vtrga.org).

## Save the Date! 2024 VRGA Events



**Legislative Day**  
*Capitol Plaza Montpelier*  
Backup Date: April 11, 2024



**Annual Meeting**  
*Location TBD*



**Scholarship Golf**  
*Location TBD*



## LOOK WHAT'S IN STORE

The **Total Solar Eclipse** is coming to Vermont on April 8, 2024 and Moon Over VT has the made-to-order merchandise your customers want!





# Business Resources

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**We have compiled some valuable technical assistance resources to aid your business in navigating the challenges of the current economic landscape.**

- [ACCD Business Assistance Team](#): A team of business professionals dedicated to guiding businesses towards success by providing valuable resources and assistance.
- [Regional Development Corporations \(RDC\)](#): Vermont's RDCs offer local insights, connect businesses with potential sites, and assist in site-related planning by collaborating with municipalities.
- [Center for Women & Enterprise Vermont \(CWEVT\)](#): CWEVT serves as an educational partner, collaborating with coworking facilities across the state to support aspiring and existing entrepreneurs. They offer individual business counseling and courses to help entrepreneurs make decisions conducive to business success.
- [Vermont Employee Ownership Center \(VEOC\)](#): VEOC supports business owners considering a transition to broad-based employee ownership through options like an Employee Stock Ownership Plan (ESOP) or worker co-op. The non-profit provides free pre-feasibility consulting, seminars, an annual conference, and maintains a revolving loan fund to support financing for such transitions.
- [Vermont Sustainable Jobs Fund \(VSJF\)](#): VSJF delivers tailored business management coaching, entrepreneurial support, and training to position Vermont entrepreneurs for growth and long-term success.
- [VtSBDC in CNPP](#): Vermont Small Business Development Center (VtSBDC) is one of 51 grantees chosen for the U.S. Small Business Administration's Community Navigator Pilot Program (CNPP).
- Hub and Spoke Model: VtSBDC employs a "hub and spoke" model, partnering with community-based organizations to address barriers faced by small businesses, especially those owned by veterans, women, BIPOC entrepreneurs, and individuals in rural communities.
- RDCs as CNPP Spokes: Building on the success of the Restart Vermont Technical Assistance Program (ReVTA), Regional Development Corporations (RDCs) in Vermont will act as CNPP spokes. They will provide crucial technical assistance to businesses adapting to post-COVID challenges, including the adoption of new practices, retrofitting physical spaces, and accessing new technology.
- Details on Technical Assistance: Additional information on receiving or providing technical assistance is available. To explore services from other CNPP spokes, visit this [link](#).

## Attorney General Assistance

Remember that businesses, just like individual consumers, can sometimes face challenges related to fraud or unfair business practices. We want to remind all our members that the Attorney General's office is a valuable resource available to assist you in such situations. Whether you encounter fraud, deceptive practices, or any other legal concerns, don't hesitate to reach out. Your business matters, and the Attorney General's office is here to support and protect the interests of Vermont businesses. To learn more or file a complaint, click [here](#).

# Funding & Education

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## Funds to Help you Bring More Local Foods to Your Shelves

The Vermont Agency of Agriculture, Food and Markets (VAAFM) has announced the release of a Request for Applications (RFA) for Local Food Purchase Assistance (LFPA) Plus funding. Approximately \$400,000 will be awarded to farmers, producers, and organizations to purchase and distribute Vermont-sourced food from socially disadvantaged producers to underserved communities across the state. Grants range from \$15,000 to \$60,000 with no match requirement. Applications are open until December 12. Restrictions do apply. Find more information [here](#).

## Community Recovery and Revitalization Grants

The \$40 million CRRP program is funded through the federal American Rescue Plan Act (ARPA). After this latest round of grants, \$8.2 million remains. [Applications will continue to be accepted](#) until all funds are allocated.

## Grants for Minority Business Owners:

Find information on 24 small business grants designed to support minority-owned businesses. These grants cover various sectors aiming to address historical funding disparities and provide opportunities for business growth, with eligibility criteria varying across programs. Read [here](#).

## Grants for Woman Owned Businesses:

Find information on 31 small-business grants specifically designed to support women entrepreneurs. The grants cover a diverse range of industries and are provided by various sources, including government agencies and private organizations. Read [here](#).

## Vermont Launches \$1.25M Small Business Assistance Program Prioritizing Marginalized Communities

Grant funding is now available for small businesses that are looking for technical assistance. The Small Business Technical Assistance Program links business owners to resources and support from 300+ Vermont-based service providers. Apply for a grant to work with a professional that could support you in updating websites, financial forecasting, financial management, operations consulting, and more.

In its third round, the program prioritizes historically disadvantaged small businesses, allocating \$1.25 million to fund 183 awards with a focus on BIPOC, women, veterans, justice-involved individuals, people with disabilities, those in very rural areas, LGBTQIA+ individuals, Young Vermonters (25 and under), and Mature Vermonters (55 and older). For more information or to apply, visit [SBTAE Small Business Technical Assistance Exchange](#).

## Work Opportunity Tax Credit

The Work Opportunity Tax Credit (WOTC) is a federal tax credit available to employers for hiring individuals from certain groups who have consistently faced significant barriers to employment. The WOTC joins other workforce programs that incentivize workplace diversity and facilitate access to good jobs for American workers. For more information, guidelines and to determine if an employer qualifies for the credit, visit the [WOTC page](#) on IRS.gov

# Member Benefits

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## Get the most out of your membership

The Vermont Retail and Grocers Association has partnered with these organizations after careful consideration and review. VRGA believes these organizations can offer superior customer service along with considerable savings to member businesses. In addition to these benefits, we offer a comprehensive package of services. Learn more about our [services here](#).

### Payment Solutions

Wix, a premiere website platform and POS solution, allows you to sell online and in store. Create a beautiful website with easy templates. [Contact us](#) to schedule a demo and receive special VRGA member rates.



### Multi-state 401K Program

Provide great retirement plans to yourself and your staff, without the high cost, liability, and time drain of paperwork oversight. Member Chris Henry, President of The Medical Store, shares, "we ended up saving over \$12,000 annually" [Learn more](#).



### Payroll Services

A Vermont company offering easy and economical payroll services. Services include payroll checks, tax filings, reports, new hire reporting and more. Member discount & savings of up to \$150. [Learn more](#).



### Business Insurance Program

MMG Insurance offers a comprehensive and competitive insurance program designed for your business. Exclusive 5% discount for members.



### Vision Insurance

Low cost vision program with major benefits. Monthly premiums starting at \$5.95/mo.



### Dental Insurance

Access to a variety of affordable plan options with no minimum enrollments. Plans starting at \$41.75/mo.



For more information, please email [info@vtrga.org](mailto:info@vtrga.org).

# Industry News | Grocery

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## Insights from FMI's Grocery Shopper Trends Report

Despite concerns about high prices, shoppers remain optimistic about their financial situations for the upcoming holidays, according to FMI—The Food Industry Association's U.S. Grocery Shopper Trends, Holiday Season report. Many are finding ways to manage their expenses, including seeking deals, cooking more meals at home, and exploring diverse food options at local grocery stores. The report indicates that shoppers are embracing a hybrid approach, combining homemade meals with prepared items from grocery stores for convenience and affordability. Cooking at home has become a popular strategy, with 31% of shoppers preparing meals at home more often and over half planning to cook and eat more meals at home in the coming year.

Additionally, 20% of shoppers are buying more groceries to contain food spending. Despite challenges, over 80% of shoppers are excited about the holidays, with some planning larger celebrations than usual.

Gasoline prices have dropped for eight consecutive weeks, with 11 states below \$3 per gallon, and further declines are anticipated, influenced by seasonal patterns and potential economic challenges impacting demand.

● **\$3.33/g**

### National Average Gas Price

↓4.6¢ from last week

● **\$3.51/g**

### Vermont Average Gas Price

↓7.2¢ from last week

Thanksgiving is the perfect time to express appreciation and gratitude.

We extend a warm thanks to all our dedicated employees, vendor partners and customers.

**New England**

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Associated Grocers of New England is a full service Cooperative Grocery Wholesaler supplying Supermarkets and Convenience Stores from Maine to New York.

## Frozen Food Trends: Exploring the Rise Amidst Inflation

During the pandemic, consumers increased their purchases of frozen foods, and this trend has continued over the past three years. Dollar sales of frozen items like meals, desserts, and fruits/vegetables have shown growth. Frozen meals, especially gluten-free options, have been popular, with retailers like Walmart introducing exclusive celebrity chef lines. However, plant-based frozen foods have seen a decline in interest. Frozen desserts and fruits/vegetables have also seen strong sales, although inflation has affected pricing. Convenience remains a key factor driving sales, with frozen snacks being a popular choice, especially those offering familiar flavors and high protein content. Despite inflation, frozen snack sales continue to grow, but unit sales for some categories have been flat or slightly down.





# New England

**Is your message clear?  
Engaging with customers  
on social media,  
can establish a  
meaningful relationship  
with your audience.**



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Associated Grocers of New England is a full service Cooperative Grocery Wholesaler  
supplying Supermarkets and Convenience Stores from Maine to New York.

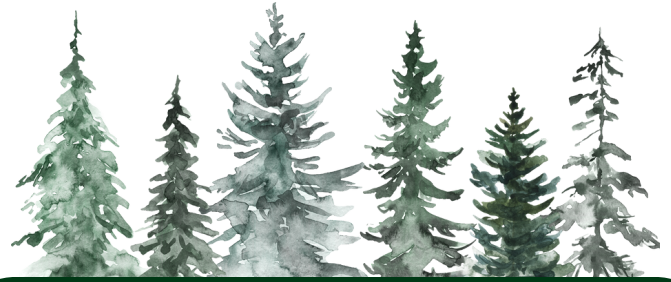


### Holiday Spending in 2023 Expected to Reach Historic Highs

The National Retail Federation (NRF) has projected that holiday spending in November and December is expected to reach record levels, growing between 3% and 4% over 2022, totaling between \$957.3 billion and \$966.6 billion. Despite a slower growth rate compared to the pandemic years, this increase aligns with the average annual holiday rise of 3.6% from 2010 to 2019. Online and non-store sales are expected to increase by 7% to 9%, reaching a total of \$273.7 billion to \$278.8 billion, reflecting a shift in consumer behavior due to the pandemic. NRF anticipates retailers will hire between 345,000 and 450,000 seasonal workers to meet the holiday demand. The forecast is based on economic indicators like employment, wages, and consumer confidence, and excludes automobile dealers, gasoline stations, and restaurants. NRF defines the holiday season from November 1 to December 31. A survey also revealed that 43% of holiday shoppers planned to start making purchases before November, with an average spending intention of \$875 on core holiday items.

### NRF Releases Principles of Using AI

NRF published its “Principles for the Use of AI in the Retail Sector” report under the auspices of its new Center for Digital Risk & Innovation. The principles are intended to support AI-related governance and strategic planning in the retail sector, promote consumer trust, and facilitate ongoing innovation and beneficial use of AI technologies. [Download the full guide here.](#)



Consumers celebrating the winter holidays expect to spend \$875 on average on gifts, decorations, food and other key seasonal items, according to the National Retail Federation’s latest consumer survey conducted by Prosper Insights & Analytics. The amount is \$42 more than consumers planned to spend in 2022 and is in line with the average holiday budget over the last five years.

### 2023 Retail Survey

Retail crime, violence and theft continue to impact the retail industry at unprecedented levels. NRF’s National Retail Security Survey is an annual survey of retail loss prevention professionals capturing data about risks, threats and vulnerabilities, as well as forward-looking priorities.

This year’s study found that the average shrink rate in FY 2022 increased to 1.6%, up from 1.4% in FY 2021. When taken as a percentage of total retail sales in 2022, that shrink represents \$112.1 billion in losses. The report also examines drivers of shrink, the increased threat of violence associated with retail crime and other priorities.

[Read the full report here.](#)

# Member News | Classifieds

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## New Members this Month

Putney General Store  
Bia Diagnostics Laboratories

Looking for  
something from a  
previous newsletter?

[CLICK HERE](#)

## Mac's Market Locations to Change Hands

The Associated Grocers of New England is set to acquire the Mac's Market locations in Woodstock, Essex, and Stowe, which are part of a small grocery store chain in Vermont. The organization, known for operating smaller grocery stores in various communities, already has a working relationship with Mac's staff and customers. They aim to continue serving these communities effectively.

## Botanica Florals Receives Prestigious \$25,000 Enhancement Grant

Botanica Florals has been chosen as one of the 25 original grantees to receive a \$25,000 Enhancement Grant from the Backing Small Businesses program, a collaboration between American Express and Main Street America.

## VSFA Members Featured in "10 Things That Are Actually Worth Buying In Vermont This Winter"

Congrats to our members Vermont Nut Free Chocolates, Lake Champlain Chocolates, and Mad River Distillers for being featured in this list!

## Price Chopper/Market 32 Hosts "Red Kettle"

Price Chopper/Market 32 is hosting the Salvation Army's "Red Kettle" holiday campaign in all 130 of its stores. The collaboration, spanning over 35 years, raised nearly \$500,000 last year, directly benefiting communities. The campaign, running from November 13 to December 24, aims to support those in need during the holiday season, with Price Chopper/Market 32 president, Blaine Bringham, highlighting the significance of community partnerships. The Salvation Army acknowledges the increasing demand for assistance and expresses gratitude for the continued generosity of Price Chopper/Market 32 and its customers, enabling them to provide essential support to families facing economic challenges.

## Association Staff is here to help!

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