

Partnering With Purpose



Blue Ridge
AREA
FOOD
BANK

A NEWSLETTER FOR FOOD BANK PARTNERS

Food Is Medicine: The Future Is More Nutritious

Over the last decade, the Food Bank has increasingly focused on improving the health of our guests through nutrition. Now, it's one of our four strategic goals. We're doing so because for many of our guests the Food Bank and its partner network are a regular source of food.

And we are not alone; a growing number of food banks across the country are working on this same goal. We know that food is medicine. Research shows that access to nutritious food can prevent and manage chronic diseases like diabetes and heart disease and reduce mental health issues such as depression and anxiety.

Under the umbrella of Food Is Medicine, our Food Bank is working on several initiatives aimed at improving the health of our guests.

- **Food Pharmacy:** Food offered in a healthcare setting to support the health of patients who are food insecure.
- **Nourish:** Tracking software that enables us to buy healthier foods and improve the nutritional profile of our inventory.

- **Healthy Pantry Initiative (HPI)**– A statewide effort encouraging and supporting food pantries in the implementation of more health-focused and neighbor-centered practices.

A focus on HPI

Led by the Federation of Virginia Food Banks, representatives of all seven food banks in the state plus guests and pantry leaders worked together to identify 20 healthy pantry practices.

To support pantries, the Federation created an online Learning Center, which will house training modules for all 20 healthy pantry practices. All pantries will have access to the Learning Center by March. All modules will be live by July.

“Together, we can help neighbors experiencing hunger achieve their desired level of health,” said Director of Health Initiatives Maria Bowman. “When we consider that 80% of our personal health outcomes are the result of factors outside the doctor’s office, it shines a spotlight on the value of community-based nutrition efforts. This is important work that can



How Partner Impact & Innovation Grants Support HPI

Each year, we invest in partner resiliency and capacity through Partner Impact & Innovation (PII) Grants. These critical funds contributed by Food Bank donors help our partners distribute more food, increase the distribution of fresh foods, store perishables, and welcome guests in a dignified and welcoming space. That makes these grants an extension of the HPI philosophy.

“HPI is becoming the lens through which we view all of our work,” Maria Bowman, director of health initiatives, said.

If your organization is planning to apply for PII Grants, consider joining the Healthy Pantry Initiative. Pantries who join the movement will increase their chances of receiving funds, since some donors have restricted their funding for HPI-specific projects.

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Food Is Medicine

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improve lives and we're grateful to be a part of it."

Currently, 122 of the Blue Ridge Area Food Bank partner pantries have opted to join the Healthy Pantry Initiative.

A successful HPI pilot

The Front Royal Congregational Community Action Project (CCAP) was one of two local pantries who received funding as part of an HPI pilot in January 2024. As a result, the pantry was able to source more healthy foods and increase the amounts of produce, fruits, and culturally inclusive foods on its shelves. The pantry was able to reach more people of color, seniors, children, and people with chronic health conditions, among many other groups, according to an impact study.

"Your support has enabled us to change the blueprint of our pantry. Without this support, we would have been good, but now we are great," said Executive Director of CCAP Joanne Koszyk.

To learn more about HPI and find pantry resources, visit www.brafb.org/partner-resources/

Expanding Access and Benefits: A New Chapter for TEFAP

The Emergency Food Assistance Program (TEFAP) has undergone significant changes, making it more accessible and beneficial for pantries and their guests. These changes will improve access to nutritious, high-quality food items, while making TEFAP administration easier for food pantries.

Key changes to TEFAP:

Expanded eligibility: The income eligibility threshold has increased from 185% to 250% of the Federal Poverty Level.

Flexible access: Now, there are no restrictions on how often guests can access TEFAP foods. Previously, it was once per week. Please note: your organization can still determine how often guests can access food at your pantry.

Simplified certification: Signature requirements for certification, recertification, and service logging have been removed.

Longer guest certification periods: Once a guest is certified for TEFAP, they are eligible for three years, instead of the previous two-year period.

A bountiful harvest for food banks

Because of advocacy efforts across the country, food banks have seen a substantial rise in the availability of fresh produce, meat, and other highly nutritious items from the USDA. While there is still more work to be done to ensure a stable and consistent flow of TEFAP food in the future, recent developments are encouraging.

"TEFAP is a lifeline for our partners and communities. By increasing eligibility, reducing administrative work, and expanding the food supply, we can collectively increase access to nutritious meals and positively impact the health and well-being of our communities."

— TYLER HERMAN, Senior Director of Impact and Innovation

If you are not distributing TEFAP foods, now is the perfect time for your pantry to consider doing so. By utilizing TEFAP, your pantry can:



Expand your reach and access to serve a wider range of individuals and families.



Streamline your operations with simplified administrative processes and longer certifications.



Diversify your inventory to provide more free, nutritious food options to your guests.



Save money. TEFAP foods are free, helping you save money to support other organizational needs.

If you're interested in learning more about TEFAP and how it can benefit your pantry, please contact your partner engagement manager (PEM).

New Director of Partner Engagement at the Food Bank: Jacob Matz

This month, **Jacob Matz** expands his role at the Food Bank to a leadership position strengthening pantry partnerships. Jacob has served as the partner engagement manager in the Northern Region for nearly 4 years. We want to introduce all of you to Jacob, so we posed a few questions to him.

Q: Jacob, why is food banking important to you?

A: Access to nutritious food is simply a basic human right. Food banks and our network of partners are a critical component of our society's social safety net. As food bankers, it is important that we steward our partnerships thoughtfully to lift and support the organizations and people that do this work to ensure that the safety net is strong and that it does not leave anyone out.

Q: In your time at the Food Bank, what have you learned?

A: I have learned so much from our partners. I have worked in the non-profit food system since 2016, but I am still learning. Every day I am stunned and humbled by the dedication and the expert care with which our partners respond to the needs in their communities and the steps that they take to build positive and impactful experiences for their guests. Our partners are organized and strategic, while also responsive and creative.

Q: What is your vision for the network, and the Food Bank's future engagement with partners?

A: I envision a strong, equitable food distribution network that helps

everyone access the right food, when they need it. I want to support our Partner Engagement team and build network capacity to eliminate disparities, ensure healthy and responsive services, and provide stability for those we serve. I believe this can be achieved through collaboration, technical and capacity support, open communication, and shared decision-making.

Q: What excites you most about your new role?

A: I am looking forward to expanding my purview beyond the Northern Region, and engaging more with our network in the Eastern, Southern, and Western Regions. This includes learning from and supporting partners and colleagues across the Food Bank's service area. My new role offers the opportunity to work much more closely with partner engagement managers, our partner-facing Compliance and Technology team, our Public Benefits Outreach team, and our Health Initiatives team.

Q: You will continue to lead the effort to create feedback loops with partners within the network. Can you explain what we are trying to achieve?

A: A feedback loop is the process of an organization soliciting feedback from the people who access its services, learning from this feedback, and crafting a response plan. This is done through surveys, interviews, focus groups, or other means of collecting people's feedback. Most importantly, like a loop, this process is continuous, and organizations are routinely



learning, and bringing guests' perspectives into decision-making. The Food Bank cannot achieve our strategic goals if we do not hear directly from our partners and guests. So, we've committed to regularly offering surveys to food pantry guests, to learn directly from the experiences of the people that rely on the food we distribute, and putting their feedback into action.

Q: Which of your personality traits is most helpful to you in your work?

A: I try to listen and understand that I do not have all of the answers. I see our work and our goals as collective, and to work together, it is important that we consider the unique needs, perspectives, and experiences of everyone involved within this collective work.

Q: On a personal level, what brings you the most fulfillment working in food banking?

A: The energy of our partners, the love and care with which they work, and the privilege to be in a position to support them.

Note, Tyler Herman, previous director of partner engagement, continues to serve at the Food Bank, now as senior director of impact and innovation.

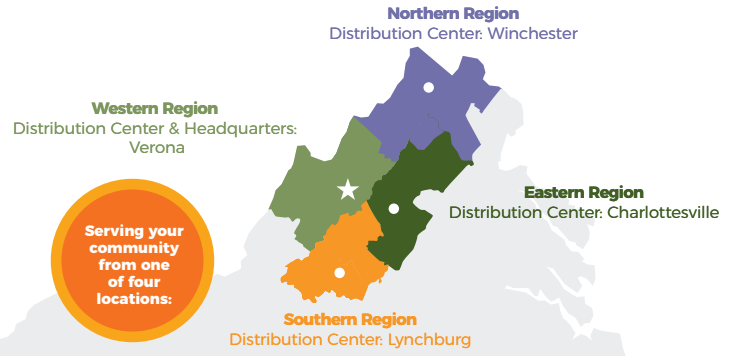


Blue Ridge Area FOOD BANK

Everyone should have enough to eat.



HEADQUARTERS | P.O. BOX 937 | VERONA, VA 24482



Our VISION: Nourishing food and better health—for everyone, every day.

Our CORE BELIEFS: Hunger is unacceptable, everyone deserves access to enough food, food sustains life and nourishes health, and we are called to serve without judgment.

Our MISSION: To improve food security through equitable access to good nutrition and the resources that support health and well-being.

Snackables



Do you know of impactful local community organizations the Food Bank could potentially partner with to expand access to nutritious food? Share our prospective partner brochure with them. You can find it here:

www.brafb.org/get-involved/partner/



Lend your voice to expand TEFAP and protect SNAP benefits in the next farm bill. Access this link to have your voice heard and make a difference! www.brafb.org/farm-bill-advocacy/

Do you want to share feedback on how the Food Bank can better support your mission? Reach out to Director of Partner Engagement Jacob Matz with your questions and suggestions: jmatz@brafb.org