

Partner Agency Handbook

Everyone should have enough to eat.



Blue Ridge Area
FOOD BANK

Everyone should have enough to eat.

Welcome to the Blue Ridge Area Food Bank!

Dear Food Bank Partner,

We are grateful for the opportunity to work with your organization and support your efforts to offer nutritious food and critical resources to your community.

At the Food Bank, we rely on the commitment and dedication of organizations like yours – nonprofits, community groups, neighbors, and religious organizations willing to work together to ensure that everyone has enough to eat.

Distributing food is not a simple task.

As your partner in this work, the Food Bank is committed to helping you make your efforts as effective as possible, while supporting investments in your capacity to work toward your goals. We hope that this handbook acts as a guide for best practices and an everyday point of reference.

As we move forward together, we want you to ask questions, share your needs, provide feedback, and offer your perspectives. We are committed to listening, gaining insights from your experiences, understanding your needs, and learning how to help you provide the right food at the right time for your guests.

We are proud to call you our partner.

With a shared purpose,

The Blue Ridge Area Food Bank Partner and Guest Engagement Team



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Section 1: Introduction to the Food Bank Partnerships

About the Food Bank

Our Mission

To improve food insecurity through equitable access to nutritious food and the resources that support health and well-being.

Our Vision

Nourishing food and good health—for everyone, every day.

Our Core Beliefs

Hunger is unacceptable.

Everyone deserves access to enough food.

Food sustains life and nourishes health.

We are called to serve without judgment.

Our Values

Diversity

We value and embrace a wide range of backgrounds and identities, and we honor different perspectives.

Accountability

We take ownership of our actions and continuously strive for improvement through open communication, transparency, and trust.

Respect

We prioritize individual dignity and inclusivity and strive to create an environment where everyone feels valued, heard, and supported. We are compassionate.

Equity

We are human-centered and responsive. We create equitable opportunities for meaningful participation and engagement of those we work with and work for.

Service

We dedicate ourselves to making a positive difference in our community, leveraging our resources and expertise. We show up.

Section 1: Introduction to the Food Bank Partnerships

Our strategic goals

Eliminate disparities in access to nutritious food

We work with our partners across our service area to ensure that food meets the diverse and unique needs of the communities we serve. We work with our partners to get the right food, at the right time, and in the right place to our guests. And we make strategic decisions to reach underserved communities within our service area.

Improve the health of guests

We work with our partners to ensure that the food we distribute is nutrient-dense, culturally inclusive, and responsive to dietary needs. We support our partner network by sharing best practices and providing resources to support health-focused practices that center the unique needs of guests.

Support household financial stability

We work with our partners to connect guests with critical public benefits and resources available in their communities. We work hard to help our partners provide wrap-around services and find ways to refer guests to other services and opportunities to improve their household financial stability. We advocate for strong public benefits.

Maintain a strong and sustainable organization

We work to ensure a solid foundation for our partners by making critical investments into the health and longevity of the Food Bank. We are sharpening our capabilities, harnessing data to drive our decision making, and building the infrastructure necessary to meet the moment. We are here for our partners and our communities, and we make strategic internal investments to ensure that this is always the case.

Learn more about our mission, vision, core beliefs, values, and how they influence our strategic goals here: <https://www.brafb.org/about-us/>



Section 1: Introduction to the Food Bank Partnerships

About Partner Agency Membership

As a partner of the Blue Ridge Area Food Bank, your agency will appreciate:

- Access to high-quality food and non-food products that the Food Bank obtains from local and national donors, including community food drives, retailers, manufacturers, distributors, and farmers.
- Opportunities to participate in The Emergency Food Assistance Program (TEFAP) and/or the Commodity Supplemental Food Program (CSFP), through which the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) provides surplus government commodities for distribution to people experiencing food/nutrition insecurity that meet income eligibility and age guidelines. There is no cost to your agency to acquire these foods for distribution.
- Availability of low-cost purchased foods that the Food Bank buys on behalf of agencies, using large-volume buying power to get the best deals.
- Access to retail grocery donations through the Partner Pick-Up Program, as availability allows.
- Access to funding and equipment through the annual Partner Impact and Innovation Grants.
- Training and support on best practices and topics such as nutrition, food safety, volunteerism, grant writing and fundraising, advocacy, effective distribution methods, and developing your message for communication with the media and supporters.
- Networking opportunities with other partner agencies in your region and throughout the Food Bank's 25-county, 8-city service area to develop best practices and build capacity.
- Access to service data through Link2Feed to determine how to enhance your mission and better serve your community members.

Section 1: Introduction to the Food Bank Partnerships

Partner Agency Responsibilities

Each Blue Ridge Area Food Bank agency signs an annual Partner Agency Contract. Among other responsibilities outlined in the Contract, our partner agencies agree to the following requirements:

Maintaining **exemption from taxation under Section 501(c)(3)** of the Internal Revenue Code. The Agency represents that it either (a) possesses an IRS Letter of Determination of 501(c)(3) status, or (b) is a church within the meaning of the Internal Revenue Code.

Conducting **regularly scheduled distributions** of food to the public at least once per month. Distribution times should be publicized in advance to the public using methods such as a sign visible from the public road, social media, listing on the Food Bank website, and/or on agency lists distributed at the respective Branch warehouse.

Obtaining food from a Blue Ridge Area Food Bank warehouse for distribution at least every **90 days**.

Providing food and non-food products free of charge without requiring attendance, membership, or participation in any religion or organization. The Agency may not require guests to provide payment or volunteer services to receive food or non-food products.

Maintaining **safe and secure transport, storage, and handling of food**. See the food safety section in this handbook for more details.

Following all Food Bank **data reporting requirements**.

Be prepared for Blue Ridge Area Food Bank staff to visit the Agency at any reasonable time, announced or unannounced.

Communicate with the Food Bank when your hours or location change and let us know when there are changes in staffing or volunteer leadership contacts.

For more information, please see your Partner Agency Contract.

Section 2: Reference and Contact Information

Headquarters and Western Region Branch (Verona):

Robin Swecker, Partner Engagement Manager – (540) 213-8413 or rswecker@brafb.org

Lyn Hall, Branch/Warehouse Operations Manager – (540) 213-8417 or lhall@brafb.org

Greta Vandevander, Branch Assistant – (540) 213-8412 or orderentry@brafb.org

Northern Region Branch (Winchester):

Katie Moffitt, Partner Engagement Manager – (540) 431-5415 or kmoffitt@brafb.org

Jarret Tomalesky, Branch Operations Manager – (540) 450-2113 or
jtomalesky@brafb.org

Cindy Holley, Branch Assistant – (540) 450-1799 or cholley@brafb.org

Eastern Region Branch (Charlottesville):

Erica Uhlmann, Partner Engagement Manager – (434) 220-5428 or euhlmann@brafb.org

Dan Dunn, Branch Operations Manager – (434) 297-2017 or ddunn@brafb.org

Kian Eldridge, Branch Assistant – (434) 220-6280 keldridge@brafb.org

Southern Region Branch (Lynchburg):

Kristi West, Partner Engagement Manager – (434) 845-4129 or kwest@brafb.org

James Quade, Branch Operations Manager – (434) 455-4908 or jquade@brafb.org

Samantha Garza Marmolejo, Branch Assistant – (434) 455-5988 or
smarmolejo@brafb.org

Section 2: Reference and Contact Information

Other Partner and Guest Engagement Team Contacts

Tyler Herman, Senior Director of Impact and Innovation – (434) 220-4951 or therman@brafb.org

Jacob Matz, Director of Partner Engagement – (540) 450-3023 or jmatz@brafb.org

Compliance and Technology

Karen Hicks, Manager of Compliance – (540) 213-8418 or khicks@brafb.org

Andy Gilmer, Partner Technology Support Coordinator – (540) 688-3235 or agilmer@brafb.org

Community Health and Resources

Maria Bowman, Director of Community Health and Resources – (540) 569-2022 or mbowman@brafb.org

Kara Snapp, Senior Manager of Community Health and Resources – (434) 202-1360 or ksnapp@brafb.org

Allie Henning, Community Health and Nutrition Coordinator – (540) 569-2022 or ahenning@brafb.org

Emma Duane, Public Benefits and Resources Coordinator – (434) 465-2534 or eduane@brafb.org

Section 2: Reference and Contact Information

Who to Contact and When?

Questions about your partnership with the Food Bank, capacity, best practices, reporting, and/or site visits?

Contact your Partner Engagement Manager (PEM). The PEM is the main liaison between the Food Bank and your agency. The PEM works with organizations just like yours across your community and helps to facilitate communication and collaboration between Food Bank partners.

Questions about Link2Feed, Meal Connect, or Agency Express?

Contact the Partner Technology Support Coordinator (PTSC). PTSC manages all systems training, troubleshooting, and account maintenance for our partners across our registration, donation reporting, and ordering platforms.

Questions about your contract, USDA or VDACS rules and regulations, compliance, or food safety training?

Contact the Manager of Compliance (MOC). MOC serves as a resource to all partners and Blue Ridge staff to ensure all applicable local, state and federal regulations are met. Particular attention is required for food safety and documentation, and the MOC will help support your efforts to remain compliant.

Questions about your shopping list, delivery, order, or billing?

Contact your Branch Assistant (BA). The BA greets you when you visit one of the warehouses, answers your telephone calls, sends out shopping lists, receives orders, and invoices your order.

Questions about food or products you receive or your interactions with our warehouse staff?

Contact your Branch Operations Manager (BOM). The BOM is responsible for the operation of the branch and supervises the Warehouse Assistant, Truck Driver and Branch Assistant. The Branch Manager oversees warehouse functions, Partner Pick-up, and distribution of all Blue Ridge Area Food Bank products.

Section 2: Reference and Contact Information

How We Work

We help distribute food to people experiencing food/nutrition insecurity through a network of diverse partners – food pantries, soup kitchens, shelters, schools, health clinics, community centers, and other non-profit and community-based organizations. Most of these partners receive 80% or more of their food supply through the Food Bank. Food Pantries – organizations that distribute free groceries – are the primary partner agencies of the Food Bank.



Section 2: Reference and Contact Information

Food Bank Locations

Northern Region Branch (Winchester): Serving partners and guests in Winchester and the counties of Clarke, Fauquier, Frederick, Loudoun, Page, Rappahannock, Shenandoah, and Warren
1802 Roberts Street, Winchester, VA 22601-6312

Phone: 540-665-0770

Hours: 7:30 am – 4:00pm Monday to Friday

Southern Region Branch (Lynchburg): Serving partners and guests in Lynchburg and the counties of Amherst, Appomattox, Bedford, Campbell, and Nelson.

501 12th Street, Suite B, Lynchburg, VA 24504-2527

Phone: 434-845-4099

Hours: 7:30am – 4:00pm Monday to Friday

Eastern Region Branch (Charlottesville): Serving partners and guests in Charlottesville and the counties of Albemarle, Buckingham, Culpeper, Fluvanna, Greene, Madison, and Orange.

1207 Harris Street, Charlottesville, VA 22903-5319

Phone: 434-296-3663

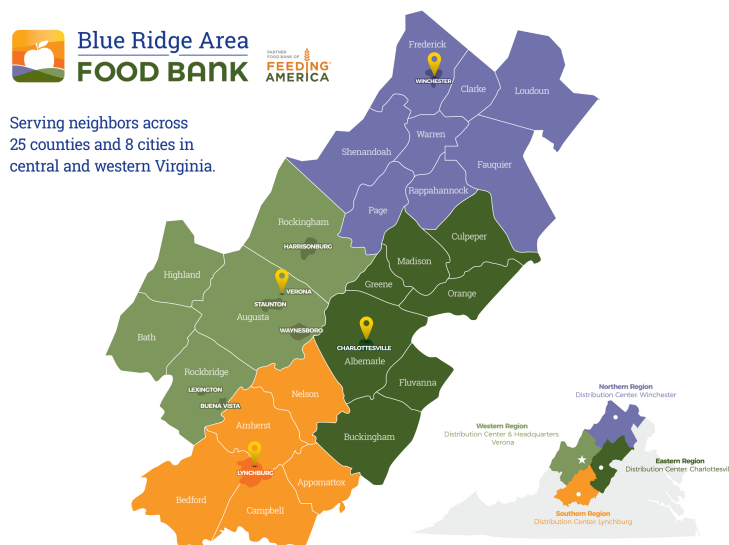
Hours: 7:30am - 4:00pm Monday to Friday

Western Region Branch and Headquarters (Verona): Serving partners and guests in Buena Vista, Harrisonburg, Lexington, Staunton, Waynesboro and the counties of Augusta, Bath, Highland, Rockbridge, and Rockingham.

96 Laurel Hill Road, Verona, VA 24482

Phone: 540-248-3663

Hours: 7:30am – 4:00pm Monday to Friday



Section 2: Reference and Contact Information

Food Finder

The Food Bank provides information for individuals seeking food assistance through the Food Finder tool on our website. This website lists all public-facing food distributions associated with the Food Bank.

www.brafb.org/findfood

Anyone can search by address or zip code to find a food distribution. It is important that the information is kept up to date and accurate. Please contact the Food Bank if your information needs to be updated!



**Blue Ridge Area
FOOD BANK**
Everyone should have enough to eat.

A member of
**FEEDING
AMERICA**

How to ...

FIND FOOD

1

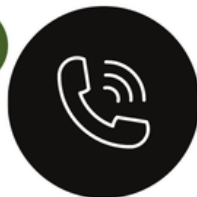


2

Enter your location to search for free groceries, fresh produce, and/or meals near you.



3



Once you've picked a nearby food pantry, call them for details.

Section 3: Food Banking 101

What is the difference between a food bank and a food pantry?

The terms “food pantry” and “food bank” are sometimes confused and used interchangeably. Food banks and food pantries are not the same, but they work together with a common goal of ensuring that everyone has access to food. At the Food Bank, we are proud of our partnership with food pantries—and many other organizations—which act with us on the belief that no one should ever go hungry.

A **food bank** is a non-profit 501(c)3 food distribution center, managing millions of pounds of food and essential products, sourced from donors, government agencies, and vendors for community distribution. The Blue Ridge Area Food Bank sources, sorts, and stores nutritious food, then distributes it to partner agencies—including food pantries, soup kitchens and shelters, schools, health care clinics, and community centers—throughout western and central Virginia. Partner agencies, in turn, distribute this food directly to guests in their community.

Most **food pantries** are sponsored by non-profit 501(c)3 organizations, religious organizations, and/or community organizations. Their mission is to directly serve community members experiencing food insecurity and nutrition insecurity within a specified area. Community food pantries are independent, often run by volunteers, and distribute food to guests on a regular schedule.

What is Food/Nutrition insecurity?

“**Food insecurity**” is the term created and used by the United States Dept. of Agriculture (USDA), which defines food insecurity as “having inadequate resources to acquire enough food for a healthy, active life.” USDA uses the term “food insecure” to refer to households that experience reduced quality, variety, or desirability of diet and/or disrupted eating patterns and reduced food intake. A household experiences food insecurity if the people in it have limited or uncertain access to adequate food.

Hunger is often a consequence of food and nutrition insecurity. Individuals living in food-insecure circumstances may experience hunger, but food insecurity does not always mean someone is hungry at all times. Rather, food insecurity refers to uncertainty about when or how food will be obtained, limited access to enough food, or limited access to nutritious foods at certain times during the month or year.



Section 3: Food Banking 101



To learn more:

Follow the links below to learn more about food insecurity across the U.S, Virginia, and our communities.

USDA's "Food Security in the US":

<https://www.ers.usda.gov/topics/food-nutrition-assistance/food-security-in-the-u-s/>

Feeding America's Map the Meal Gap -

<https://map.feedingamerica.org/county/2023/overall/virginia> -- An interactive county map from Feeding America, detailing food insecurity by county. The map also illustrates food insecurity rates by race and ethnicity to highlight racial disparities in food security.

Data USA's profile of Virginia - <https://datausa.io/profile/geo/virginia> -- Free visualizations of public US Government data sets to inform decision-making. Visualizations, maps, and data sets include statistics on diversity, economy, education, health, housing, industry, employment, and politics.

Feed VA - <https://feedva.org/explore/> -- Explore trends in hunger, food access, and health in Virginia. Data is sourced from US Census, USDA Food and Nutrition Service, Virginia Department of Agriculture and Consumer Services, Feeding America, the VA Federation of Food Banks, the Food Research & Action Center, among others.

The State of ALICE in VA - <https://www.unitedforalice.org/introducing-ALICE/Virginia> -- Compiled by the United Way, ALICE data provides an insight into households across each county of VA that could need food assistance. "ALICE" is an acronym for: Asset Limited, Income Constrained, Employed -- these are households with income above the federal poverty line, but not enough to afford basic expenses in the county where they live.

Important research

Feeding America: "Disparities in the Drivers of Food Insecurity"-- A data dashboard investigating the associations between discrimination, systemic racism, economic inequality, income, homeownership, employment, disabilities, and food.

Child Hunger - <https://nokidhungry.org/who-we-are/hunger-facts> -- Facts about child hunger in America from No Kid Hungry.

Hunger and Health - <https://hungerandhealth.feedingamerica.org/> -- Hosted by Feeding America, HungerandHealth.org provides resources, tools, and information regarding the social determinants of health and systemic causes of food insecurity. Find recipes, educational materials, and other resources to support your work.

Section 3: Food Banking 101

Additional Food Bank Programming

In addition to working with partner agencies to address food insecurity in the Blue Ridge area, the Food Bank sponsors and facilitates a range of nutrition programs for children, families, and seniors. Please see the details below and contact us if you are interested in working with us to operate any of the following programming.

USDA Food Programs

The Emergency Food Assistance Program (TEFAP) is a service of the USDA that provides a range of food commodities to eligible households. This program is facilitated by the Food Bank and operated by our partner agencies. Program rules and eligibility requirements are determined by the Virginia Department of Agriculture and Consumer Services, with guidance from the USDA. Eligibility is determined by household income and/or household participation in federal benefit programs such as SNAP and Medicaid.

TEFAP partners receive training, support, and a program-specific handbook from Food Bank staff with more details about running the program at their site. If you are interested in learning more about TEFAP or have more questions, please contact your Partner Engagement Manager.

The Commodity Supplemental Food Program (CSFP) is a service of the USDA for seniors with low incomes. The Food Bank is proud to distribute nutritious food to local seniors through our network of partner agencies.

CSFP partners receive training, support, and a program-specific handbook from Food Bank staff with more details about running the program at their site. If you are interested in learning more about CSFP or have more questions, please contact our Programs team at CSFP@brafb.org.

Additional Child and Senior Nutrition Programs

Family Backpack Program feeds families and children on weekends and school holidays.

Kids Cafe™ provides meals and snacks for children in afterschool programs.

Summer Food Service Program provides meals for children gathered at summer enrichment programs.

The **School Break Box** program provides food for children and families during the summer months. The **School Food Pantry** program supports school-based food pantries, typically in a high school or middle school setting.

The **Reach Program** provides nutrition to low-income seniors and individuals who are homebound, as well as those with special needs.

Section 3: Food Banking 101

Community Nutrition Programs

Mobile Food Pantry and Neighborhood Produce Market provide fresh and nonperishable food delivery in rural areas and urban centers with limited access to food pantries.

Food Pharmacy programming provides food in a health care or clinic setting, to meet specific health-related nutritional needs during a visit to a medical provider.

Learn more about our programs and reach out to us if you are interested in participating here:
<https://www.brafb.org/get-involved/program-partner>



Section 4: Food Sourcing from the Food Bank

Food Available at the Food Bank

The Blue Ridge Area Food Bank offers a range of nutritious products to our partners through four primary sourcing streams. Our goal is to ensure that all food provided, regardless of its source, is safe, high-quality, and culturally relevant.

Donated Foods

We receive perishable and nonperishable donations from local and national sources, including distributors, retailers, and farmers.

Source: Overproduction, cosmetic damage, or items approaching "sell-by" dates.

Safety: We rigorously vet all donations to ensure they meet food safety standards.

Cost: Always provided free of charge to agency partners.

USDA Foods

The Food Bank manages USDA-funded foods through The Emergency Food Assistance Program (TEFAP) and Commodity Supplemental Food Program (CSFP).

Inventory: Includes fresh, frozen, and shelf-stable items (TEFAP); shelf-stable items and dairy (CSFP).

Requirements: Participating agencies must sign federal agreements, maintain specific records, and complete annual training.

Eligibility: Household eligibility requirements apply.

Cost: Always provided **free of charge** to participating agency partners.

Interested in USDA programming? Contact your Partner Engagement Manager for more information.

Purchased Foods

To ensure a consistent supply of staples, the Food Bank purchases high-demand items in bulk.

Items: Peanut butter, milk, canned goods, proteins, whole grains, and legumes.

Cost: Offered to partners at a discounted rate. **Food Bank partners pay 75% of the cost that the Food Bank paid for purchased food.**

Retail Pick-Up (Partner Pick-Up Program) Foods

This initiative connects agencies directly with local grocery stores and retailers for direct collection.

Process: Agencies pick up overstock or "sell-by" items directly from the donor.

Guidelines: All retailers follow Feeding America safety protocols.

Availability: Opportunities are limited and based on donor schedules. Participation is not guaranteed.

Cost: Always provided free of charge to participating agency partners.

Interested in Partner Pick Up? Contact your Partner Engagement or Branch Manager for more information.

Section 4: Food Sourcing from the Food Bank

Culturally Inclusive Foods

We are committed to sourcing foods that reflect the traditions of our diverse community.

- **Current Offerings:** We provide items like produce, masa harina (corn flour), and spices to help partners meet the wide range of culinary traditions across the communities that we serve.
- **Focus Areas:** Our sourcing emphasizes nutrient-dense essentials, including fresh produce, whole grains, beans, and lean proteins.
- **Cost:** Key Culturally Inclusive items (masa harina, spices, produce) are free of charge. Purchased food is also selected based on cultural needs and available at the standard purchased food rates.

Nutrition

We purchase, procure, and distribute nutrient-dense, fresh foods whenever possible.

The Food Bank follows a set of recommendations known as the Healthy Eating Research (HER) guidelines for all food we distribute. HER guidelines sort food into a 3-tier ranking system based on saturated fat, sodium, and added sugar content.

Food products are ranked as “choose often” (green), “choose sometimes” (yellow), or “choose rarely” (red) based on the nutritional content of each item. Most products in the Food Bank’s inventory system, Agency Express, are ranked by color to make choosing nutrient-dense foods the easy option when placing your agency’s order. Whenever possible, we source “green” and “yellow” ranked items. To see the color ranking of the food item in Agency Express, click on the item card.

To learn more about our commitment to health and nutrition, visit our website:

<https://www.brafb.org/news/a-strategic-decision-improving-the-health-of-our-guests/>



Section 4: Food Sourcing from the Food Bank

How to Acquire Food from the Food Bank

Partner agencies can acquire food by placing orders through Agency Express, located under the “Partner Resources” section of our website. This system provides real-time warehouse inventory, custom ordering, and scheduling for pickups and deliveries.

Getting Started with Agency Express

To ensure a smooth ordering process, the Food Bank provides the following support:

Credentials: Your agency will receive a unique username, program code, and password.

Training: Our Partner Technology Support Coordinator will provide system training for your “shopper” (the person responsible for placing orders).

Ordering Guidelines

Adhering to the following timelines ensures our operations team can prepare your order accurately:

Timeline: Orders may be placed up to **8 business days** in advance but **must** be submitted at least **48 business hours** before your scheduled pickup.

Produce-Only Orders: Order ahead as usual or call or email the Operations team with your specific produce request if less than 48 hours before picking up.

Availability Note: While non-perishable items are generally guaranteed once submitted, **produce and perishable items are not 100% guaranteed** due to high turnover and quality control standards.

Picking Up Your Order

When arriving for a scheduled pickup at your branch, please keep the following in mind:

Arrival: Check in with the Branch Assistant or Manager to receive your invoice.

Loading: Plan for approximately 30 minutes for loading. Please verify your items against the invoice as you load to ensure accuracy.

Safety & Restrictions: Due to insurance policies, agency staff and volunteers are not permitted full access to the warehouse.

What to Bring:

Volunteers to load the vehicle.

Enough vehicle space to transport the entire order.

Tarps for open trucks or trailers.

Tie-downs or ratchet straps.

Thermal blankets, containers/supplies for frozen and chilled items.



Important:

Your agency is responsible for securing the load. The Food Bank is not responsible for products lost or damaged during transit.

Section 4: Food Sourcing from the Food Bank

Order Deliveries

Delivery availability is based on order quantity, existing regional service routes, and operational capacity.

Requesting Delivery:

Contact your regional branch staff to discuss eligibility and schedules.

Unloading:

An agency representative **must** be on-site to accept the order. Please have volunteers ready to bring the food indoors. Our drivers will assist in removing food from the truck but **cannot** move items into your building.

Scheduling:

Coordinate directly with your Branch Assistant for scheduling deliveries.

Cancellations and Inclement Weather

Cancellations:

If you cannot make your pickup or delivery appointment, call your Branch Assistant **as soon as possible** to reschedule.

Inclement Weather:

In the event of extreme weather, Food Bank facilities may close. If inclement weather coincides with your schedule, please contact your Branch Assistant.



Section 4: Food Sourcing from the Food Bank

Funding 101: How We Share the Cost

Acquiring, storing, and distributing food, even food that has been donated, has a financial cost. The Food Bank turns to foundations, businesses, and individuals to generate donations to cover most of the costs for packaging, transportation, facilities, and staff.

When a partner agency purchases food items from the Food Bank's inventory, they pay only 75% of the actual cost. The Food Bank uses donor support to cover the remaining 25%, allowing pantries to stretch their resources and source and distribute more food. There are no fees for shared maintenance, delivery, or food storage.

We believe in transparency and accountability. If you have questions about the Food Bank's funding model, please contact the Chief Financial Officer, at (540) 213-8410 or review our financial statements on our website at www.BRAFB.org under About Us.

Membership Fee

Each partner agency of the Food Bank pays an annual fee of **\$50.00**. Payment is due each year in February, after invoices are sent in January.

Agency Statements and Payments

All payments for 'purchased' foods or membership fees made to the Food Bank must be made by check, from the agency's checking account (not a personal account) including the agency's name and ID # in the memo.

Statements of agency charges are emailed and/or mailed **by the 8th** of the subsequent month, with payment due **by the 25th** of the month that the bill is received. Payments received on the account will be applied to specific amounts indicated on the payment documentation. If amounts paid cannot be specifically identified, payments will be applied to the older charges first. Failure to pay amounts due may result in the agency being deactivated for future shopping.

Questions about agency statements or amounts due should be directed first to the Branch Assistant. If the issue cannot be addressed at the branch level, you may contact Sarah Eadie, Accounting Manager at seadie@brafb.org or 540-213-8409.



Section 5: Partner Compliance

Compliance Expectations

The Blue Ridge Area Food Bank works with agencies in partnership and with a unity of purpose: “Everyone should have enough to eat.” While agencies maintain independence in their work, necessary requirements of partnership are outlined in the Partner Agency Contract, and the Food Bank expects agencies to comply with all areas of the contract.

Feeding America, the Virginia Department of Agriculture and Consumer Services (VDACS), and United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) have similar contracts and agreements with the Food Bank, that inform our Partner Agency Contracts. Partner Agencies are expected to maintain compliance to ensure food safety, equitable access to nutritious foods, and accountability across the network.

Partner Compliance Includes:

1. Signing the **Partner Agency Contract** each year within 60 days of receiving it.
2. Completing all mandatory **trainings**, such as Food Safety training and Civil Rights training
3. Submitting **service data** promptly.
4. **Communicating proactively** with the Partner Engagement Manager when barriers to food distribution arise (emergencies, closures, illness, etc.)
5. Settling **monthly invoices** for shared food costs.
6. Maintaining all **food safety** standards, including temperature measurement and logs, insect and rodent prevention, and proper maintenance of cold storage equipment.
7. Distributing food **without discrimination** and with the intended purpose of feeding people experiencing food insecurity.

Timeline for Noncompliance Follow-Up:

In the event of noncompliance, Food Bank staff will respond following the timeline below:

- **Month 0:** Written reminder and support
- **Month 1:** Phone call and deadline to resolve issue
- **Month 2:** Temporary pause in the ability to order food until compliance is restored
- **Month 3+:** Suspension/Termination if issue is unresolved

In cases where Partner Agencies find themselves in minor violation of the Partner Agency Contract, it is usually through a misunderstanding of the Contract requirements. Whenever possible, we will work with Partner Agencies to assist them with coming into compliance without an interruption in service to them and, by extension, their communities.

For infractions of the Partner Agency Contract, the Food Bank may place a short-term suspension on the agency’s ability to access food from our warehouse or a retail location. Food Bank staff will work with the partner agency to establish an action plan and timeline. If remediation practices are not prioritized and abided by an agency, the Food Bank may need to determine whether to terminate a partnership, in which case the Partner Agency will immediately return any food in its

Section 5: Partner Compliance

possession and settle all account fees. Notwithstanding the previous sentence, the Food Bank may immediately terminate the contract for any violation relating to tax exempt status, food safety, and/or discrimination.

Please refer to the Partner Agency Contract for more specific compliance guidelines and resources. If you have additional questions, please contact your Partner Engagement Manager or the Manager of Compliance.

Food Safety Guidelines

Partner Agencies must agree to adhere to the food safety guidelines below prior to partnering with the Food Bank. Food and other items distributed by the Food Bank are routinely checked to ensure quality and safety. Nevertheless, we encourage agencies to inspect all items, whether they come from the Food Bank or not, before distribution or meal service.

Below are some guidelines for determining whether you should keep a **donated product**. Whenever you have trouble deciding, it is best to discard it – **“When in doubt, throw it out!”**

If you are concerned about the condition of USDA food immediately contact your Partner Engagement Manager and await instructions.

Look for these issues in, on, and around containers and then discard:

- Severe dents in can seams or the body of the can
- Cans with swollen or bulging ends
- Rust that cannot be wiped off
- Crushed cans that are not stackable
- Visible signs of leaking as indicated by stained labels
- Pest infestation (gnaw marks, droppings, signs of bugs)
- Significant damage (rips, fractures, sharp dents)
- Deterioration (rotten odors, discoloration)

The following items should also be thrown away:

- Homemade items, including canned products
- Infant formulas and infant food beyond the date printed on container
- Unlabeled ammonia, bleach or other household chemicals
- Leaking personal care items such as shampoo, hand lotion or liquid soap
- Aerosol container missing the outer lid and/or the inner button, unless these pieces can be replaced
- Cans, jars, bottles, and packages without the manufacturer’s name and ingredients
- Food service items such as paper plates, napkins, cups, foil, etc. in torn packaging
- Food items that are mixed in boxes with non-food items (ex: crackers in box with bleach)

Dry Storage

- All food must be stored indoors and protected from exposure to the elements.
- Keep storage floor clear of dust build-up, cobwebs, and soil.

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- Keep all food products 6 inches or more off the floor, 4 inches away from walls, and 2 feet from the ceiling by means of shelving, pallets, or other platforms. This allows for air circulation, prevents contamination, and facilitates cleaning.
- The dry storage temperature should be between 50°F and 70°F. The use of fans or air-conditioning can help control temperatures that rise above 70°F.
- Follow “First In, First Out” process – distribute food with oldest or closest sell-by, use-by, or best-by date first.
- Rotate stock every 2-3 months and avoid stockpiling. All food should be distributed within 90 days of receiving it.
- Dry storage areas must be well organized, and food stored away from steam/water pipes, cleaning products, windows, and other hazardous materials.
- Keep food, paper products, and chemicals separate from one another, at least 4-6 feet apart and preferably in a separate room. If stored in the same area as food, chemicals should be kept at the lowest level.
- Have a pest control plan, either professional or in-house.

Cold storage

- Do not overcrowd cold storage with food. There should be a one-inch clearance all the way around (top, bottom, and sides) inside the refrigerator or freezer. This is important for proper cooling and energy efficiency of units.
- Keep all food products inside walk-in coolers or freezers 6 inches or more off the floor, 4 inches away from walls, and two feet from the ceiling by means of shelving, pallets, or other platforms. This allows for air circulation, prevents contamination, and facilitates cleaning.
- Follow “First in, First Out” process – distribute food with oldest or closest container date first.
- Maintain temperatures between 32° and 40F° in coolers and below 0F° in freezers.
- Store raw meat products BELOW produce, ready to eat foods, and prepared foods.
- Equip each refrigerator and freezer with an internal thermometer. Do not use external thermometers on the outside of cold storage equipment when recording temperatures.
- **Record temperatures on log sheets as frequently as possible, at a minimum of three times a week.**
- Keep refrigerators (coolers) and freezers clean and odor free.
- Label the receiving date of each item or case of items.
- Make sure door seals are tight.
- Rotate stock at least every 1-2 months.
- No refrigerated or freezer items should sit out for more than 30 minutes during distribution, especially as those items will be in transit until the guest returns to their home. The use of insulated coolers, thermal blankets, or only taking out a small amount of frozen food at a time is recommended during food distribution.

Safe distribution guidelines

- Keep the distribution area clean.
- Keep all products off the ground or floor by means of pallets, cardboard, or tarps.
- Pack raw meat products separate from produce, ready to eat food, and prepared foods.

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- Pack raw meat products separate from produce, ready to eat food, and prepared foods.
- Ensure that proper security measures are in place to prevent theft or vandalism of food. This includes door locks, cameras, and alarm systems.
- Per Feeding America policy, only service animals are allowed in agencies and/or branch warehouses, and only under controlled circumstances—no food preparation, packaging, food processing equipment, or exposed food can be present. All other animals are prohibited from where food is being received, handled, and stored.



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Record Keeping and Reporting

Partnership with the Food Bank requires a commitment to recordkeeping and data quality. The Food Bank requires partners to regularly report service data in a timely manner to support Food Bank decision making and stakeholder requirements.

Guest Registration with Link2Feed

The Food Bank and our agency partners use a shared digital registration system called [Link2Feed](#). This system standardizes how pantry guest information is collected, analyzed, and reported at our agency partner sites. In addition to providing a uniform, one-time intake for guests, Link2Feed's reporting features allow partner agencies, and the Food Bank, to gain a deeper insight into the individuals and families we collectively serve so that we can tailor our work to best meet their needs.

As a Food Bank partner, your agency is required to use Link2Feed to record guest information. The Food Bank will provide the training, tools, and support needed for your organization to successfully use Link2Feed. TEFAP and CSFP agencies are required to use Link2Feed to verify eligibility of guests.

Link2Feed data must be submitted no later than the 5th of the following month.



Retail Food Donations with MealConnect

The Food Bank is responsible for keeping track of all food donations from retail donors to our partner agencies participating in "Partner Pick-Up" programming. Agencies use a website called [MealConnect](#) to track these donations. All agencies participating in the Partner Pick-Up program must weigh food donations and submit a weekly report in MealConnect. If your organization participates in this program, you will receive all of the tools, training, and support to successfully use MealConnect. Please reference Partner Pick Up Program section below for more information about this program.

MealConnect data is due within 7 days or by the end of the month that donations were received, whichever comes first.

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Additional USDA Reporting

If your pantry chooses to participate in TEFAP or CSFP, additional monthly reporting is required. TEFAP partners must report their monthly USDA inventories, and CSFP partners must report their inventory of commodity boxes. Please reference their respective Handbook(s) and annual contract materials for more information. These documents detail all reporting, retention, and record keeping obligations, along with civil rights compliance and food safety.

USDA monthly reports are due by the 5th of the following month.

Guest Eligibility Criteria

For partners that distribute USDA foods through TEFAP and/or CSFP, eligibility is determined by household income, residency in Virginia, age, and/or participation in certain federal benefits programs. Partners that do not distribute USDA food may determine their own eligibility criteria, in keeping with the Partner Agency Agreement; **however, our recommendation is to serve all who come seeking food assistance and minimize eligibility criteria whenever possible.**

If the agency chooses to implement eligibility criteria, criteria must be applied consistently to all guests. Documentation of eligibility policies should be maintained, and the criteria should be stated clearly in outreach materials for the agency. Agencies are encouraged to serve all first-time guests, regardless of eligibility, while informing first-time visitors of the policy and referring them to another Food Bank partner if eligibility criteria are not met.

Agencies must inform their branch Partner Engagement Manager of any eligibility criteria specific to the organization beyond TEFAP and CSFP requirements. This information will be listed on the Food Bank's web-based Food Finder tool.

Example of additional eligibility criteria: "Guests must show proof of address and must reside in Frederick County to receive food." Note: this example of criteria would not be acceptable for TEFAP foods, for which agencies cannot require additional paperwork.

Remember: The Food Bank encourages all partners to remove unnecessary barriers to food access wherever they exist. As a best practice, if an individual expresses a need for food assistance to your organization, we strongly encourage your organization to provide food to this individual without requiring additional eligibility criteria.

Section 5: Partner Compliance

Monitoring Visits

As a Partner Agency of the Food Bank, your Partner Engagement Manager and/or Manager of Compliance will visit your pantry at least once every two years. We refer to these visits as “monitoring visits”. The Food Bank reserves the right to monitor any Partner Agency more frequently, either announced or unannounced, to provide compliance oversight. This section will go into detail about what to expect during a monitoring visit to help you prepare.

The purposes monitoring visits are to:

- Maintain communication between the Food Bank and Partner Agency
- Discuss opportunities for growth
- Identify opportunities for training and assist with record-keeping requirements
- Confirm that high sanitation and food safety standards are upheld
- Ensure your pantry is a warm, inviting, and safe environment for guests to access food

During a monitoring visit, Food Bank staff will look for the following:

Contacts

The Pantry Leader/Agency Manager, Executive Director, and person who is responsible for Partner Pickup should be there at the monitoring. If that is not possible, the pantry leader/Agency Manager needs to be present.

Agency Services

Food Bank staff will ask questions and facilitate a discussion revolving around:

- Distribution schedules.
- Distribution procedures.
- Other programs, such as TEFAP, CSFP, Reach, etc.
- Other services, like clothing or financial aid.
- Food options and availability.
- General compliance with the Partner Agency Contract.



Guest Services

Additionally, Food Bank staff will ask questions to ensure that:

- Guest registration is confidential, polite, and designed to preserve dignity.
- Fees, donations, or memberships are not required for guests to receive food.
- Religious services or classes are not required or encouraged for guest to receive food
- Guests are treated the same regardless of religion, race, sex, gender identify, sexual orientation, disability, age, national origin, or other protected classes
- Food Bank records are retained for three years plus the current year. This includes guest records, inventories, temperature logs, and all Food Bank correspondence.

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- Guests are asked if any of their information has changed during the intake process.
- Guests are not required to provide proof of address or an ID to receive food.
- Food distribution times are publicized in advance to the public, using social media, newspapers, etc.

Safe Food Storage Procedures

Food Bank staff will carefully assess partner food safety procedures to ensure that:

- Pantry staff and volunteers have been trained in the appropriate level of Food Safety
- Temperatures are taken and logged with the date at least three times per week for coolers and freezers. This alerts pantries when units are malfunctioning before there is food loss, ensures food quality, and prevents spoilage or waste of food.
- Temperature logs show that refrigerated and frozen foods are kept at the correct temperatures. Coolers should be maintained between 32° and 40° F. Freezers should be maintained at 0° F or lower.
- Each refrigerator and freezer should have an internal thermometer. Do not use external thermometers on the outside of cold storage equipment when recording temperatures.
- Food is kept in a clean and organized environment in compliance with all relevant Food Safety agreements and training.
- Food is properly labeled
- All food is dated on the day it was received. Write the date on the case with a sharpie or use a color-coded dot system.
- Inventory is rotated using FIFO (First In, First Out). This ensures that older inventory is used before new inventory and minimizes waste.
- All canned products are in acceptable condition (not swollen, rusted, or leaking)
- All baby food/formula is within expiration dates
- Coolers and freezers have bottom racks and 1 inch clearance all around
- No signs of pests/rodents anywhere. Signs of infestation include droppings, gnawing on packaging, and actual pests on or around food. Food Bank staff will also look for excessive cardboard boxes as they can become breeding grounds for pests and rodents.
- Pest control records are on file and can be shown to Food Bank staff
- Proper security measures are on place to prevent theft or vandalism

Partner Pickup Procedures (if a pantry participates)

- Perishable product temperatures are taken at pick-up and arrival back at the pantry and logged on the appropriate forms
- Temperature logs are available and can be shown to Food Bank staff
- Thermal blankets, coolers, or pallet covers are used when transporting food
- Products are weighed at the agency and reported
- If the agency receives more food than it can distribute from Partner Pick-up, explain what is done with the excess
- All vehicles used for transporting food must have clean storage areas and be maintained to prevent contamination of the transported food

For more information visit the [Virginia Learning Center](https://vafoodbanks.acornlms.com/register): <https://vafoodbanks.acornlms.com/register>

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Additional USDA Food Programming Considerations

The following will be discussed and documented for compliance for agencies participating in TEFAP and/or CSFP food programming.

Civil Rights

- Guests are served without discrimination in accordance with the current USDA non-discrimination statement
- There is documentation to show that all staff/volunteers have received Civil Rights training within the last 12 months
- The full current non-discrimination statement is on all program materials available to the public that advertises the distribution of USDA Food
- The Civil Rights Complaint form is posted and visible to guests.
- The Current "And Justice for All" poster is posted and visible to guests
- The Written Beneficiary Notice is posted where guests can see it. For CSFP, the notice is given at the time of application
- All program information is provided in the appropriate languages for guests with limited English proficiently
- Pantries are not requiring proof of address or income to determine eligibility for TEFAP

Documentation

- Link2Feed is used properly to certify eligible households for USDA foods.
- All household information is verified properly during recertification.
- Completed proxy information is on file for individuals who pick up food on behalf of guests.
- Records are retained for three years, plus the current year
- The agency has taken the appropriate measures to protect guests' privacy, data confidentiality, and security

Food Storage

- All USDA food is dated with the date on which it was received.
- The pantry knows the procedure if USDA food arrives in poor condition.
- USDA inventory is tracked correctly on the monthly report and is submitted by the 5th of the following month to the Food Bank
- All USDA food is three months old or less.
- USDA food, including cold storage, is clearly labeled as "USDA".

For Partners participating in CSFP:

- Partners verify all information during the initial application, certification, and recertification process.
- The waitlist procedures are followed.
- The No Show policy is posted where guests can see it.
- There is a system in place to ensure that cheese is tracked and distributed with each CSFP box.

All distribution guidelines are followed appropriately.

Section 6: Guest Services - Enhancing Your Distributions

The Healthy Pantry Initiative

The Blue Ridge Area Food Bank, and many Food Bank partners, are participants in the The Healthy Pantry Initiative (HPI). HPI provides a framework that guides how our network continuously improves services for all individuals seeking food assistance in Virginia.

HPI is a statewide initiative that is transforming Virginia's food pantries to improve the health and well-being of neighbors facing hunger. Virginia's food banks and our dedicated network of partners are committed to more than just ending hunger—we are committed to nourishing health.

Partners who opt to participate, focus on enhancing at least one practice in the following areas:

- Food Availability
- Community Connections
- Health Education
- Neighbor Centered services



The Food Bank Supports All Pantries With:

- **An annual HPI Assessment** that identifies service gaps and guides priorities for expansion and improvement
- **Workshops and training:** Several opportunities for pantries to participate in virtual and/or in-person and live learning around HPI practices. Topics are data-driven, based on survey results.
- **The Virginia Learning Center** which houses a catalog of free online courses to help pantry staff and volunteers make improvements, no matter their budget or size
- **Microgrants:** Distributed by the Federation of Virginia Food Banks and awarded through Blue Ridge Area Food Bank to pantries to implement healthy pantry practices.

Become a Healthy Pantry Partner

We invite you to join this growing movement! Becoming a partner is simple, and we are here to support you at every stage of the transition. You can opt-in any of the following ways:

- **Annual Assessment:** Complete your yearly pantry assessment and select the "opt-in" option.
- **Site Visits:** Discuss your interest with a Food Bank representative during your next scheduled monitoring visit.
- **Direct Consultation:** Reach out to your Partner Engagement Manager or the Manager of Health Initiatives at any time to start the conversation.

If you have questions or would like to learn more about how health-focused practices can transform your pantry, please contact: **Kara Snapp**, Senior Manager of Community Health and Resources at ksnapp@brafb.org

Section 6: Guest Services - Enhancing Your Distributions

Distribution Models and Best Practices

Food distribution looks different at every food pantry. Factors such as physical layout and location, storage capacity, number of volunteers, and the level of demand for services can all affect how a food pantry might want to handle its distributions. We encourage you to be creative and see what works best in your situation to meet the needs and expectations of your guests.

Things to keep in mind when planning your distribution include the guest experience, volunteer skillsets, equitable food distribution, and the amount of time you can spend working with each guest. You will also need to consider how the registration process (Link2Feed) will be integrated into the flow of your distribution.

Guest Choice Model of Distribution

All food pantries should focus on preserving the dignity of their guests. This includes practices like establishing hours of operation that are convenient for as many people as possible and training all staff and volunteers to offer excellent customer service.

It also includes allowing guests to choose the food that is right for them.

The concept of **guest choice** (sometimes known as “client choice”) simply means providing pantry guests the option of selecting foods from the pantry based on their unique household needs and preferences.

Many food pantries follow the practice of pre-bagging/boxing food for guests. While this ensures consistency of items distributed and may be a convenient practice for pantry operations, it does not account for the unique health, cultural, or dietary needs of each household served. Pre-made grocery bags may include items that a household does not need, cannot use because of allergies, religious, or health reasons, is unfamiliar with, or cannot prepare.

- For example, a bag of canned goods, dry beans, uncooked rice, and pasta would be far from ideal for a guest who is unhoused/experiencing homelessness. A box of food that contains pork products could lead to frustration for guests who do not eat pork for religious or cultural reasons, and a box containing dairy products could lead to waste and be unhelpful for a guest who is lactose intolerant.

In contrast, **guest choice** helps establish a welcoming environment, places trust in guests to choose what is best for their households and helps ensure that resources are distributed equitably (based on need). It creates opportunities for agency staff and volunteers to discuss cooking, food preferences, nutrition, and healthy eating with guests. And it ensures that the food that you go through great lengths to procure, store, manage, and distribute does not go to waste.

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Guest choice also helps agencies to better understand and respond to the needs of their guests. By having a better understanding of guests' preferences and needs, partner agencies can place more effective orders from the Food Bank and make purchases or seek donations that are directly informed by the specific needs of their guests.

By implementing guest choice, partner agencies can create a more dignified pantry experience and ensure that our collective efforts make an impact. But not every operation can be organized to facilitate 100% full choice. We encourage partners to see choice as a spectrum and look for creative ways to provide guests with options wherever they can.

Full Guest Choice

Some pantries structure their distribution much like a grocery store where guests can come in and select the items that are most relevant to cultural preferences and dietary needs. All item selections and/or quantities are based on the preferences of each household.

Partial Guest Choice/Hybrid

Some pantries will provide a premade box of basic food items and allow guests to choose other items. This could mean a pre-selected box of nonperishables, and a choice of items like fresh produce, frozen meat, bakery items, snacks, cooking oil, spices, and/or nonfood items such as hygiene and cleaning products.

Shopping List or Menu

Particularly for agencies conducting drive through distributions, or in situations where guests do not come into the pantry itself, pantries can provide choice by choice providing a shopping list (or menu) of available items for guests to choose. This is a creative way to combine the dignity of choice with the efficiency and privacy of the drive-through model.

Choosing How to Receive Food

Guests could be provided with the option of receiving a pre-made box of food or selecting their own food in the full choice pantry. For some guests, the convenience of receiving pre-boxed foods could outweigh the process of selecting their own foods. For others, mobility challenges, or other circumstances may limit the ability to enter the pantry and shop for their items. It is important to always provide additional support to guests with disabilities or mobility challenges. Read below to learn more about drive-through distributions and consider asking your guests how they would prefer to pick up their food.

Let us know if we can provide support to help your pantry offer choice!



Section 6: Guest Services - Enhancing Your Distributions

Drive-through distributions

Drive-through distributions tend to be more efficient than traditional, indoor pantry distributions. You can serve many guests very quickly via drive-through services. Some guests also prefer the privacy and convenience of drive-through service. And guests with disabilities and/or mobility challenges also benefit from drive-through.

While these benefits are considerable, keep in mind that the drive-through distribution method can make it difficult to build close relationships with your guests, provide choice, and offer additional services such as nutrition education or referrals.

Appointments

Some pantries have had success with offering scheduled food pickup appointments. This requires a guest to call ahead or use a web-based scheduling platform to arrange for a time to visit the pantry. Appointments allow for the same, or greater, level of personalized attention that a guest might receive at a traditional, indoor food distribution, while also allowing for a greater degree of privacy and eliminating the need to wait in a lengthy line to receive food. It also provides pantry staff and volunteers with much more control over the flow of traffic to the pantry.

Mobile Pantries and Home Delivery

To support equitable food access for homebound individuals and underserved communities, many partners have expanded beyond the walls of their pantry to offer mobile distributions and/or home delivery. This requires having a vehicle, either a van or truck owned by the pantry, or volunteer/staff members' personal transportation, to bring the food to a central distribution location or to individual households. It also requires work upfront to determine delivery routes, drop-off locations, eligibility requirements and/or lists of home delivery recipients, and staff or volunteers who are willing and capable of supporting this distribution method.

How much Food to Distribute

The quantity of food to be provided to an individual/household is determined by each partner based on unique inventory capacity and guests' household needs. Factors to consider include household size, how often guests are allowed to visit the pantry, storage capacity, and staff/volunteer capacity.

Historically, food banks and pantries were thought of as sources of "emergency" food. Today, many households rely on pantry agencies to meet most, or even all, of their nutritional needs. While the Food Bank encourages partner agencies to operate sustainably and within their capacities, we also encourage them to make as much food as possible available to the guests they serve.

Section 6: Guest Services - Enhancing Your Distributions

Centering Guests and Protecting Civil Rights

Successful food programs implement a guest-centric approach to their work. A guest-centric approach means that the organization keeps the experiences and perspectives of their guests top of mind in all operations and strategic decision-making.

A guest-centric approach is guided by the principle of equity – accommodating guests based on their unique needs and avoiding a “one-size-fits-all” approach to food service. It is also guided by the principle of equality – ensuring that services are welcoming and available to all despite any perceived differences among guests, volunteers, or staff. The Food Bank champions this approach as a means of preserving guests’ dignity and ensuring the protection of civil rights.

Your organization provides a critical safety net for community members experiencing food insecurity. It is important to design a welcoming, positive, and stress-free experience for all. Remember, guests accessing charitable food assistance services do so out of economic necessity and might feel uneasy asking for assistance. Often, people experiencing financial hardships are asked to navigate complicated rules, schedules, requirements, and intake processes to meet basic needs. This adds to the stress that comes from economic insecurity, trauma, and the stigma that some associate with seeking charitable services.

As service providers, we have an opportunity to create certainty for the people we serve by creating a welcoming environment. The Food Bank expects agency partners to approach guests with empathy, compassion, and solidarity. Regardless of where or how you distribute food, your pantry can be a welcoming space that provides stability.

Below are questions that the Food Bank asks when considering new partnerships and that your organization can consider as you work toward providing welcoming and equitable services in your community.

Accessibility

- Is your organization open during the weekend or evenings to accommodate guests that are unable to access services during normal business hours?
- Does your organization provide curbside services and/or otherwise accommodate guests with mobility challenges?
- Does your organization provide delivery to people that are home-bound?
- Is your space and are your services designed to be accommodating to visitors with disabilities?
- Does your organization have staff or volunteers that speak languages other than English?
- Is your organization accessible by public transit or by walking? If it is necessary for guests to drive, is there safe and adequate parking?
- How much information do you require of your guests to receive services? How do you collect this information? Do you absolutely need to collect all the information that you collect from guests? Where can it be minimized?

Section 6: Guest Services - Enhancing Your Distributions

Equity

- Are people able to visit your organization as often as necessary to achieve food security for their family?
- Does your organization allow guests to choose their own variety and quantity of food?
- Do you provide a variety of fresh foods, produce, proteins, and dairy to meet guests' nutritional needs?
- Do you have adequate cold and dry storage options to accommodate your guests' needs and preferences?

Understanding Community Needs

- Does your organization conduct outreach tailored to communities in your area that are particularly vulnerable to food insecurity?
- Do you build connections with other local organizations to conduct outreach, provide referrals, or otherwise work together to respond to needs in your community?
- Do you take your guests' unique needs and preferences into account when sourcing food?
- Do you have a process in place for collecting guest feedback, comments, questions, and concerns? Do guests have a seat at the decision-making table? Do you offer avenues for the communities you serve to help make decisions in your organization?

Guest Experience

- Does your space offer a welcoming environment where guests can comfortably and safely wait for food assistance?
- Does your organization provide restrooms for guest use?
- Do you display and serve food in a way that is attractive and respectful of your guests?
- Do you train your volunteers and staff to approach services through an equitable and guest-centric lens?
- Do you strive to make guests feel comfortable, to build relationships, and to ensure that everyone that visits your organization walks away having had a positive experience?

Incorporating Language Access Strategies at Your Food Pantry

It is important that we all work toward creating welcoming, inclusive spaces for all, regardless of a guest's country of origin or what language they speak. One such effort is considering language accommodations within pantry spaces for those who may not speak or read English as their first language.

Section 6: Guest Services - Enhancing Your Distributions

There are several strategies to consider when thinking about language access:

- Determine the primary language(s) that your guests speak.
- Recruit volunteers who speak those languages to assist with Link2Feed registration and to help introduce guests to the pantry process.
- If volunteers are not available, consider technological solutions like Google Translate on a phone or tablet to communicate with your guests. There are also translation devices that can be used much like Google Translate.
- Consider translation services available by call or app – note, these services typically require fees for services.
- Translate documentation, signs, forms, and outreach materials. **Please note:** The Food Bank has translated Link2Feed registration forms on our website: <https://www.brafb.org/partner-resources/link2feed-forms/>. Our interactive Food Finder tool can also be translated into multiple languages: <https://www.brafb.org/find-help/>. Ask your Partner Engagement Manager for additional translated Food Finder handouts.
- Build relationships with other organizations in your community that serve your guests.
- Cultivate relationships with guests who may be able to build connections within their community to invite others to your pantry. Surveys have shown that 80% of people who come to pantries hear about the services by word of mouth. Building trust is essential.

Community Outreach

When operating a food pantry or other feeding program, it is important to consider how neighbors in your area will learn about the availability of your services. The best way to get more guests at your agency, as well as attract volunteers to your mission, is to build awareness in the community, and develop trust and a good reputation among those you serve.

Community Outreach Strategies

- Ask staff, volunteers, and guests to share agency information with their networks. Word of mouth is the most effective outreach strategy.
- Ensure that outreach materials are translated.
- Place ads in local newspapers and other publications, on the radio, or on TV.
- Post on social media, such as Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, or TikTok
- Speak at or share information with local churches and other organizations, particularly organizations that provide services to your community or communities you seek to serve.
- Install roadside signage directing guests to your location.
- Become listed on 211, findhelp.org, and/or another community resource page in your area.
- Post detailed flyers at high traffic locations such as corner stores, coffee shops, etc.
- Connect with other service providers (food-related and non-food related) in your area to strengthen referral channels.

Section 6: Guest Services - Enhancing Your Distributions

Public Benefits and Resource Navigation

As you know, food insecurity does not happen in a vacuum, and our pantry guests often need additional information, additional resources, and referrals to other services.

The Food Bank's Public Benefits and Resource Navigation (PBRN) team provides training and networking to help partners connect community members to public benefits and community resources, including those related to housing, employment, transportation, and healthcare. This includes assistance in navigating the application process for Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program or SNAP (formerly referred to as "Food Stamps").

Your staff and volunteers can refer guests in need of SNAP support to the PBRN team using the Food Bank's Assistance Request Form available here on our website: <https://www.brafb.org/snap-prescreening/>.

Your organization can also submit referrals by emailing Emma Duane at eduane@brafb.org

The PBRN team offers SNAP training for agency partners and other community organizations to build knowledge of the program. If your organization is interested in providing SNAP support directly to guests, our PBRN team can help you develop the skills needed to support guests through the application process. Regular training sessions are listed and updated on the Partner Calendar on the Food Bank's Partner Resources page online.

Apart from food assistance, the PBRN team is developing referral networks to strengthen coordination among service providers and make it easier for guests to access the services they need. Contact our PBRN team today if you are interested in getting involved: Kara Snapp (ksnapp@brafb.org) and Emma Duane (eduane@brafb.org).

Advocacy

The Food Bank, our partners, and our guests have a direct understanding of food insecurity in our communities. Our network is visited by thousands of people every day, but our political decisionmakers do not always understand the reality and scale of this need across our communities. That's why we help our partners advocate for public policies to address food insecurity and its root causes.

Your voice, your experiences, and your expertise are valuable in these efforts. Your organization and organizations like yours make up a vital social safety net for so many people in our community. But our network cannot do it alone. We need strong policies that protect USDA food programming, like SNAP, TEFAP, CSFP, and WIC; and we need strong public policies that help to address the material needs of our guests.

Please join us in our work to advocate for public policy that allows our communities to thrive by lending your unique perspective to this work. The Food Bank will provide advocacy updates, share priorities, and alert you to opportunities to participate. To learn more, find comprehensive resources, talking points to take to your local leaders, and training opportunities – all tailored to our partners – please visit <https://www.brafb.org/advocacy-resources-for-partners/>

Section 6: Guest Services - Enhancing Your Distributions

Online training at your own pace



VA Learning Center

The Virginia Learning Center (LC) is an online learning platform, developed by Food Banks, Food Pantries, and community members across Virginia, that is free to all Food Bank partner agencies and their volunteers. Food Bank partners create a Learning Center profile to complete some required training, like the Food Safety training, and gain access to additional training opportunities. In addition to required training and compliance resources, there are many other, highly valuable resources on the LC. Training modules available on the LC help partners learn how to further their Healthy Pantry Initiative practices, create sustainable organizations, apply for grants, fundraise, and more. You will find comprehensive courses created by experts, with free resources to help you advance your mission.

We encourage you to utilize this tool as much as possible to discover food pantry best practices, learn from Food Banks, Food Pantries, and community members, and enhance your efforts. New content is added to the LC regularly.

You can create your account on the Learning Center [here](#). Please reach out to your Partner Engagement Manager if you have any questions about the Learning Center, or to discuss training needs.

Link2Feed - Understanding Your Impact

Link2Feed (L2F) is a web-based case management software used by food banks, food pantries, and community-based meal programs across the United States and Canada. This tool ensures that partners across our network are utilizing an accessible, secure, and shared platform to document services. Link2Feed use is a requirement for all agency partners. Not only does L2F data help us make decisions at the Food Bank, but it can be used to help your organization evaluate your own services and make strategic decisions about your operations.

What does Link2Feed do, and why do we use it?

L2F allows our agency users to accurately track their programs and generate reports to monitor and evaluate services over time. Link2Feed offers detailed guest registration features that allow agencies to build robust profiles for every individual and household served. Profiles include important details like demographic information, spoken languages, ages of household members, historical records of visits to your agency, and eligibility for USDA food programming. Unique profiles are accessible at any agency location in the system, meaning guests only need to register once and can visit any pantry in our network without registering again.

Section 6: Guest Services - Enhancing Your Distributions

Case management

Link2Feed's primary purpose is to standardize guest intake across the Food Bank's 220+ partner locations and 180+ nutrition programs. The system provides your organization with a form to create profiles for each individual and household that you serve. Intake information includes Name, DOB, Gender Identity, Marital Status, Address, Contact Information, Languages, Race/Ethnicity, Disability Status, Veteran Status, and how the individual was referred to your organization. Once a profile has been created, a unique Client ID is generated, and the profile can be accessed at any food pantry visited by the individual in the Food Bank service region.

Eligibility for TEFAP and/or CSFP programming is automatically determined by qualifying intake questions regarding residency in Virginia, monthly household income, and/or participation in the federal household benefits programs (SNAP, Medicaid, TANF, SSI, Free/Reduced Lunch, FDPIR, LIS, MSP). Link2Feed will recognize whether the household is eligible for TEFAP or CSFP, allow you to certify the household for participation in the program, and allow the user to log the TEFAP/CSFP and/or food pantry visit. No paperwork is required.

In Link2Feed, most questions offer guests the ability to opt-out or choose "prefer not to answer". However, some answers to some questions are required to determine USDA eligibility. Speak with the Partner Technology Support Coordinator, your Partner Engagement Manager, or the Manager of Compliance, if you have any questions about L2F requirements for households.

Self-registration

With a tool called CNCT, guests can register for Link2Feed on a personal computer, tablet, or smartphone without needing a volunteer or staff member to record their information. This feature can be accessed in all languages available to Google and allows for a personalized and private guest intake process. Guests receive a client ID, username (email or phone number), and a password to edit their account as needed. Once an account has been created on CNCT, the individual just needs to provide your agency with their name or client ID so that you can record their visit. We encourage use of this tool to overcome language barriers and privacy concerns during the intake process.

Reporting

Link2Feed reporting provides your organization with data to better understand who accesses your services so that you can better meet their needs. In turn, Link2Feed allows the Food Bank to view intake data across locations to inform how we can best meet the needs of our agencies and their guests. The level of robust and standardized recordkeeping provided by Link2Feed gives agencies and the Food Bank accurate information to report back to funders, apply for grants, communicate activities to supporters, and evaluate services over time.

Reporting helps agencies understand the broader impact of their day-to-day work, it helps agencies tell their story, and it helps all of us better understand the communities that we serve. We strongly encourage agencies to take advantage of the reporting features in Link2Feed.

Section 6: Guest Services - Enhancing Your Distributions

Anonymous Distributions and Meal Programs

There are certain programs and distributions that do not need to be tracked via full guest intake. Soup kitchen services, backpack programs, holiday boxes, anonymous food distributions, meal deliveries, and other initiatives can be tracked by recording the numbers of individuals served and numbers of households served. The only information that the system requires is an age breakdown. Numbers are reported in four categories: number of children served, number of adults served, number of seniors served, and number of households served. With this type of data tracking, guests can be assured that their visits remain anonymous, and your agency can be assured that your distributions are not slowed down by a detailed intake process.

This type of data tracking is not available for TEFAP or CSFP agencies and is only available for food pantries on a case-by-case basis. Please speak with your regional Partner Engagement Manager if you have food service that should be tracked anonymously.



Section 7: Grants

Partner Impact and Innovation Grants

The Food Bank makes every effort to support the needs of our partners. Primarily we do this through food procurement, operational support, providing best practices, and facilitating participation in our network. We also offer support to our partners through the annual Partner Impact and Innovation Grant (PII Grant).

Since 2016, the Food Bank, with the support of our generous donors, has been investing in the resilience and capacity of our partners through PII Grants. Our aim is to help partners source the equipment and materials they need to strengthen their mission, better serve their guests, and reach underserved populations in their community. Simply put, the Food Bank could not achieve its strategic goals, or support the goals of the Healthy Pantry Initiative, without investing in our network. PII Grants are one of the key ways that we make strategic investments across our partnerships.

Maximizing your impact is not a simple task. There are tools, materials, supplies, technology, and equipment that you need to bring your program to life.

The PII Grant provides funding support to help Food Bank partners to:

- Increase refrigeration or freezer space
- Purchase computers, tablets, laptops, and translation devices to support registration.
- Add shelving, tables, and produce displays to create a guest choice pantry.
- Acquire equipment like carts and pallet jacks to make pantry operations safer and streamlined.
- Purchase a vehicle to start a mobile pantry in an underserved area, and provide home deliveries to residents who are homebound.
- Create comfortable and private spaces for guests to register and wait for services.

Section 8: Additional Information

Partner Agency Communications and Networking

Food Bank Partner Town Halls

As a Food Bank partner agency, you have access to a wide range of ongoing support and resources. Through opportunities such as town hall meetings, partner agencies can share best practices, discuss collaborations, and exchange ideas with one another.

Partner Calendar and Newsletter

To consolidate communications, partner agencies have access to an events calendar and monthly newsletter. All events are posted on the Food Bank website <https://www.brafb.org/partner-resources/> and registration is required. The monthly newsletter is emailed to partner agencies and includes important information such as updates, partner, news, training opportunities, and advocacy information. With our monthly newsletter, our hope is to make sure information is centralized and accessible to help partner agencies stay informed.

Regional Coalitions

The Food Bank encourages our partners to connect with one another. We recognize that we can strengthen this work by organizing and working with one another through collaborative partnerships. We hope that you will see your work as part of a much larger community-based effort to alleviate food insecurity. As such, Food Bank staff help facilitate connections among partners, sometimes other aligned service providers and individuals, to encourage dialogue and collaboration at the local and regional level. This work is done via Hunger Action Coalitions, Food Provider Groups, and other similar groups of organizations. Regardless of what we call these initiatives, the goals are very similar: to learn from one another, to work together, and to strengthen the services available to our neighbors. These groups often advocate local, regional, statewide, and federal policies that strengthen food systems and support the basic needs of our communities. Are you interested in working with other organizations in your area? There may already be a coalition in your community, or we can help you facilitate one! Reach out to your Partner Engagement Manager today for more information.

Food Bank Publications

The Food Bank's printed, public-facing newsletter, *Harvest*, will be mailed to your agency twice each year. You will also receive *Partnering with Purpose* – our printed publication designed specifically for partner agencies. These will be mailed to the site coordinator at your location. These publications highlight network news, provide updates from the Food Bank, and share stories from our partners and guests. Please let your Partner Engagement Manager know if you need additional copies or would like to add names to the mailing list.

The Food Bank is always collecting guest stories to share (with permission) in our newsletters, publications, and online to educate the public about our mission and impact. If you know of individuals or families willing to tell their stories, please contact our Communications Office (communications@brafb.org) or notify your Partner Engagement Manager.

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You can subscribe to our mailing list at www.BRAFB.org/subscription-home.

Other Resources

Your Partner Engagement Manager will publicize opportunities for workshops, training, grant opportunities, and seminars in your area that are related to our work, whenever possible. We hope you will take advantage of these resources to support your work. Look for updates in communications from your PEM, newsletters, town halls, and other Food Bank communications. You can also find many helpful resources on our website. Please visit brafb.org/partner-resources to familiarize yourself with what is available.

Complaint Procedures

The Food Bank is committed to providing excellent customer service and responsiveness to every concern and/or complaint brought to our attention. If you have a concern or complaint, please contact your local Branch Operations Manager and/or Partner Engagement Manager first (see page 2 for contact information).

If the issue cannot be addressed at the Branch level, please contact the Director of Partner Engagement, Jacob Matz, at jmatz@brafb.org

Equal Opportunity

According to the Food Bank's contract with Feeding America: Agencies will not engage in discrimination in the provision of services against persons of any race, color, citizenship, religion, gender, national origin, ancestry, age, marital status, disability, sexual orientation including gender identity or expression, unfavorable discharge from the military or status as a protected veteran.

Section 8: Additional Information

Thank you!

Thank you for your partnership with the Blue Ridge Area Food Bank! If you have any questions, concerns, needs, or stories to tell, do not hesitate to contact us!

The Food Bank is grateful to work alongside your team to support household nutrition, health, and financial stability across central and western Virginia. Together, we can eliminate disparities in access to food assistance across our region, ensure individuals and families have access to nutritious foods that meet their cultural and dietary needs, contribute to improved health, and support overall household financial stability. Together, we can and do help ensure everyone has enough to eat.

