One Historic Year: What We Are Learning

It’s been about a year since the world changed. The COVID-19 pandemic has impacted every part of our lives. And for the neighbors we serve, the changes have been significant—including loss of wages, housing instability, and lack of regular access to nutritious food.

Like you, we have been learning, stretching, and growing with every step of this strange journey. While working almost around the clock to ensure everyone has enough to eat, we have also forged new partnerships, adapted existing programs, and provided food free of charge to our pantry partners.

The Blue Ridge Area Food Bank has been able to adapt and respond to every challenge, thanks in large measure to your steadfast support. Thank you for walking alongside us on this journey.

To watch a recording of a virtual CEO Forum held on March 11, visit www.brafb.org/CEOtalks.
Elevated need, continues

- The number of visits surged 48% in May and leveled off to 16% from July through Dec, thanks largely to federal relief efforts. Now, there are about 11,000 more visitors each month.
- We saw a surge of people new to food assistance—28% at the high point and now averaging 16% of all visitors, up from 6% pre-pandemic.
- More than 187,000 unemployment claims have been filed in the Blue Ridge area since March. Hardest hit are low-wage earners, and women.

Achievements and updates as of March 1

- With the help of our partners, from March through January the Food Bank distributed 27 million pounds of food, the approximate equivalent of 23 million meals. That’s an increase of 3 million pounds of food over the same period the previous year.
- Thanks to donor support, we’ve been able to purchase more than $4.5 million worth of food since March 2020 (a 150% increase in volume compared to last year), and we’ve waived all expenses typically incurred by food pantry, soup kitchen, and shelter partners, including delivery fees.
- Food Bank programs have required significant adaptations, especially those helping school-aged children and homebound seniors. We prioritize outreach to children, seniors, and immigrants and refugees who may not be familiar with the food resources available to them.
- We are poised to make a significant investment in our food pantry network through the Agency Capacity Fund, providing equipment, technology, vehicles, and other capacity enhancements.
- We’ve expanded our distribution network with 23 new and nontraditional partners (like healthcare providers) to help get food to people most in need.
- More than 1,300 people have joined our volunteer ranks since March 2020. If you’re looking for a way to help, reach out to your local food pantry to see if they need volunteers, or visit www.brafb.org/volunteer or www.brafb.org/hungerhero for other ideas and Food Bank needs.

What have we learned this year?

- We can’t easily solve the problem of food insecurity without good-paying jobs and government support.
- We must prepare for a higher level of need for some time to come, especially because of the economic implications for the lowest-paid workers and women.
- Our distribution network is our greatest asset and is also highly vulnerable; investments are needed.

We are planning for the coming months and years with these realities in mind. Thank you for standing with us!

Do you have questions or want to learn more?
Reach out to Karen Ratzlaff, chief philanthropy officer at kratzlaff@brafb.org or (540) 213-8404.