

# harvest

A NEWSLETTER OF THE BLUE RIDGE AREA FOOD BANK



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Blue Ridge Area  
**FOOD BANK**

Everyone should have enough to eat.



# Food Is Medicine:

How Food Banking Is  
Transforming to Transform Lives



Cletus

**F**or **Cletus**, a retired senior living with food insecurity and diabetes, food is medicine. To manage his disease, he needs to follow a healthy diet. But he cannot afford to stock up on costly fruits and vegetables at the grocery store.

Cletus is one of more than 170,000 people in central and western Virginia whose finances are too strained to make the healthy choices they want to.

Our neighbors aren't just facing food insecurity, they're facing **nutrition insecurity**. Calories are lacking and so is nutrition.

**Jessica** relies on the Neighborhood Produce Market to supplement the food supply for her family of four. She says, "Even though I have a job—with the increase in rent, bills, and everything—it's just getting so hard to maintain." She has health issues that require her to watch her diet, and she notes that healthy food costs more than junk food. "I'm very thankful to everybody who donates—that helps us."



Jessica

**Good nutrition is expensive, but poor nutrition is also costly, for the entire community.**

Consider the child who is falling behind in school, the employee who doesn't have the energy to keep up at work, the grandparent who is becoming increasingly ill and frail—all because of an inadequate diet. Individuals living with food insecurity are more likely to have diabetes, heart disease, depression, and anxiety, and spend more on healthcare each year, than people who are food secure.

More than half of the guests we surveyed recently told us that their health was poor or only fair, and an equal number said someone in their home had health-related dietary restrictions. Because the charitable food network is a regular source of food for many community members, if the Food Bank doesn't prioritize health, then they may not get a healthy diet.

That's why we are shifting our thinking from "food is charity" to "food is medicine."

Learn more about our strategic health focus. [brafb.org/medicine](http://brafb.org/medicine)

## What does “food is medicine” mean?

“We see every day the direct connection between nutrition and chronic diseases. Our patients struggle to manage diabetes and heart disease when they lack nutritious food,” says Dr. Clint Merritt, Chief Physician Executive at Augusta Health in Fishersville, and a member of the Food Bank’s Board of Directors.

Food is increasingly being seen as a medically necessary treatment to address the specific health needs of individuals. At Augusta Health’s clinics and hospital, Dr. Merritt says, “We are asking each patient about their food security, wanting to understand if this is a key driver in a patient’s health. We are also building a network of community partners (like the Food Bank) and interventions so we can provide this important medicine in our community.”

The state’s seven food banks have committed to making sure all Virginians have equitable access to healthy and culturally familiar food, all part of an effort to prevent and manage diet-related diseases.

*Donate to support this work.*  
[brafb.org/donate](https://brafb.org/donate)

## The Blue Ridge Area Food Bank and its partner network are expanding health initiatives in several important ways:

- **We’re improving access to nutritious food through the statewide Healthy Pantry Initiative:** 120 of our pantry partners have agreed to implement one or two of the 20 designated healthy practices this year.
- **We’re setting up pantries in clinical settings through the Food Pharmacy program (20 sites to date):** While they are getting medical care, patients with chronic health conditions who are food insecure receive foods that meet their nutritional needs.
- **We’re improving the nutritional profile of our food inventory:** Using evidence-based nutrition guidelines built into tracking software (Nourish, developed by this Food Bank and James Madison University), we are buying a variety of nutrient-dense and culturally responsive foods.

We are committed to working alongside neighbors experiencing food insecurity to make sure everyone has what they need to thrive. When you support the Food Bank, you are giving more than food.



### ON THE COVER: **Care and Nourishment at Augusta Health**

Alyssa is feeding four growing children on a tight budget. Her husband works full-time but his wages have not kept up with the high cost of living.

She preserves food to make it last and makes her own bread to save money. And now Alyssa picks up fresh produce at the Augusta Health Food Pantry (a Food Bank Food Pharmacy site), where she also receives her health care.

“It has helped me be able to eat healthier and put my health first. ... I always have struggled with eating healthy but when I am given the option, that encourages me to follow through.”

She’s grateful and is not sure how she would be able to bring fresh produce home to her family otherwise.



*We are grateful to the Anthem Blue Cross Blue Shield Foundation for its financial commitment to the Food Bank’s Food Pharmacy program. This support comes to us through Feeding America’s “Food as Medicine” grant program, which marks the largest investment in the Foundation’s history.*

## You've Invested in Your IRA... Consider Investing Your IRA in Your Community

**Y**ou can help ensure that everyone has access to nourishing food *today* by making a charitable contribution to the Blue Ridge Area Food Bank through a Qualified Charitable Distribution (QCD).

Also known as an IRA Charitable Rollover gift, a QCD is a direct transfer of funds from your traditional or Roth IRA.

### What are the benefits?

- Satisfy some or all of your required minimum distribution (RMD)
- Reduce your taxable income, even if you do not itemize deductions
- Help the Food Bank provide about 30 meals for every \$10 you contribute, and change lives



*"Making IRA charitable contributions to organizations like the Food Bank is*

*as simple as providing the instructions to the custodian of your IRA, and they will take care of the rest. The benefit of receiving a QCD reduction of taxable income, instead of an itemized deduction, may provide significant tax savings. Plus, it makes me feel good knowing that my contribution helps continue the good work of the Food Bank."*

— JIM MUNGOVAN, FOOD BANK DONOR

### To Make a Gift From Your IRA, Today

- You must be at least 70-and-a-half years old on the date of your gift.
- Distributions must transfer directly to a qualified charity, like the Food Bank.
- A distribution must be received by December 31 to count in the current tax year.
- You cannot claim a charitable tax deduction for this form of contribution.

Learn more at [brafb.org/ira](http://brafb.org/ira)

*A QCD gift or beneficiary designation is best made with the advice of your legal, tax, or financial advisor.*

**You can also ensure everyone has access to nourishing food, tomorrow, when you name the Food Bank as the beneficiary of your IRA or other retirement accounts.**

These designations are made with your plan provider, can easily be modified, reduce the tax burden for your heirs, and are simple to complete.

Learn more at [brafb.org/planned-giving](http://brafb.org/planned-giving)



# 'An Amazing Gift'

*Partner Impact & Innovation Grants help build partners' capacity and resilience*

Over the last eight years, the Food Bank, with the support of generous donors, has invested in the resilience and capacity of our partners through Partner Impact & Innovation (PII) Grants. Our goal is to help partners source the equipment and materials needed to strengthen their mission and better serve their guests.

Since the start of the program, more than \$5 million has been awarded to hundreds of partners, funding items that include cooling equipment, shelving, floors, ramps, pallet jacks, and refrigerated vans and trucks.

"To me, a PII Grant feels like we're getting an amazing gift," said Heather Gibson, director at Food for Families at Park View Community Mission in Lynchburg, especially when those funds are used to enhance the guest experience.

"A while ago, a guest came to me and said that visiting our pantry was just like going to a regular supermarket. That is priceless," Heather said.

According to Tyler Herman, director of partner engagement at the Food Bank, allowing partners to enhance and expand their mission to better serve their guests is exactly what PII Grants are meant to do.

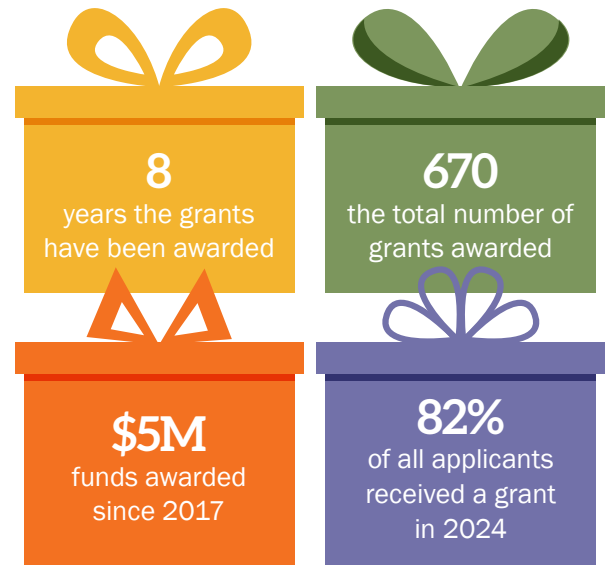
"These grants are a key driver in building the capacity for partners to source nutritious options for their guests," Tyler said. "But we also aim to improve language access with devices and tools, make spaces more welcoming, and expand deliveries to homebound individuals by providing trucks and vans."

It is music to Heather's ears.

"For many partners, it would be impossible to invest in new equipment and at the same time serve their guests," Gibson said. "Through the PII Grants, we have been able to do just that."

Donor generosity means the Food Bank can continue building capacity within our charitable food network, meaning more guests find the healthy and nutritious food they need to thrive.

## PII Grants by the Numbers



## Donor Spotlight



*"The Greater Lynchburg Community Foundation proudly supports the Blue Ridge Area Food*

*Bank through our competitive grants process. We're pleased to be a part of this collaborative effort, which will have an exponential impact on food insecurity in our region."*

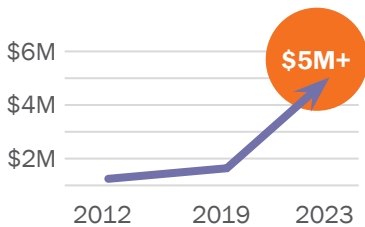
— KATHRYN YARZEBINSKI, EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR

# Rising Above



Chief Operating Officer Dave Kraft and Director of Food Sourcing Greg Knight ensure that we acquire and move food to our partners and programs—over 30 million pounds this year.

## Purchased Food Costs



## How the Food Bank Responds to the Soaring Need for Food Assistance



*“It’s very difficult, with three kids, [between the] baby, gas, rent, energy... So that’s why I come here. It helps us a lot.”*

—JESSICA

The Blue Ridge Area Food Bank relies on food donations, food we buy, and federal support, as well as staff, partners, donors, and volunteers to distribute 30 million pounds of nutritious food each year to local families living with hunger.

Food banking is more than simply moving food in and out of warehouses. Staff members work with growers, manufacturers, retailers, other food banks, food drive champions, and the USDA to keep pantry shelves stocked, and to purchase food when donations aren’t enough.

Higher demand from community members, reduced food donations, and rising food costs have all contributed to the Food Bank’s increased food purchasing expenses this year.

In October 2023, there were 173,000 monthly guest visits, a new record

that surpassed the previous high of 141,000 visits in May 2020 (the pandemic’s early days).

That means we’re spending much more on food. In the year before the pandemic, the Food Bank spent approximately \$1.8 million on food purchases. This past year, the amount exceeded \$5 million.

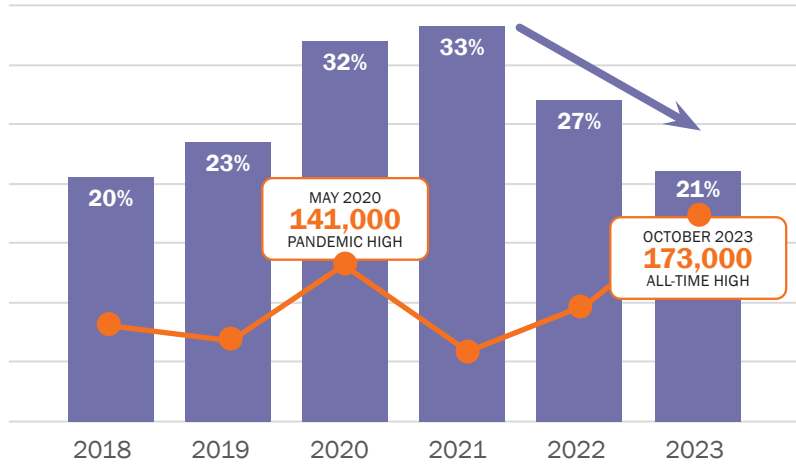
In recent years, the USDA has been providing less food, and its supply has become less predictable.

**USDA support is crucial to our ability to provide food to essential community organizations and food pantries.**

During the pandemic in 2020 and 2021, **almost a third of this Food Bank’s inventory consisted of USDA-provided food**, helping us to meet the increased community demand.

## Increasing Monthly Visits and Decreasing USDA Donations

● Average Number of Monthly Guest Visits  
■ Annual Percentage of USDA Food Donations



### The pandemic recovery didn't follow the typical trajectory.

After the pandemic, the demand for food assistance increased, even as food donations from the USDA declined. As a result, we are buying more food than ever to help neighbors struggling with the high cost of food, housing, childcare, and other necessities.

As households deal with high grocery prices, the Food Bank also faces significantly higher food costs and increased guest visits.

### This is a concerning trend.

The federal government plays a critical role in supporting hunger-relief organizations. **When the USDA provides food through programs like The Emergency Food Assistance Program (TEFAP), we pass that food to our partners at no cost.** Yet, when we must buy more food because of USDA cuts, we share some of that cost with partners, impacting all our budgets and leaving fewer resources for other critical needs.



**Help neighbors today:** Your support means we can continue purchasing food and supporting our partner pantries through cost-sharing and free delivery. Your \$10 dollar donation helps provide more than 30 meals.

**Give at [brafb.org/donate](https://brafb.org/donate)**



**GIVE NOW**

**Help neighbors tomorrow:** Urge Congress to fully fund and increase The Emergency Food Assistance Program (TEFAP) in the next farm bill. Together, we can make a difference in the effort to end hunger. **Learn more at [brafb.org/advocate](https://brafb.org/advocate)**



**ADVOCATE**

## Your Gifts Help Us Support Our Local Partners

To help our pantry partners operate effectively and distribute more nutritious food, the Blue Ridge Area Food Bank provides these benefits to partners, thanks to donor support:

**FREE donated food, produce, and grocery items:** All food and products donated to the Food Bank are free to pantries.

**FREE TEFAP/USDA food:** Partners can access TEFAP/USDA food at no cost. Qualifying pantries may distribute food acquired by the Food Bank from The Emergency Food Assistance Program (TEFAP) of the U.S. Department of Agriculture.

**FREE delivery:** Food delivery fees are waived.

**Cost sharing on purchased food:** We cover 25% of the cost of purchased food for our partner pantries. Occasionally, costs for specific products are reduced or waived entirely to move additional products quickly through our warehouses.



Passionate public support from you, our donors, makes it possible to uplift the 1 in 10 neighbors living with food insecurity. With gifts of time, food, funds, and advocacy, Food Bank donors help ensure that everyone has enough to eat. When you give food, you nourish health—a simple act with a profound impact.

Across our 25-county service area, tens of thousands of people actively support the work of the Food Bank and make each community stronger. We appreciate every one of you!

Here, we highlight a few examples of the many ways our community stepped up in recent months.

**Devils Backbone** is renowned for excellent beverages, and they excel in their commitment to community service. The company generously contributed **\$25,000 plus volunteer support** to our Mobile Food Pantry program this year. With their assistance, we can continue to ensure that healthy nutrition is accessible regardless of where one lives.



Since 2011, the annual **School Food Drive** in the greater Charlottesville area has collected a total of 101,909 pounds of food for distribution to community members experiencing hunger. This year, students from 20 schools and two organizations came together to donate **6,531 pounds of food**.

Reflecting on this achievement, Emily Warren, senior student coordinator, and recent Albemarle High graduate, shared, “Surpassing 100,000 pounds marks a significant milestone and serves as a tangible testament to the impact that youth can have in our community.”

We extend our heartfelt gratitude to Emily, all of our past and present dedicated student coordinators, and to the staff and students of area schools for their support and steadfast commitment to service.



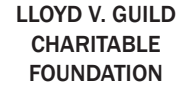
Providing **fresh produce** is a cornerstone of our work because hunger and health are so deeply connected. We are proud to partner with public and private organizations who have prioritized nutrition security for our neighbors. Thank you to the **City of Charlottesville, Navigate Gives Back, and Augusta Health** for financial contributions to support the distribution of fresh foods, and for being part of our efforts to ensure a well-nourished community.



THANK YOU, Generous Corporate, Foundation, and Event Partners



Elks Care - Elks Share



\*REFLECTS SIGNIFICANT GIFTS RECEIVED DECEMBER 1, 2023 TO MAY 31, 2024



# Get Involved

We hope the stories you've read in this issue of *Harvest* inspire you to take action.

The truth is, we are a community food bank, supported by you and here to serve. And we need many hands and hearts to achieve our shared vision.

Looking to get involved? Here are some timely ideas that can help you make a local impact this summer or fall.

## VOLUNTEER

Donate Food

Form a Business Partnership

Invite a Speaker

Share Our Story

Organize an Event



The farm bill is vitally important for supporting food security in America. It impacts access to nutritious food for the millions of people in the U.S. living with hunger. **You can make a difference by telling lawmakers to pass a bipartisan farm bill that supports food banks and the people they serve. Become an advocate at [brafb.org/advocate](http://brafb.org/advocate)**

## ADVOCATE

Make a Gift

Host an Online Fundraiser

Coordinate a Food Drive



VOLUNTEER TODAY!



MAKE YOUR VOICE HEARD!

If you don't see a path to get involved that fits you, visit our website at [www.brafb.org](http://www.brafb.org), call **540-248-3663**, or email [solvehunger@brafb.org](mailto:solvehunger@brafb.org) to start a conversation.



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# Your Food Bank Is Leading by Example

During my tenure as a member of the Food Bank's Board of Directors, I have learned a great many things about food banking, food insecurity, and how important it is to provide healthy and nutritious food to those who need it. And as you've read in this issue of *Harvest*, having a varied, nutritious diet is pivotal to staying healthy and keeping chronic illnesses at bay.

Food is medicine, indeed.

The Food Bank recognized this reality early on. Back in 2019, we partnered with James Madison University to develop Nourish, a food-scoring system that allows us to rate the quality of the food we secure and distribute. Because of this tool, we know that 98% of the food we provide contributes to a nutritious diet for our guests. Nourish is now being used by our sister food banks across Virginia.

This topic was one of many discussed at the Feeding America conference I attended last year. It was an eye-opening experience for me, even after serving on the Board for seven years. On many topics, I realized that the Blue Ridge Area Food Bank is in a leadership position among our peers.

Our leadership efforts have not gone unnoticed. In April, CEO Michael McKee received the John van Hengel Fellowship Award, considered the highest honor in food banking, during this year's Feeding America conference.

The well-deserved recognition of Michael's leadership also reflects how we, *together*, uplift those who need it most.

Thank you for your generosity in supporting this work and mission. It makes a difference in the lives of tens of thousands of our neighbors every day. And with your support, we can keep leading the way.



**Hatsy Vallar**  
Chair, Board of Directors  
Blue Ridge Area Food Bank



Watch  
Michael McKee  
receive the  
John van Hengel  
Fellowship

[brafb.org/award](https://brafb.org/award)



Blue Ridge Area

**FOOD BANK**

Everyone should have enough to eat.



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BLUE RIDGE AREA  
FOOD BANK

Headquarters:  
P.O. Box 937 | Verona, VA 24482



**OUR MISSION** is to improve food security through equitable access to good nutrition and the resources that support health and well-being.



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## OUR LOCATIONS

We serve your community through one of four distribution centers:

**Western Region  
Distribution Center  
& Headquarters**  
P.O. Box 937  
96 Laurel Hill Road  
Verona, VA 24482-0937  
P: 540.248.3663

**Eastern Region  
Distribution Center**  
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Charlottesville, VA 22903-5319  
P: 434.296.3663

**Southern Region  
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Lynchburg, VA 24504-2527  
P: 434.845.4099

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P: 540.665.0770

# You asked, we listened!

Check out the new ways to give online, and know that as a Food Bank supporter, your donation helps right here in your community.

[brafb.org/donate](https://brafb.org/donate)



GIVE NOW



Now, online donors can make a gift with PayPal, Venmo, digital wallet (Google or Apple), bank transfer, or credit card.

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