

Virginia Roadmap to End Hunger *2024 Update*



Introduction

The Virginia Food Access Coalition (VFAC) is a collaborative of public and private organizations advocating for improved access to nutritious, local foods for all Virginians. VFAC has become a leading voice for food access in Virginia, building voluntary membership, and joining the Virginia Agriculture Business Council as an advocacy partner in 2023. VFAC identifies the legislative priorities of members and provides education and advocacy on food access issues.

VFAC produced the 2024 edition of the Virginia Roadmap to End Hunger as the second update to the original Roadmap released in October 2020. Continuing its purpose as a living document, this edition of the Roadmap documents the regulatory and budgetary opportunities in food access and nutrition policy available to the Commonwealth to make the most significant impact for families facing hunger. We have achieved a number of policy victories at the Federal and state level that have moved us closer to our vision of a Virginia where everyone has access to the nutrition they need. We must be vigilant in protecting these and build on them where possible because no one in a state and nation as rich in resources as ours should go to bed hungry.

In solidarity,

the undersigned members of VFAC



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Hunger by the Numbers

- In a 2022 national study, USDA found a nearly 5% increase in food insecurity among households with children. The study found statistically significant increases in food insecurity across almost all categories compared with the previous year.
- End of pandemic-era programs and waivers resulted in higher food insecurity in 2023
 - » Virginia food banks reported 5-10% increase in demand at pantries compared to the end of 2022
- Food banks are experiencing declines in food donations and a decline in the volume of commodities made available through The Emergency Food Assistance Program.
- Grocery store prices grew as much as 12% year over year in 2022. As of Oct. 2023, food inflation was 3.3%. While prices are not increasing as quickly, they are still presenting a tremendous challenge for Virginia families whose wages have not kept up with the cost of living. (CPI Home: U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics (bls.gov))
- The Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC) participation increased 5.3% compared to 2022

2022 Listening Sessions

In August and September 2022, 6 social service and food access organizations across the Commonwealth hosted listening sessions to gain insight into the lived experiences of food insecure families. Several key takeaways emerged:

- Transportation is a barrier to accessing food in general, but specifically healthy and affordable food
- Cost of food has risen
- Rising outside costs are making it harder to afford food
- Income limits need to be adjusted, and the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) expanded to provide higher benefit levels to more people
- Difficulty or lack of knowledge around accessing public assistance
- Need to invest in improvements in community connection



Child Nutrition

Wins

The past few years have ushered in significant changes for school and summer meal programs, reshaping the landscape of child nutrition access. Although many pandemic-era access flexibilities came to an end in 2022, Virginia continued to find innovative opportunities to expand access to nutritious meals for K-12 students. Read on to learn how these complex federal, state, and local programs are working together to maximize the number of young people who have the food they need to thrive.

- **Elimination of the reduced-price school meals category**

- » Virginia's 2022-2024 biennial budget included \$8.2 million to eliminate the cost of breakfast and lunch for students who qualify for reduced-price meals. This funding will help approximately 64,500 more Virginia students access free school breakfast and lunch. School meals are now free for households up to 185% of the federal poverty level (\$45,991 for a family of three).

- **CEP maximization in Virginia**

- » The Community Eligibility Provision (CEP) enables eligible schools to provide no-cost meals to ALL students. During the 2022-2023 school year, an all-time high of 1,082 public schools in Virginia offered CEP, reaching over 566,000 public school students with access to breakfast and lunch at school. Combined with the elimination of the reduced-price meals category and other focused efforts to increase awareness about school meals applications, this resulted in 62% of Virginia's K-12 population having access to free school meals.

- **Virginia Food for Virginia Kids**

- » The Virginia Food for Virginia Kids (VFVK) initiative, led by the Virginia Department of Education, Office of School Nutrition Programs (VDOE-SNP), focuses on enhancing Virginia school divisions' capacity to provide scratch-cooked, fresh, local, and culturally inclusive meals. VFVK collectively aims to improve the quality and accessibility of school meals in Virginia through components such as the Virginia Farm to School Initiative. VDOE-SNP has made significant strides in advancing the procurement of Virginia-grown and regional foods, with the goal of reaching \$24 million by School Year 2026–2027. Collaborating closely with a diverse array of farm-to-school stakeholders, including farmers, community organizations, parents, and educators, VDOE-SNP has fostered vital connections. Furthermore, the Centralized Local Procurement Pilot Program (CLPPP) has successfully linked 61 school divisions to regional food hubs, resulting in the distribution of \$1.55 million worth of locally sourced food to cafeterias by May 15, 2023.

- **Changes to Summer Meals Access**

- » In December 2022, Congress approved the Consolidated Appropriations Act of 2023, one of the most consequential changes to federal nutrition programs in years. There were two significant adjustments made to summer meals access:

First, some rural communities are now allowed to operate non-congregate meal service, allowing kids to take meals offsite. Similar to the flexibilities that were proven successful during the pandemic emergency response, rural summer meal providers are able to provide bulk meal pickup and home delivery. Rather than mandating that meals be consumed during a certain time at a specific location, these program options greatly

increase access in rural areas where families may have to travel miles to access meals. The initial rule has impacted nearly 50 counties and cities across Virginia, and the USDA introduced their interim final rule at the end of 2023, providing additional guidance on program reach in Summer 2024.

Second, a national Summer EBT program was established, providing qualifying families with \$40/month to purchase groceries for their kids when school is out of session. This program is available to states starting in the summer of 2024, but it will require an opt-in process and additional state appropriated funds to operate.

Opportunities

- **Secure state funding to support the implementation of Summer EBT:** In order to connect parents and caregivers with grocery relief in the summer months, Virginia needs to contribute 50% of the administrative funding needed to operate the Summer EBT program (the other 50% will be matched by USDA). This administrative funding, approximately \$5.4 million, must be included in the 2024-2026 biennial budget.
- **Expand school meal access:** Virginia has made great strides in connecting more K-12 students with free school meals. But many are still slipping through the cracks, including those on the cusp of income eligibility. More can be done to leverage free school breakfast and lunch as tools to support student well-being and academic success.
- **Establish minimum mealtime standards to support school meal participation:** Numerous states have enacted laws that impact lunch timing and duration. To advance school meal participation, Virginia should consider opportunities to ensure that lunch times are long enough to give all students adequate time to be served and to eat.

College Hunger

- A 2023 survey of Virginia Tech undergraduate students found that 34% experienced low or very low food security
- There is growing evidence that food security and housing insecurity are issues on college campuses
- SNAP eligibility restrictions were loosened for college students during the COVID-19 Public Health Emergency, but were reinstated in July 2023
 - » Generally, students attending an institution of higher education (i.e., college, university, trade/ technical school) more than half-time are only eligible for SNAP if they meet one of several exemptions, including working at least 20 hours per week, participating in an on-the-job training program, having a physical or mental disability, or being responsible for the care of a young child (depending on household circumstances)

Opportunity

- Establishing a **Hunger-free Campus Grant** program will provide resources to address student hunger at public institutions of higher education. If a public institution of higher education satisfies certain criteria set out in the bill, including creating initiatives on campus to address student hunger, it shall be designated as a “Hunger-Free Campus” and the State Council of Higher Education for Virginia shall award a grant to such institution. Initiatives may include, but are not restricted to, campus pantries, meal-swipe donation programs, and SNAP navigators

Food is Medicine

Food and nutrition insecurity put people in the high-risk category for chronic health conditions, such as diabetes, obesity, heart disease, mental health disorders and other chronic diseases (National Institute for Minority Health & Health Disparities). When a person chooses between diabetes management and healthy food, the outcome could be life altering-- leading to eye disease or kidney disease. While this creates a devastating cycle between healthy foods, healthy outcomes, and healthcare, the Center for Disease Control lists fruit and vegetable incentives and produce prescription programs as two key evidenced-based strategies used to increase affordability and access to fruits and vegetables. Nutrition incentive and produce prescription programs often work in tandem to expand access to fruit and vegetables for high need individuals. Food is Medicine is a framework that proves a nutrient-rich diet can prevent, manage, or improve diet-related health outcomes. The initiatives are coupled with educational programs that improve health literacy. Additionally, the program improves local market demand for fruits and vegetables, which could boost sales for local farmers, food hubs, distributors, and retailers.

Wins

Across the Commonwealth of Virginia, local produce prescription programs have demonstrated efficacy for increasing participant consumption of fruits and vegetables. Virginia's food banks host 50 food pharmacy sites that reach over 29,000 people annually in partnership with over 38 health partners, including local health departments, hospital systems, health plans, free clinics, federally qualified health centers, and home health agencies. At the pharmacy sites, medically tailored food is delivered in a clinical setting.

Community-based organizations are advancing Food is Medicine.

- In Fairfax, Virginia, Food for Others jumpstarted their Rx for Food program in partnership with area pediatricians, local health clinics, and the Fairfax County Health Department.
- In Roanoke, Virginia, The Local Environmental Agriculture Project (LEAP) has a pilot fruit and vegetable prescription (FVRx) program in partnership with Carillion.
- Lynchburg Grows launched a FreshRX program in partnership with Centra Health and Virginia Cooperative Extension.
- In Charlottesville, Local Food Hub launched the Fresh Farmacy and Veggie Prescription Program in partnership with 4P Foods and local area health clinics.
- In Richmond, Shalom Farms unveiled their Produce Rx program in partnership with Bon Secours Richmond Health System, the VCU Health and Wellness Program, and Health Brigade.

Mainstreaming Food is Medicine Virginia:

In 2021, the Virginia General Assembly passed House Bill 2065. The bill directed the Department of Social Services to create a work group comprised of diverse stakeholders to develop a plan for a three-year pilot Produce RX Program. The work group produced a report titled, Mainstreaming a Produce Rx Plan in Virginia. The report suggested the Virginia General Assembly consider creating a Produce RX benefit in Virginia designed to address and prevent diet-related conditions and to combat food insecurity.

Opportunities

- **Invest in a Medicaid-funded benefit through a Section 1115 Waiver:** The Virginia General Assembly would need to consider directing the Department of Medical Assistance Services to pursue a Section 1115 Waiver to test and measure the outcomes of a produce prescription program.
- **Allocate funding to the Virginia Department of Social Services or the Virginia Department of Health to administer a Produce Prescription Nutrition Program:** As an alternative path to developing a Medicaid-funded benefit, the Virginia General Assembly could consider providing funding to the Virginia Department of Social Services or the Virginia Department of Health to develop and administer the program. Both agencies currently deliver nutrition programs as VDSS administers SNAP and VDH administers WIC.
- **Integrate food insecurity screenings into health assessments.** Physicians across Virginia are integrating the practice of screening for food insecurity into their child well-being visits or health assessments through tools, such as the Hunger Vital Sign Screening Tool, and others tailored to their electronic medical records systems.
- **Leverage “trusted community members” when identifying unmet community needs:** A community health worker is a frontline public health worker who is a trusted member with a shared understanding of the community served. This enables the worker to serve as a liaison between health, social services, and the community to facilitate access to services, resources, and improve the quality and cultural competence of service delivery.
- **Streamline service delivery through a digital e-referral system:** Digital e-referral systems are a collaborative network of partners across healthcare, government, nonprofit sectors, and beyond. Through the system, cross-sector collaborations work to improve people’s well-being by meeting their unmet needs. The network allows users, such as community health workers, to send and receive electronic referrals and monitor patient outcomes in real-time.



Federal Nutrition Benefit Programs

The End of SNAP Emergency Allotments

Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) provides essential support during challenging times to over 900,000 Virginians. In response to the COVID-19 pandemic, SNAP Emergency Allotments injected approximately \$100 million dollars per month into Virginia's economy. These Emergency Allotments not only increased the average benefit to the maximum allowable level for each recipient's household but also contributed significantly to local economic stability by stimulating businesses and fostering growth. However, the end of Emergency Allotments in March 2023 has left many low-income households facing food insecurity once again.

Wins

- **Broad-Based Categorical Eligibility (BBCE):** In 2021, Virginia joined 43 other states in implementing the SNAP expansion known as BBCE. This initiative increased the gross income limit to 200%, enabling more families to access SNAP benefits, and eliminated the asset limit, significantly reducing administrative hurdles. As a result, an estimated 25,000 families across the state gained the means to secure nutritious food.
- Virginia's implementation of the Elderly Simplified Application Program (ESAP) has brought significant benefits to its elderly population. ESAP simplifies the application process for crucial assistance programs by eliminating redundant paperwork and reducing bureaucratic complexity. ESAP also extends certification periods to 36 months, providing eligible seniors with a longer duration of assistance.

Opportunities

- **Increase SNAP minimum benefit for seniors:** There is an urgent need to increase SNAP benefit amounts for seniors. With the end of Emergency Allotments, many elderly individuals have seen monthly SNAP benefits dwindle from around \$280 to just \$23, a stark contrast to the rising costs of food. It's crucial to recognize that the current benefit calculation doesn't account for these increased costs related to specific dietary needs. Like other nearby states, Virginia should raise the minimum benefit to \$50 for seniors to ensure an adequate level of benefits and promote health and well-being.
- **Simplify the SNAP application and renewal processes:** By making these processes less burdensome, we can encourage more eligible individuals and families to enroll and maintain their benefits. Implementing innovations such as text alerts for renewal reminders can help beneficiaries stay informed and current on their SNAP status, reducing the likelihood of benefits lapsing due to missed deadlines.
- **Expand telephonic signature capabilities for community-based organizations:** Increasing coordinated outreach efforts is crucial in reaching eligible individuals who may not be aware of their eligibility or the application process. Telephonic signature is a policy Virginia can make available to community-based organizations to significantly enhance these efforts and help us move to the original Roadmap goal of 90% SNAP participation among eligible people. Telephonic signature empowers outreach partners to assist individuals in completing applications remotely, making it easier for those with limited access to transportation or technology to participate in the program.
- **Achieve 90% SNAP participation among eligible individuals:** Virginia continues to suffer from a below average SNAP participation rate. The policy opportunities listed here, as well as enhanced outreach and application assistance efforts across the board are needed to overcome the misunderstandings and structural barriers to SNAP participation affecting food insecure Virginians.

Spotlight on the Farm Bill

The Farm Bill is the United States' foremost legislation impacting agriculture, nutrition, and food access. It authorizes the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), the Gus Schumacher Nutrition Incentive Program (GusNIP), the Emergency Food Assistance Program (TEFAP), and other critical nutrition assistance programs in addition to crop insurance programs and commodity supports. It is authorized in five-year increments and was due for renewal in 2023 but was recently extended by Congress only one year to September 2024. Over the next year, VFAC will use this opportunity to work with its Congressional representatives to achieve a Farm Bill that improves nutrition security and strengthens our regional food system.

Specific policy opportunities in the Farm Bill include:

The Farmers Feeding America Act of 2023 (S.2713), would increase the funding amount for The Emergency Food Assistance Program (TEFAP) entitlement commodities to an estimated \$960 million in fiscal year 2024 (more on this below). It would also raise the authorized amount of funding for TEFAP storage and distribution to \$200 million and extend the \$15 million authorization for TEFAP infrastructure grants. The bill provides flexibility to help the USDA better serve specific geographically isolated states and procure fresh produce. These funding levels are better aligned with the historic demand facing pantries and food banks across the Commonwealth.

The Closing the Meal Gap Act (H.R. 3037/S. 1336), is a notable proposal within this landscape. This act seeks to enhance SNAP benefits for all participants and introduces vital improvements. Among these enhancements, the act replaces the outdated Thrifty Food Plan with the more appropriate Low-Cost Food Plan as the basis for SNAP allotments. Furthermore, it eliminates the cap on the SNAP Excess Shelter Deduction and streamlines SNAP Standard Excess Medical Deductions, particularly for older individuals and those with disabilities.

The Improving Access to Nutrition Act (H.R. 1510), addresses another critical aspect of SNAP policy. This legislation seeks to eliminate the three-month time limits on SNAP eligibility for certain working-age adults who cannot document sufficient hours of work. The current law's provision often results in food insecurity for unemployed and underemployed individuals, making this proposed change a long-overdue and permanent alteration that will promote food security and equity for Americans with low incomes.

The Enhanced Access to SNAP Act (H.R. 3183), aims to address disparities in SNAP eligibility, particularly for college students with lower incomes. This proposed legislation seeks to level the playing field for such students by eliminating the requirement of work-study or outside employment for SNAP eligibility, ensuring equitable access to vital nutrition assistance.

The Lift the Bar Act (S. 2038/H.R. 4170), addresses a pressing issue in Virginia and across the United States where there are lawfully present immigrant children who cannot afford to eat due to the current prohibition. The act seeks to remove the five-year waiting period and other restrictions on lawfully present immigrants' access to SNAP benefits. This change is essential to ensure that all lawfully present immigrant children in Virginia and beyond have access to the nutrition support they need.



Community Food Access

Community-based food access plays a critical role in ending nutrition insecurity (or supporting food security) in Virginia. With agriculture as Virginia’s number one industry, connecting food insecure families with locally produced food is a top priority. Through collaboration and advocacy, community-based food access in Virginia has advanced significantly. The Commonwealth has leveraged significant state and federal resources to advance food access and strengthen the regional food system in recent years. VFAC believes that these wins should be protected, improved, expanded, and sustained.

Wins

Virginia Fresh Match (VFM)

VFM provides nutrition incentives that double the value of SNAP at participating retailers. In FY 2022, VFM secured \$2 million over 2 years in state funding to support SNAP incentives at farmers markets, mobile markets, farm stands, and community grocery stores. Paired with federal funds through the Gus Schumacher Nutrition Incentive Program (GusNIP), VFM has strengthened its network and expanded its program to 120 outlets, building income for 560 local producers with a total economic impact of \$1.3 million in 2022.

Farm Market Fresh/WIC and Senior Farmers Market Nutrition Program

The Virginia Department for Aging and Rehabilitative Services (DARS) runs Farm Market Fresh, which provides WIC clients and low-income seniors with vouchers for Virginia-grown fruits and vegetables at farmers markets in Virginia. In 2022, DARS received funds from the Virginia General Assembly and the federal American Rescue Plan Act to expand Farm Market Fresh to the entire state. DARS increased the value and quantity of vouchers available to eligible Senior and WIC Farmers Market Nutrition Program participants, is on track to double the number of Farm Market Fresh participating farmers by 2024 and plans to expand the WIC Farm Market Fresh program in coming years.

Virginia Food Access Investment Fund (VFAIF)

VFAIF is a statewide program created in 2020 by the General Assembly to support local food systems by investing in projects that improve retail access to fresh foods in low-income areas with low food access. VFAIF provides grants of up to \$50,000 for the construction, rehabilitation, equipment upgrades, or expansion of grocery stores, small food retailers, or innovative food retail projects in underserved communities. VFAIF-funded projects must have a retail component, accept federal SNAP benefits, and participate in the Virginia Fresh Match nutrition incentive program. VFAIF has offered 3 grant rounds to date, funding 27 projects in 18 localities, totaling \$1.14 million, and the 4th round will open in 2024.



Virginia Agriculture Food Assistance Program (VFAP)

VFAP supports Virginia farmers and food producers to donate, sell, or otherwise provide agriculture products to charitable food assistance organizations. Passed in 2021, the bill also creates the Virginia Agriculture Food Assistance Fund to disburse funds to charitable food assistance organizations so they can reimburse farmers or food producers for any costs associated with harvesting, processing, packaging, or transporting agriculture products donated to charitable food assistance organizations.

New Federal support leveraged in Virginia

With nationwide gaps in local food infrastructure exposed by the pandemic, the USDA's Food Systems Transformation Framework introduced in June 2022 provides states with new funding opportunities to address these gaps. New federal programs are designed to support building more resilient food supply chains, creating better local market options for consumers and producers, reducing carbon pollution, making nutritious food more accessible and affordable for consumers, and emphasizing equity by creating wealth that stays in small towns and underserved communities. Through this investment framework, the Virginia Department of Agriculture and Consumer Services (VDACS) has received nearly \$60M to help transform Virginia's local food infrastructure. VFAC will seek to collaborate with VDACS to maximize available funding, achieve the stated goals of the grant programs, and sustain the realized benefits for producers and food insecure communities.

Local Food Purchase Assistance Cooperative Agreement Program (LFPA)

A new federal program, LFPA provides funding to VDACS for grants to procure local foods from farmers/producers. LFPA focuses on socially disadvantaged Virginia farmers working with charitable food assistance organizations that have the capability to distribute these products across the state, with a special focus on reaching areas of the state that are currently underserved, rural, and urban areas. This new grant program is in its first round, working with 7 subaward organizations utilizing \$6.2M in funding. Another round of \$7.4 million is expected to be awarded in 2024.

Regional Food Business Centers (RFBCs)

A key part of the USDA's Food System Transformation Framework involves the establishment of 12 USDA Regional Food Business Centers (RFBCs) throughout the US to support a more resilient, diverse, and competitive food system. These RFBCs will support producers by providing localized assistance to access local and regional supply chains, including linking producers to wholesalers and distributors. The primary focus of the RFBCs is coordination, technical assistance and capacity building to assist small- and mid-sized producers in overcoming barriers to market access with a focus on underserved farmers, ranchers, and food businesses. Virginia is part of the Southeast USDA Regional Food Business Center managed by Georgia Minority Outreach Network, with Locus (formerly Virginia Community Capital) serving as the fiscal partner.

Resilient Food Systems Infrastructure (RFSI)

VDACS has been awarded \$6.5 million over four years from the new USDA Resilient Food Systems Infrastructure program (RFSI) to develop food and farm businesses and coordinate initiatives to build resilience across the food supply chain in Virginia. VDACS will invest in aggregation, processing, manufacturing, storing, transporting, wholesaling, and distribution of locally and regionally produced food products, including fruits and vegetables, dairy, grains for human consumption, aquaculture, and other food products (meat or poultry are supported through other programs). The RFSI program especially intends to support investments that benefit producers that qualify as disadvantaged. The Virginia RFSI State Plan is under development and a grant program will be rolled out in the future.

