

harvest

A NEWSLETTER OF THE BLUE RIDGE AREA FOOD BANK

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Blue Ridge Area
FOOD BANK

Everyone should have enough to eat.

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How We Are Solving Hunger in **Rural Places**

Food Insecurity Shaped by Geography

In rural communities, hunger is shaped by the long distances and limited resources that define daily life.

In places like beautiful Page County, for example, one of 25 counties in the Food Bank's service area, accessing food can mean long drives, higher prices, and limited transportation options.

Justin Horn has a front-row seat to what rural hunger looks like. He is the executive director of Page One, a Food Bank-supported food pantry in an area where food access is limited.

"Food insecurity in rural areas is very challenging, because people have limited options to get food," Justin said. "On top of that, many of the people here are retired seniors on fixed incomes. Many don't have transportation to get around, there's no public transportation available, and there are only two grocery stores in the county. Especially in times when life gets more expensive, those folks turn to our food pantry for help."

This is why the Food Bank is so involved in rural communities across our service area, and we have been since our beginning in 1981.

While hunger exists in every zip code, it is especially common in rural communities.

In fact, **9 out of 10 U.S. counties with the highest rates of food insecurity are rural.** In Page County, 1 in 7 residents is food insecure. As a food bank rooted in this region, we see how these barriers to food affect our neighbors every day.

Hear from two guest voices from Page County.

Meet Victoria: Strength and connection where options are few

Victoria's life in rural Page County is shaped by distance and determination. Living outside Luray, rising costs and long drives limit how often she can travel, so she carefully plans each trip. Because SNAP and Social Security benefits don't cover all her basic needs, she relies on the Page One food pantry to bridge the gap, stretching what she receives so she can cover other expenses. In a place where help isn't always close by, the pantry is both a practical lifeline and a meaningful point of connection. "I love them all," she said about the pantry volunteers.



VICTORIA

Meet D'anna: Traveling the distance to find a deal

D'anna has learned to be "as savvy as you can be."

"Because grocery prices are outrageous," she said.

With few grocery store options and high prices, even a basic trip can blow her budget. To make it work, she carpools long distances to shop for better prices and relies on the Page One food pantry in Luray to fill the gaps. She does whatever it takes to make sure her two kids, ages 3 and 14, have enough nourishing food.



D'ANNA

How does the Food Bank help rural neighbors?

At the Food Bank, we are committed to supporting our neighbors living in rural communities. For example:

- By investing in partners via Partner Impact & Innovation (PII) grants, we help them expand their capacity. For instance, following the installation of a new walk-in freezer, Page One can now store and distribute more fresh, nutritious food.
- Through the Food Pharmacy program, we collaborate with clinics and healthcare partners who provide medically tailored groceries to their patients to support their health.
- By increasing delivery frequency, we're ensuring rural pantries have the inventory they need to serve their communities.

- In areas where few brick-and-mortar pantries operate or where neighbors are unable to travel to traditional pantries, the Mobile Food Pantry (MFP) program brings healthy food closer to them.

These are some examples of how the Food Bank is eliminating disparities in access to nutritious food and actively helping to improve the health of our guests.

Geography shouldn't keep someone from getting the food they need. And with your support, we continue to reach people wherever they are.



IMPACT IN ACTION:
WATCH JUSTIN AND VICTORIA SHARE THEIR STORIES IN THIS VIDEO.



Powered by Community for 45 Years

How volunteers, donors, staff, and partners built a lasting movement to end hunger



What began in 1981 in a small Staunton warehouse without heat, running water, or electricity has grown into one of the region's most trusted and effective hunger-relief organizations—not because of a single person, but because an entire community chose to help.

“Rural areas don’t need food banks,” an urban hunger-relief worker

assured founder Phil Grasty as he researched and planned for the new organization in 1980. “Why, people there can pick fruit right off the trees.”

Phil knew apples alone were not the answer. He recognized hunger existed in his community, and he recruited others with passion to help him address it.

How it started

Churches organized collections. Farmers donated produce. Businesses contributed trucks and warehouse equipment. Families dropped canned goods into barrels and mailed checks with handwritten notes of encouragement. Volunteers showed up to unload trucks and sort food.

OUTREACH ANNIVERSARIES in 2026

Over the years, community support helped fund warehouse expansions, refrigerated trucks, nutrition programs, and outreach efforts designed to reach families, children, seniors, and rural communities.



For 20 years, the **FAMILY BACKPACK PROGRAM** has helped elementary school children and their families solve weekend hunger.

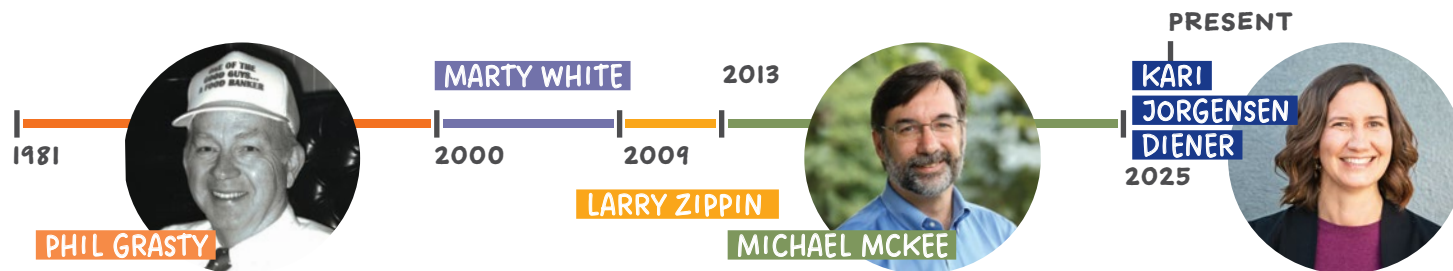


SCHOOL BREAK BOXES have been helping families for 10 years. They bridge the nutrition gap during school holidays and extended breaks when children lose access to school meals.



The **REACH PROGRAM** marks 10 years of serving older adults and homebound neighbors who may struggle to access food because of mobility, transportation, or health challenges.

Food Bank Leadership Over 45 years



Together, those acts of generosity built something lasting.

In the Food Bank's earliest years, volunteers were so essential that Board meeting minutes affectionately referred to the organization as "Volunteer City." Community members harvested grapes for juice projects and helped reclaim donated food. Supporters didn't simply donate to the Food Bank—they became part of its mission.

The transformation and the growth

That spirit of partnership enabled growth beyond its original footprint.

The Food Bank began by working with 35 partner agencies in 18 counties. From there, it expanded to serve 25 counties in western and central Virginia and connecting hundreds of food pantries, soup kitchens, shelters, and community organizations through a regional network. It grew from one distribution truck to a professionally managed fleet. From one location to four top-rated distribution centers, powering a coordinated hunger-relief system.

As the region changed over the years, so did the challenges facing families. Economic downturns and rising costs meant mounting

pressure on households struggling to make ends meet.

And unfortunately, the number of people seeking the Food Bank's help grew. For comparison, we distributed 500,000 pounds of food in 1981; last year, we distributed 33 million pounds.

Through each changing season, the community continued to respond. Every contribution—whether a few dollars, a box of canned goods, or a morning spent packing food—helped ensure that neighbors had access to meals and hope.

Celebrating strength and resilience

Today, the Food Bank's work remains rooted in the same belief that launched it in 1981: when people come together, hunger can be met with compassion, dignity, and hope.

Forty-five years later, our mission is still powered by community—by every volunteer, donor, partner, and advocate who refuses to let neighbors face hunger alone.

And as the need continues, so does this shared commitment: to ensure everyone in our region has the nourishment they need to thrive.

Thank you for standing with us.

NOURISH THE FUTURE

You can play a vital role in ensuring that children and families in our community have food on the table for generations to come.

A gift through your will or estate is one of the simplest ways to create a legacy of nourishment, hope, and dignity.

Planning a future gift is easier than many people imagine and keeps the Blue Ridge Area Food Bank strong for years to come.

When you include the Food Bank in your estate plans, you join the Will to End Hunger Society—a special community of supporters helping create a future that's free from hunger.

Interested in learning more? Wondering how your gift could make an impact?

Visit www.brafb.org/legacy or contact Karen Ratzlaff at 540-213-8404 or kratzlaff@brafb.org for a confidential conversation and sample bequest language.



Food Is Medicine

Putting Nutrition at the Center of Health



R_x

If Foods Were Prescribed Like Medicine...

Patient Name: _____

- ☒ We'd screen every patient for food insecurity
- ☒ We'd fill food prescriptions at Food Pharmacy sites
- ☒ We'd provide medically tailored food
- ☒ We'd prevent and manage chronic diseases like diabetes, high blood pressure, heart disease
- ☒ We'd manage illness with nutrient-dense food

This is exactly what Food is Medicine programs do.



"Coming to the pantry helps me manage my health conditions," Paula said while filling her cart with the foods that support her well-being.

Paula needs six well-planned meals each day to manage her low blood sugar, but this is challenging on a limited income.

"Food Is Medicine" (FIM) puts nutrition at the center of health and health care. This approach encompasses a variety of programs and services that aim to improve, manage, and prevent diet-sensitive illness through access to healthy food.

Across the region, the Blue Ridge Area Food Bank and its partners are putting FIM into practice to help neighbors who can't afford all their groceries. There are several ways we do this today:

- **Food Pharmacy:** In 33 clinics and hospital settings, patients who are food-insecure receive food to support their health. They also receive nutrition education and referrals to other community resources. Clinicians screen for food insecurity and connect patients to resources that help prevent and control diseases with nutrition.

- **The Healthy Pantry Initiative (HPI):** 177 partner pantries are focused on providing foods that meet guests' health needs, along with education about healthy choices and easier access to food.
- **Sourcing healthier food:** Using nutrition guidelines embedded in Nourish—the Food Bank's nutrition tracking software developed with James Madison University—the Food Bank acquires nutrient-rich foods. Guests who need specific items to manage conditions such as diabetes, high blood pressure, and heart disease can access those foods from a Food Pharmacy or traditional partner.
- **Remote Area Medical (RAM) clinics:** Providing produce and shelf-stable items to neighbors when they are receiving healthcare helps ease the burden of access for underresourced and underinsured patients.

This is "Food Is Medicine" in action, and it is tied directly to the Food Bank's strategic goals.

Healthier lives, backed by science

Medical leaders and research support this approach. "We see every day the direct connection between nutrition and chronic diseases," said Clint Merritt, MD, Chief Physician Executive at Augusta Health in Fishersville, Va., and a member of the Food Bank's Board of Directors.

In a study conducted by Augusta Health, patients who were food-insecure stayed in the hospital longer and were readmitted more often within 30 days. It also showed that patients with steady access to healthy food were more likely to have controlled their diabetes than those who were food insecure.

Elected leaders are also recognizing how "Food Is Medicine" can ease pressure on state and federal budgets. Diabetes alone drives \$1.3 billion in Medicaid spending, nationally. Bills are being introduced across the country with the intent to improve health outcomes and reduce the need for medical care for people with nutrition-related chronic diseases.

By helping people manage illness with the right foods, Food Is Medicine programs not only lower healthcare costs; they also strengthen communities and create better lives for Virginians.

For Joanne and her spouse, medication has become difficult to afford. "Because we both live on Social Security, and with inflation the way it is, plus the cost of my medications ... I wouldn't be able to afford my insulin," she said. Access to the healthy food at this pantry has improved their health. "Our diets have changed. Because my husband and I are both diabetic, having fresh fruits and vegetables has been great."

When the right food is available at the right time and place, guests like Paula and Joanne can manage their health and avoid impossible choices between food and medicine.

Become an advocate for "Food Is Medicine" policies at www.brafb.org/FIM-action.



"We see every day the direct connection between nutrition and chronic diseases"
—Clint Merritt, MD



Access to healthy foods helps Joanne and her husband better manage diabetes while stretching a limited household budget.



At the Food Bank, we witness heartwarming, heroic acts that take place every day.

Hunger Heroes are inspired to take action to end food insecurity. A Hunger Hero exhibits bravery and empathy and generously sets an example for others to follow. Food Bank volunteers, partners, advocates, donors, staff, and guests are our heroes.

We appreciate every one of you and your support of the Food Bank to make local communities stronger and healthier.

Here, we highlight just a few examples of Hunger Heroes who stepped up to make a difference in recent months.

As expenses rise, many older adults living on fixed incomes face difficult choices between paying for groceries, medication, utilities, and transportation. We are deeply grateful to our friends at **Genworth**, whose gifts through the Genworth Foundation support seniors in the greater Lynchburg area. Their long-standing generosity helps ensure that older neighbors have access to healthy food and compassionate support.



University of Virginia student **Daniel McCain** produced a powerful documentary. **"The Invisible Epidemic"** chronicles colleges and universities across Virginia, from schools with billions in endowments to community colleges, struggling to fund their campus food pantries and support students living with food insecurity. It is inspiring to see young people who care deeply and who are committed to creating meaningful change.



WATCH
THE
INVISIBLE
EPIDEMIC



Grocery retailer **Giant** has been a steadfast Food Bank partner for many years, consistently illustrating what community commitment looks like in action. In honor of their 90th anniversary:

- Giant contributed a significant financial gift to support childhood hunger relief
- Their associates donated volunteer hours
- They held a food drive at the Charlottesville store that collected enough food and funds to provide 6,169 meals



Retiring, longtime store manager Tim Wamsley and associates.

THANK YOU, Generous Corporate, Foundation, and Event Partners



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*REFLECTS SIGNIFICANT GIFTS RECEIVED DECEMBER 1, 2025 TO MAY 31, 2026

WELCOMING NEW LEADERSHIP: *New Board Members and a New CFO Join the Food Bank*

This summer, several accomplished leaders assumed leadership roles at the Food Bank. They bring fresh ideas, deep community connections, and a shared belief that everyone deserves enough to eat. We are pleased to welcome five new members to our Board of Directors:

- **Will Crimmins, CFA**
Brown Advisory
- **James Hornsby**
Walmart
- **Fariss-Terry Mousa, PhD**
James Madison University
- **Rev. Eugene French Triplett, Jr.**
Culpeper Free Clinic / Rising Zion Baptist Church
- **Patricia Young**
Centra Health

We're grateful for these new leaders as they join a committed board that shapes strategy, supports the CEO, and helps advance our mission across the 25-county region.

A new Chief Financial Officer has joined the management team: Ali Erarac brings extensive financial experience and a commitment to strengthening the Food Bank's long-term financial health.

In turn, we honor the nine years of service of outgoing CFO, Linda Baker, who retires at the end of the calendar year.

To learn more about the Food Bank's leadership team, visit www.brafb.org/leaders.



Get Involved

We hope the stories you've read in this issue of *Harvest* inspire you to take action.

For details on these and other partnership and event ideas, visit our website at www.brafb.org, email solvehunger@brafb.org, or call 540-248-3663.

COORDINATE A FOOD OR FUND DRIVE

Volunteer

Donate Food

Invite a Speaker

Advocate

Host an Online Fundraiser

BUSINESS PARTNERSHIP

Make a Gift

Share Our Story

Organize an Event

Whether you're rallying friends and family to give online, collecting donations at your workplace, or organizing a neighborhood food and fund drive, every effort helps provide meals for neighbors living with hunger across our region.

Our **Hunger Hero Toolkit** makes it easy to get started, and we love celebrating the creative ways our community comes together to support the Food Bank's mission.



GET THE
TOOLKIT HERE



ABC 13 and **Berglund Toyota** worked together to shine a spotlight on the growing need in the greater Lynchburg community and the work of the Food Bank. Berglund Toyota underwrote the cost of a major media campaign, while ABC 13 reporters and producers volunteered in our Lynchburg warehouse, assembling emergency food boxes for neighbors experiencing food insecurity. The campaign brought powerful awareness to our mission and helped provide nearly 50,000 meals for our neighbors living with hunger.

abc 13 WSET-TV

BERGLUND TOYOTA



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Centra Health

KARI JORGENSEN DIENER

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LES SINCLAIR

MANAGING EDITOR
Sr. Manager, Communications & PR

Driving Down Country Roads

When this food bank was founded in 1981, America's Second Harvest (now, Feeding America) heralded us as an experiment in rural food banking. We've certainly learned a lot about what works in rural communities over the past 45 years, but there is also much we are still learning and testing.

What we do know is that hunger is more common in rural areas. That might seem odd given the crucial role that rural communities play in food production, but there are many factors at play. Some of the challenges include no public transportation and longer distances to travel, fewer grocery stores and employment opportunities, and limited internet connectivity.

We believe all our rural neighbors deserve enough to eat—just as our neighbors in urban and suburban communities do. So, this Food Bank will continue to do what we can to limit the barriers to charitable food access, regardless of where people live.

We're already using mobile distributions to reach many rural areas. Partners—food pantries, senior services, health clinics, school-based programs—are based in these communities and are helping us achieve equitable food distribution. Future potential innovations include partnerships with local agricultural producers to ensure more fresh food access.

We have also identified the need for more and better data and technology, improving our efficiency in getting the right amounts of food out to people when and where they need it.

The last mile of food distribution is often the most expensive and complex part of transporting food to people living with hunger. But we are as committed as our founder to reaching a day when everyone has enough to eat.

Country roads or interstate highways—we'll be there!



A stylized, handwritten signature of Kari Diener in dark ink.

Kari Diener
Chief Executive Officer



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 is to improve food security through equitable access to good nutrition and the resources that support health and well-being.



SCAN HERE

< To change your mailing information or preferences, send an email to donorservices@brafb.org.

OUR LOCATIONS

We serve your community through one of four distribution centers:

**Western Region
Distribution Center
& Headquarters**
P.O. Box 937
96 Laurel Hill Road
Verona, VA 24482-0937
540-248-3663

**Eastern Region
Distribution Center**
1207 Harris Street
Charlottesville, VA 22903-5319
434-296-3663

**Southern Region
Distribution Center**
501 12th Street, Suite B
Lynchburg, VA 24504-2527
434-845-4099

**Northern Region
Distribution Center**
1802 Roberts Street
Winchester, VA 22601-6312
540-665-0770

We'd Love Your Feedback

You're part of our Food Bank family, and *Harvest* is one of the ways we stay connected. Are we sharing what matters most to you? What could we do better?



SHARE YOUR
PREFERENCES IN OUR
SHORT SURVEY.
WE'RE LISTENING!

