



Blue Ridge
AREA
**FOOD
BANK**

Partnering With Purpose

WINTER 2026

A NEWSLETTER FOR FOOD BANK PARTNERS

Dear Partners,

All of us at the Food Bank hope your 2026 is off to a happy and healthy start.

We'd like to begin this (expanded) edition of *Partnering With Purpose* with a simple, but heartfelt, thank you. Thank you for your leadership, your vision, your care for your community, and your willingness to keep showing up, even as our shared work continues to grow more necessary and more complex. The updates and milestones you'll read about in the following pages are all made possible by partnerships with organizations like yours.

This issue captures another critical moment for our network. You'll read reflections from Kari Diener, our new CEO, on what she's learned in her first months on the job (coinciding with record demand for services!) and what inspires her about our work together. You'll see how Food Bank partners are collaborating and adapting in response to increased need and building new models to meet the moment. And you'll learn how our network is thinking about the road ahead—what's changing, what's holding steady—and how the Food Bank plans to invest energy and resources to meet future needs across our service area.

Along the way, we reflect on what we've built together over the years—milestones that mark our shared history, statewide efforts to strengthen community health through food, and practical tools meant to support you in your day-to-day work and long-term sustainability.

Taken as a whole, we hope it feels less like a formal update and more like a conversation. One that recognizes the many challenges you're navigating, celebrates your compassion, care, and resourcefulness, and reinforces something we know to be true: we are strongest when we are together.

We are proud to call you a partner.

Sincerely,

Jacob Matz
Director of Partner Engagement





Building a Resilient Future

Refining Our Strategic Plan

Between now and 2028, the Food Bank will continue to invest in three core areas: partner capacity, capability, and resiliency; data and technology infrastructure; and staff wellness and retention.

These priorities were affirmed during a midpoint check-in on the five-year strategic plan (2023-2028), conducted with staff and the Board of Directors recently.

That assessment also made clear that the four strategic goals identified in 2023 still provide the right foundational framework for our collective work. Those goals are:

- Eliminate disparities in access to nutritious food
- Improve the health of guests
- Support household financial stability

- Maintain a strong and sustainable organization

However, the environment around us has changed significantly, and so must our approach to achieving these goals in the next two years.

What has changed since 2022?

COVID-era demand did not decrease as anticipated. Because of higher living costs and inflation since 2020, the Food Bank and this network have been serving record numbers of guests each year for several years, putting enormous strain on everyone in the network. On top of that, partner capacity is strained due to volunteer shortages, succession planning gaps, a more competitive fundraising environment (especially

in rural areas), and a lower volume of free food streams.

Lastly, federal nutrition programs (SNAP, TEFAP, and other USDA programs) faced unexpected budget cuts and more restrictive eligibility requirements.

Going forward

Staff and Board reached strong consensus on three critical areas for investment: partner capacity, capability, and resilience (top priority); data and technology infrastructure; and staff wellness and retention. For partners, this means increased funding for capacity-building grants, succession planning support, and deeper collaboration to strengthen feedback loops. We'll also explore innovative distribution models and expand

Did you know?

...That the Food Bank marks its 45th anniversary in 2026? Our birthday is November 23, 1981.



Virginia Food Banks Collaborate to Advance Food Is Medicine

Virginia's seven food banks have launched a bold, three-year Food Is Medicine (FIM) strategic plan. This statewide commitment aims to improve nutrition security and health for the Virginians we collectively serve. This plan aligns seamlessly with the Blue Ridge Area Food Bank's own strategic priorities.

For us, it's not a shift, but a continued emphasis on health and nutrition.

Why does this matter?

"A unified approach means greater impact for the communities we serve," said Maria Bowman, director of health initiatives at the Blue Ridge Area Food Bank.

"When the Blue Ridge Area Food Bank works with our sister food banks across the state, we achieve more than we could alone. Thanks to the scope of this collaboration, we can share resources, advance our existing health and nutrition programs, and identify new ways to improve community health."

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partnerships beyond traditional networks to reach underserved communities.

Health-focused programs remain a priority as well, with continued growth in Food Is Medicine initiatives and the Healthy Pantry Initiative.

Finally, we recognize the importance of organizational resilience. Investing in staff wellness, professional development, and technology upgrades will help us move from a reactive crisis response mindset to sustainable, smart growth.

As we look ahead, one message stands out: Solving hunger takes a village. Your partnership is essential to building a stronger, more resilient network for the communities we serve. Together, we can provide nourishing food and good health—for everyone, every day.

The FIM strategic plan includes four goals:

- **Nourish** – sourcing and distributing nutritious foods
- **Connect** – reducing barriers to food access
- **Integrate** – linking food banks with healthcare systems
- **Navigate** – expanding public benefits enrollment

What can you expect?

"We'll continue to prioritize sourcing fresh produce and nutritious foods, identify and support high-need communities to expand services, and support public benefits outreach and application assistance," Maria said. "On top of that, the growth of the Food Pharmacy program, expansion and support of the Healthy Pantry Initiative, and further development of the online Learning Center are Blue Ridge Area Food Bank priorities for the next three years."

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“Together, we are stronger. And even though we are experiencing difficult times right now, I have to believe that the power of community will help us weather the storm.”

— Adrienne Young



This year, the Blue Ridge Area Food Bank designated Waynesboro a priority community for food assistance because of its high food insecurity.

‘Food Is Freedom’

How River City Bread Basket Is Empowering Waynesboro

Inside a small building on North Winchester Avenue in Waynesboro, something special is happening. A movement built on food, hope, dignity, and, most of all, *empowerment*. At the center of it are Adrienne and A.J. Young. The married couple created the Lifeworks Project in 2021 to help uplift people and families in real, lasting ways.

“Everyone deserves the chance to thrive,” Adrienne said. “We do this because we love this community so much.”

A mission of solidarity

River City Bread Basket, a guest-choice food pantry that opened in 2023, is at the heart of The Lifeworks Project.

“The food we offer is important, and a big part of what we do,” Adrienne said. “For the simple reason that everyone should have enough to eat. But it’s also the key that opens the door for us to have deeper conversations about people’s lives,” she said.

“We are honored that people share their life stories with us, but we also want them to have what they need to better their lives. We feel that food is freedom. We want to be the accomplices on their journey forward. We don’t offer charity, but solidarity.”

The pantry serves about 500 families each month. Since the pantry opened its doors, Adrienne and A.J. have supported about 1,400 local families.

Programs that change lives

In addition to food access, under The Lifeworks Project umbrella Adrienne and A.J. offer a range of programs that address the real-life barriers people face.

- Micro-grants help cover expenses like car repairs, work uniforms, sturdy boots, or apartment application fees. Fully funded by donors, the program has helped 259 locals to date with critical purchases.
- Food delivery ensures that guests in rural areas without transportation can still get the food they need.
- Their annual Job Fest connects job seekers with local employers. The Hooptie Hospital Car Care Clinic teaches basic vehicle maintenance, empowering participants to take control of their transportation needs and issues.
- Through a partnership with The Arrow Project, healthcare professionals provide mental health services and support onsite, which is an essential but often overlooked part of well-being.

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“Everything we do is about empowering people. What we do isn't called a handout—it's called a hand up.”

— A.J. Young



Ordinary people, extraordinary impact

“We are not extraordinary people,” Adrienne said. “Everyone can start a food pantry. What really helps, though, is our passion. Our day jobs help pay the bills, but this is where our hearts are. Every day.”

Their story shows what's possible when compassion meets action.

“We really believe in the power of community,” Adrienne said. “Together, we are stronger. And even though we are experiencing difficult times right now, I have to believe that the power of community will help us weather the storm.”

The Youngs show Waynesboro what it means to serve with heart. And in doing so, they're proving that when we lift each other up, we all rise.



Scan the QR code to see a video with Executive Director Adrienne Young at River City Bread Basket

Addressing food insecurity means more than providing meals—it's about meeting people with dignity, respect, and care. At the Food Bank, we honor Adrienne and A.J.'s community-centered mission, their ability to bring hope in challenging times, and their work to empower opportunity wherever they go. From all of us at the Food Bank, thank you!

Early Impressions:

A Q&A With Kari Diener, the Food Bank's New CEO



Reflecting on your first 6 months of leading the Food Bank, what stands out most?

I am grateful for the strong partner network and depth of community support for the Food Bank. This fall has been one of the busiest periods in the Food Bank's history. Across Virginia, the Federation of Virginia Food Banks reported a nearly 20 percent increase in guest visits over the same time last year. In our service area, we were able to quickly and nimbly meet this dramatic increase in need because of the resilience, strength, and responsiveness of our partner network and because our communities stepped up so remarkably—and generously—through individual volunteerism and financial support.

What do you think makes our partner network so unique?

I am so impressed by the deep connections that our pantry and program partners have with their neighbors, how they consistently show up with compassion, dignity, and care, and the breadth of understanding of community needs that they bring to their work.

Another area that stands out is our network's desire to collaborate, and the emergence of food coalitions that build the connective tissue, resource-sharing, and peer support network that helps us all thrive. Two examples are the Piedmont Action Coalition on Hunger (PACH) and the Loudoun Food Providers Group. PACH spans

counties in our Eastern and Northern regions, with strong community ownership. They have also worked to map needs for transportation and delivery support for area partners to help extend the food access web. The Loudoun Food Providers Group (spearheaded by Loudoun Hunger Relief) has brought together Food Bank partners, area backpack programs and non-Food Bank partner pantries to coordinate on services. The bottom line is that collaboration is key for us all to do this work well.

What do you see as the biggest challenge for our partners in the next 12 months?

We are seeing dramatic changes to social safety nets like SNAP, putting into question the continuity of federal and state programs that have historically been stable. And where food banks like ours thought guest demand would taper after COVID, if anything, it is on the rise, with the rising cost of living impacting many families in our region.

What are you most excited about for the future of the Food Bank and this network?

I am excited about the work of our Healthy Pantry Initiative and the progress that we've made collectively to ensure that our neighbors have access to nourishing food. I am also excited about our network's work—and ideas for future work—to center our guests and uplift their ideas and voices to strengthen our approaches

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— Kari Jorgensen Diener

to addressing food insecurity in our region.

What message would you like to share with our partner pantries, programs, and their volunteers/staff?

All of us at the Food Bank see the dedication, intentionality, hard work, and heart each one of you pour into this work. As food insecurity is now at an historic high, you all have weathered a *lot*. You're working tirelessly to acquire as much food, funding, and volunteers to support your community with compassion, care, and respect. You're adaptive and resilient, consistently show up when times get tough, and stand as steadfast beacons of service, hope, and light when our communities need you the most. Getting to work with you all to meet this moment is a privilege; we're so grateful to walk alongside you. Thank you for choosing to dedicate your time and talents to advancing our shared mission.

Planning for Your Future: Why Anticipating Succession Matters

Food pantries and programs are the backbone of hunger relief in our communities. So many depend on a few dedicated leaders to keep things running. Many of these leaders are volunteers. When these individuals retire or move on, operations can stall, and sometimes even cease, if there's no plan for succession.

"I don't see or hear much about succession planning in the nonprofits in our county," Rhonda Oliver, executive director of Feeding Greene said. "We benefit from a lot of loyal, hardworking volunteers, but not many who want to lead an organization. It's difficult to find new people. Leaders in rural areas wear many hats, from grant writing and paying bills, to mopping floors. Most people shy away from that responsibility. We just do the best we can with what we have."

Rhonda's comments highlight a reality for many pantries: Succession planning often feels out of reach. Limited resources, volunteer-driven operations, and the sheer workload make it hard to focus on leadership transitions. Yet, without a plan, a change in leadership can affect the entire organization, ultimately impacting food access for families who depend on these services.

Succession planning tips

Create a list of key operational processes. List all essential tasks, including infrequent ones like tax filings or quarterly reports. Note who leads and who serves as a backup, then prioritize the most critical functions—such as ordering food and opening the pantry—to identify gaps.



Volunteers at the Central United Methodist Church in Staunton get ready for a distribution.

Document systems. Record instructions for each process in a central location so others can step in when needed. *Take it one step at a time. Steady progress is good progress.*

Encourage others. Share responsibilities with a core group of leaders to build institutional knowledge and resilience. This prevents burnout and ensures continuity. If one leadership role is currently responsible for too many things (making it difficult to attract a new leader), consider how to divide tasks across several roles to make leadership more attractive.

Clarify roles. Clearly defining roles across the organization will help a new leader understand how tasks

are delegated and labor is divided to keep the operation running smoothly.

Connect with the Food Bank. Connect with your Partner Engagement Manager if you have questions about, or if you need help with succession planning.

"Succession planning helps preserve the deep and hard-fought knowledge of pantry leaders, the important stories of their organizations, and the perspectives they've gleaned from guests across their communities," said Jacob Matz, director of partner engagement at the Food Bank.

"Proactive succession planning ensures that our critical services and supports are resilient and here for the long haul."

Did you know?

The Food Bank has distributed more than \$5.5 million through our Partner Impact and Innovation grant program since its inception in 2017. These funds provide critical support to partners, enabling them to operate more efficiently and effectively.

"Proactive succession planning ensures that our critical services and supports are resilient and here for the long haul."

— Jacob Matz, director of partner engagement



Blue Ridge Area FOOD BANK

Everyone should have enough to eat.



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FOOD BANK

Headquarters:
P.O. Box 937 | Verona, VA 24482



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

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 LOCATIONS

We serve our partners and our community through four distribution centers:

**Western Region
Distribution Center
& Headquarters**
P.O. Box 937
96 Laurel Hill Road
Verona, VA 24482-0937
P: 540.248.3663

**Eastern Region
Distribution Center**
1207 Harris Street
Charlottesville, VA 22903-5319
P: 434.296.3663

**Southern Region
Distribution Center**
501 12th Street, Suite B
Lynchburg, VA 24504-2527
P: 434.845.4099

**Northern Region
Distribution Center**
1802 Roberts Street
Winchester, VA 22601-6312
P: 540.665.0770

Snackables



Want to make your voice heard on hunger relief?

We've created easy-to-use tools to help you advocate with local elected officials. Explore them here:

www.brafb.org/advocacy

The Food Bank will roll out Agency Express 4.0 to all partner agencies in Spring/Summer 2026. The updated platform will feature a more intuitive design, easier navigation, and improvements to the backend of the site. A small group of partners will be invited to pilot the new ordering site, beginning in Spring 2026.



Mark your calendars!

Here are some important reminders for this year's PII grant cycle.

The application is open until Friday, February 27 to submit your grant proposals. On February 18, the Food Bank will host a Q&A session to answer any questions. More information to come soon. All funding decisions will be made in the spring, with funds and equipment distributed in July.