

The Blue Ridge Area Food Bank Gets Its Start

The First Steps in a Decades-Long Journey to Solve Hunger

In the mid-20th century, a soup-kitchen volunteer in Phoenix, AZ heard about the mounds of product businesses wasted when refreshing their inventories. *When many people lacked enough good food to eat, why was so much of it ending up in the trash?* John van Hengel employed his newfound knowledge to plant the seeds of the first-ever food bank in 1967.

The concept of food banking—so named because of the similarities to collecting, withdrawing, and distributing resources from a reserve—rippled across the country, catching on in major cities like Los Angeles, Denver, Atlanta, and Boston through the 1970s. Rural pockets in between, however, remained largely untouched.

A founder's calling

But this didn't deter Lynchburg-native Phil Grasty from researching how he might cultivate the practice regionally. A faith-driven veteran who poured energy into a substance abuse-rehabilitation center and ministry, he recognized the oppressive presence of hunger in the Blue Ridge Area and felt called to address it.

According to *Mother Earth News*, he was told in 1980 that "Rural areas don't need food banks."



(They're agricultural hot spots, right?) Still, he trusted himself and pressed on.

"A major experiment in food banking"

Phil recruited three additional Board of Director members and secured a 11,000-square foot structure in Staunton to act as the Blue Ridge Area Food Bank's first warehouse. And the same year they got the Food Bank up and running—1981—it was recognized as a conditional member of America's Second Harvest (known as Feeding America today).

As founding Board member Howard Houghton shared, "[Phil] was the driving force" of the operation in its earliest days. Phil graduated from his position on the Board and became Executive Director, a role he held for 19 years. He worked to engage volunteers, leverage public-private partnerships, and advocate for the needs of charitable-food assistance organizations in government halls. **What was once regarded as a rural experiment by the national network developed into a widely respected regional charity with four distribution warehouses dotting central and western Virginia.**

We've come a long way since the earliest batches of food donations—including a shipment of chocolate sauce and taco shells—arrived. But through the evolution, one thing has stayed the same: The Food Bank is driven by the belief that everyone should have enough to eat—a truth Phil Grasty boldly proclaimed decades ago. *Not just in big cities but in the Blue Ridge area, too.* He set a domino effect of compassion into motion, laying the foundation for a mission-driven network of community partners to come together and combat hunger.



Founder Phil Grasty

Turn the page and journey with us through the past 40 years. Then, catch a glimpse of where we're headed next.



of Feeding Hope in the Blue Ridge Area

YEARS

1981

The Blue Ridge Area Food Bank—led by founder Phil Grasty—kickstarts its operations, offering support to 35 local organizations. The Food Bank is named a provisional member of Second Harvest, the national network that later becomes Feeding America.

1982

Although sights were originally set on the central Shenandoah Valley alone, the Food Bank's service area expands almost immediately: Branch warehouses are established in Charlottesville and Winchester to meet widespread need.

1985

A fourth branch opens in Lynchburg with the Board's approval, and 75,000 pounds of food are delivered to the acquired warehouse.

1987

More than 150 active volunteers contribute to our shared mission, earning the Food Bank the nickname "Volunteer City."

1989

The Federation of Virginia Food Banks is assembled, with the Food Bank contributing to its creation.



2005

Starting in the early 1980s, the Food Bank forms relationships with Kroger to salvage some of the stores' unshelved food. In 2005, this system is solidified with the creation of the Partner Pick-up Program, which in its first year sources more than one-million pounds of food.

2004

Following the annexation of Fauquier and Loudoun Counties in 1990, the service area grows for the last time when Appomattox County is added.

2000

To better serve older adults and neighbors with disabilities, the Food Bank initiates the Reach program. In 2016, we add the federally funded Commodity Supplemental Food Program (CSFP), also known as "Senior Food Boxes," to our services.

1993

Community engagement abounds with the inauguration of the annual Stamp Out Hunger Food Drive. The nationwide event depends on dedicated letter carriers who collect donated food while on their routes.

2006

The Backpack Program finds its footing with initial support from Walmart-funded grants. Augusta County and Craigsville Elementary School students receive five-pound packs filled with food items like macaroni and fruit.

(2013 marks a shift toward household-sized portions in what is now called the Family Backpack program.)

2007 -2021

The Great Recession forces a spike in need. The average count of people served soars from 70,000 monthly to 120,000. Resilience is required, and transformation results: The volunteer pool widens, financial support swells, and new programs launch.

2010

The Mobile Food Pantry hits the road, transporting fresh food—including produce—to people in rural areas where nutritious shopping options are limited and established pantries are scarce.

2016

Client-choice distribution is upheld as a best practice as it prioritizes guests' dignity and helps reduce food waste. Loaves & Fishes, a partner pantry in Charlottesville, is among the first to embrace the approach.



2021

At the table we set, all are welcome. On the heels of the pandemic's outbreak and in line with a new strategic operating plan, the Food Bank jumpstarts an initiative to reach and serve more community members who are immigrants and/or refugees. The work involves translating and distributing outreach materials, as well as applying a more holistic approach to food sourcing.

2020

Crisis is the real test of an organization's strength, and for the Food Bank, that test comes in the form of a pandemic. COVID-19 changes every facet of our operations, stresses our agency network, disrupts supply chains, surges thousands more people to pantries, and motivates the largest outpouring of public support in our history. Despite stress and uncertainty, 94 percent of our community partners continue serving neighbors with the Food Bank's backing, marking our network as one of the most resilient nationally.

In the same year, the first Food Pharmacy launches at the UVA Kidney Center, supplying nourishment weekly to patients in need.

2019

With support from Perdue, the Food Bank opens its first Good Food School Market at Harrisonburg High School. The program offers up shelf-stable items and fresh produce to teens (and their families) to help ensure they stay nourished outside of school hours.

2017

The Food Bank institutes its first-ever Nutrition Policy, setting a new standard for the quality of food obtained and distributed.

Feeding Hope Today and Tomorrow

What does it look like to build upon the momentum of our past while also moving the organization forward into the future? For starters, the Food Bank's new strategic themes, which will guide our work for the coming years, place emphasis on the following actions:

- strengthening our food-assistance network
- expanding access for underserved populations
- supporting improved nutrition and health within our communities
- centering advocacy on federal support and statewide initiatives

We're bolstering the existing system that allows us to serve so widely even as we're looking to better it. We're challenging notions of what charitable food assistance "should" look like and pursuing innovation to press toward the brighter tomorrow we believe in.

In the words of CEO Michael McKee, the goal is not only to "feed the line but also to shorten the line and reduce the need for us to be here in another 40 years."

Our history is in our hands—and so is the future of food banking in central and western Virginia.

Pandemic Snapshot

March 2020 - Feb. 2021



125,350

Average visitors
served monthly



25.4 million

Meals
provided



**We're looking forward to
gathering in person again!**
Please join us if you can.

Get Involved *Events Are Out of Quarantine*

AUGUST 7-14

We're marking 40 years of serving our communities throughout central and western Virginia. Help us collect enough to provide 400,000 meals: Donate funds anytime during the week and/or drop off food donations at your local branch on August 13 and 14 from 10 a.m. to 3 p.m. Working together, we can realize a future where everyone has enough to eat. Branch locations: Charlottesville, Lynchburg, Verona, Winchester

**UNITY
COMMUNITY**
FOOD & FUND DRIVE

SEPTEMBER

Hunger Action Month

One in every 12 people in the Blue Ridge area experiences hunger, but together, we can make a real difference. Participate in this month-long, national movement to raise awareness about food insecurity.

SEPTEMBER 13-26

Canstruction

Lynchburg competitors will build unique virtual sculptures using architectural software and share their works of art to raise awareness and funds for local families experiencing hunger. The 2021 theme is "Mythical Creatures and Fairy Tales."

OCTOBER 7

CEO Forum

At this virtual event, CEO Michael McKee, will share important updates about the Food Bank and answer your questions. Register to attend: www.brafb.org/ceotalks.

OCTOBER 22

LIVE2LEAD

Hosted by Dove Development & Consulting at Blue Ridge Community College, LIVE2LEAD is a professional-development opportunity designed to equip attendees with new perspectives, practical tools, and key takeaways.

OCTOBER 28

Empty Bowl Dinner

Join Blue Ridge Community College leaders, faculty, and students for this event, part of the annual Hunger Symposium that promotes hunger awareness in local communities.

NOVEMBER 11

Make Every Rep Count

Athletes raise funds and awareness for local nonprofits, including the Food Bank, with every rep they log during this weight-lifting competition at Shenandoah Powerhouse Gym in Waynesboro.

NOVEMBER 30

GivingTuesday

On this global day of giving, anyone anywhere can support the causes they care about. Following Black Friday and Cyber Monday, remember to go online and make your contribution to the Food Bank, alongside many other caring individuals.