Blue Ridge Area Food Bank Announces New Farm Fresh Program

New Alliances Will Support the Distribution of More and Greater Varieties of Fresh Produce

(VERONA, Va. – April 22, 2015) — The Blue Ridge Area Food Bank along with partners from the Shenandoah Valley Produce Auction of Virginia and Farm Credit of Virginia announced their new partnership to provide greater varieties of fresh produce to hungry neighbors in need. Called Farm Fresh, the program’s aim is to help the Food Bank procure greater amounts of fresh, local produce at a discount to provide Food Bank patrons with more nutritious foods.

Farm Fresh will not only advance the Food Bank’s core mission — to feed the hungry — it will also help the Food Bank become part of the solution to improve health outcomes for the economically disadvantaged.

“We know that cardiovascular disease is highly prevalent among people who are food insecure,” said Michael McKee, CEO of the Blue Ridge Area Food Bank, who explained the need for Farm Fresh at a recent press event. “We know that this problem is especially critical among seniors. Seniors who are food insecure have a 51 percent higher risk of cardiovascular disease than seniors who are not food insecure, and the number of food insecure seniors is expected to double.”

What’s more, the latest Hunger in America study found that 30 percent of households served by the Food Bank have at least one person with diabetes. Also, 57 percent of households served have at least one person living with high blood pressure. The link between diet and these chronic diseases are well known.

To get fresh produce from the farm and onto the tables of the region’s neediest, the Food Bank will bid on produce through the Shenandoah Valley Produce Auction. Local farmers associated with the Produce Auction will receive an economic benefit from selling foods gleaned from their fields or surplus foods that might either go unsold or sell for prices below the costs of bringing them to market.

“We’re delighted to be a conduit for blessings to pass from one person to another,” said Jeff Heatwole, director for the Shenandoah Valley Produce Auction. “That’s what it means to be a part of a community — to be able to look around and see people in need all
around you and to say ‘hey, I’m in a position to fill that need.’”

The Farm Credit of Virginia has arranged to match donations to the Farm Fresh program up to $25,000. Matt Lohr, director for the Farm Credit of Virginia Knowledge Center, joined the firm’s CEO David Lawrence to present the Food Bank with a matching gift check.

“Farm Credit sees this as a benefit on so many levels,” said Lohr. “As an agricultural lender, we are a part of a community; we care deeply about those in the community, and are always looking for opportunities to help — especially our neediest citizens. To help lay the groundwork and help supply more of these foods to those neediest citizens are something that we’re certainly proud to partner with.

“We’re also excited to see the benefits that it’s going to have on awareness of local foods. The local food movement all across the country has been growing and we certainly see the benefits in local foods being more accessible for all citizens,” Lohr added.

The new partnership also comes at a good time for the Verona headquarters and warehouse. Current renovations there will include a new cold storage cooler, doubling the location’s capacity to hold more produce.

“If we’re going to get more produce in, we’ve got to have some place to put it,” said McKee. “This new produce cooler will allow us to store three tractor trailer loads of fresh produce at any one time.”

The new cooler is scheduled to be ready in July — around mid-season for central and western Virginia fields bearing fruits and vegetables.

To donate to the Farm Fresh Program, please call or write Todd Lilley at 540-213-8424 or email tlilley@brafb.org.

About the Blue Ridge Area Food Bank
Founded in 1981, the Blue Ridge Area Food Bank is the largest organization alleviating hunger in western and central Virginia. Headquartered in Verona, VA, the Food Bank serves 25 counties and nine cities.
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through distribution centers in Charlottesville, Lynchburg, Winchester and Verona. The Blue Ridge Area Food Bank distributes more than 24 million pounds of food annually to 114,000 people each month through a network of 224 community partners — food pantries, soup kitchens, shelters, schools, churches and other non-profit groups. The Food Bank is a member of Feeding America, a national food bank association that supports more than 200 food banks across the United States. For more information, visit www.brafb.org.

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