



Blue Ridge
AREA
FOOD
BANK

Partnering With Purpose

SUMMER 2026

A NEWSLETTER FOR FOOD BANK PARTNERS

Dear Partners,

Every day, you demonstrate that responding to hunger requires more than food alone. It requires compassion, innovation, collaboration, and an unwavering commitment to meet our guests and neighbors where they are. This edition of *Partnering With Purpose* celebrates the many ways our partner network continues to strengthen communities across the Blue Ridge region.

In these pages, you'll meet organizations finding creative solutions to local challenges—from the Knights of Columbus delivering food directly to guests who cannot access a traditional pantry, to nonprofit farms like JK Community Farm helping ensure families have access to fresh, nutritious produce and protein. You'll also learn about new investments and resources designed to advance your work, including an expanded Healthy Pantry Initiative and more than \$1.14 million in Partner Impact and Innovation grants to enhance food access, strengthen infrastructure, and improve the guest experience.

Together, these stories reflect our shared commitment to advancing the Food Bank's strategic priorities: eliminating disparities in access to nutritious food, improving community health, supporting household financial stability, and building a strong and sustainable network.

While each community is unique, one thing remains constant: local partners are the driving force behind lasting change. The Food Bank's role is to support, invest in, and learn alongside you as we work toward a shared vision of nourishing food and good health—for everyone, every day. From strengthening access to fresh and nutritious food, to connecting neighbors with critical resources, to building organizations equipped to meet tomorrow's challenges, our collective impact is greater than any one organization could achieve alone.

Thank you for your partnership, your service, and your commitment to creating stronger, healthier, and more resilient communities across our region. We are honored to stand with you to advance this meaningful work.

With gratitude,

Jacob Matz
Director of Partner Engagement



Building a Referral Network:

A New Approach to Connecting Neighbors with Public Benefits

For years, our Food Bank's Benefits and Resource Navigation team has worked directly with neighbors to help them access public benefits, especially the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP). Through one-on-one application assistance, volunteer training, and outreach, we've helped hundreds of individuals and organizations take an important step toward enhancing food security.

That work continues today, but our approach is evolving.

Why we're changing our model

As the need for food assistance continues to grow across our region, it has become clear that a direct service model alone cannot meet the scale or complexity of that need. While our team has been deeply committed to supporting individual guests, we recognize that greater long-term impact requires a broader, more collaborative strategy.

"Instead of serving as the primary access point for SNAP application assistance, the Food Bank is shifting toward building a network of trained, community-based partners who can help connect people to benefits where they already live, work, and receive services," said Emma Duane, public benefits and resources coordinator at the Food Bank. "This approach is a more sustainable model."

What this looks like today

We still offer direct assistance and will do so for the foreseeable future. Our team continues to work closely with individuals who are navigating complex or challenging cases, ensuring that those who need specialized support can still receive it.

"At the same time, we are helping more people connect to public benefits by equipping community organizations with the tools and knowledge to provide benefits assistance themselves," Emma said.

Expanding capacity through training

To support this shift, the Food Bank offers:

- SNAP 101 trainings, offered online, that introduce the basics of the program, eligibility requirements, and application process
- Application assistance training, offered in person; two sessions will be offered each year in each region, starting in the Southern Region this summer.

While food pantries and existing program partners are a natural fit for this work, we know that effective support can extend far beyond traditional food assistance settings.



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“... the Food Bank is shifting toward building a network of trained, community-based partners who can help connect people to benefits where they already live, work, and receive services.”

— Emma Duane

We are especially eager to partner with:

- Schools and school systems
- Nonprofits and community-based organizations
- Public libraries
- Community Services Boards
- Medical centers and clinics
- Faith-based groups and other trusted local institutions

A call to action

If you are part of a community organization and are interested in helping people connect to public benefits, we encourage you to attend a virtual SNAP training hosted by the Food Bank. For a current listing of upcoming events, please check our partner events calendar.

www.brafb.org/partner-resources

You Asked, We Listened:

Expanded Support for the Healthy Pantry Initiative

Through the Healthy Pantry Initiative survey that many of you participated in earlier this year, you let us know what you'd like to see. In response, we created:

- Recipe cards for your guests
- Shelf tags to highlight healthy items at your pantry
- Additional training modules for the Learning Center
- New nutrition education opportunities for guests
- Targeted Healthy Pantry Initiative workshops over the summer

We also expanded staff capacity to directly support partners with Healthy Pantry Initiative enhancements.

We also learned that our HPI pantries have a strong interest in Health Education and Food Availability practices.

Supporting the 'whole' person

"I'm happy that all categories remain of great interest to our partners, but I'm not surprised that Food Availability and Health Education are particularly popular," Manager of Community Health and Resources Kara Snapp said.

"We continue to see high demand for our services coming out of a very turbulent fall season. Additional federal program cuts have taken away many resources, including health education," Kara said.

The Healthy Pantry Initiative aims to support the "whole" person, so they have the means to thrive. Access to nutritious food is important, but through Community Connections practices, guests can get connected to additional resources. Neighbor-Centered practices aim to remove barriers, so guests have access to the foods they need.

"Our partners are invested in the well-being of their guests and

understand that wrap-around services are important to achieve that goal," Kara said.

Added staff capacity

The Food Bank can respond quickly to partners' needs because we have added staff members, as we are committed to supporting our partners and our guests. Allie Henning is our community health and nutrition coordinator and is able to assist partners with health education resources.

Emma Duane, benefits and resources coordinator (BRC), was hired last year and focuses on connecting guests with benefits, supporting pantries in expanding Community Connections practices through SNAP trainings, and

enhancing referral networks in our service area. An additional BRC is expected to be added to the team in the late summer.

"With our partners, we continue to invest in the well-being of our guests," Kara said. "The Healthy Pantry Initiative is a great example of that effort, and I'm excited so many of our partners are part of this movement. We listen carefully to what they're saying, and we do our best to respond to those needs."

Partners who'd like to take part in the Healthy Pantry Initiative can do so at any time.

For questions, please reach out to Kara: ksnapp@brafb.org

Remind me: What is HPI?

The HPI is a statewide movement led by the Federation of Virginia Food Banks to promote health-focused and neighbor-centered practices in food pantries. The HPI offers 20 recognized Healthy Pantry Practices across four key areas: Food Availability, Community Connection, Health Education, and Neighbor-Centered practices. Currently, 182 of our pantry partners are part of the HPI movement, up from 166 last year.





Hope Delivered

Inside Knights of Columbus Mobile Food Distribution

Addressing transportation barriers, especially in rural communities, is critical to accomplishing our shared goal of eliminating disparities in access to nutritious food. In Winchester, the Knights of Columbus have built a model designed to meet that challenge head-on.

And it all started with a simple question: *“Would you be willing to make some food deliveries?”*

About three decades ago, that was the question posed by a local food pantry to the Knights of Columbus in Winchester, a Catholic fraternal organization poised to make an impact on the lives of their neighbors.

The answer to that question was “yes.”

And so, it began. Since that day, with the Columbus Club building on South Cameron Street as their base of operations, the Knights of Columbus have been delivering food, and hope, to many of their neighbors living with food insecurity.

“What started with 10 locations and maybe 30 people, has grown into a program that serves more than 340 people at 123 locations,” said Food Ministry Program Director Bill Melvin.

‘This model works’

Over the decades, the Knights opted not to open a traditional food pantry.

“This model works for us, and our neighbors,” Bill said. “We have clients throughout Frederick County, and it’s a big county. Many of them are seniors, and don’t drive anymore, or don’t have access to reliable transportation. Delivering the food they need makes the most sense and has the biggest impact.”



Father Krempa Soup Kitchen

Besides their mobile food pantry, the Knights of Columbus also operate the Father Krempa Soup Kitchen. Run by 6 volunteer teams, the kitchen provides sandwiches, and soup for about 100 guests who pick up every Wednesday afternoon.



Volunteers make all the difference

To make that work, Bill and his fellow knights lean on a dedicated pool of 25 volunteer drivers, who make their deliveries every Wednesday afternoon.

“These volunteers make all the difference,” Bill said. “Without them, nothing happens.”

“We have been doing this for about 18 months, and we love doing it,” said John and Donna Pearl.

Thankful guests

Guests often keep an eye out for their food delivery. That’s certainly the case for Ruby Lee, who lives in a motel in Winchester with her husband. Both have several health issues.

“It’s really difficult to put into words the difference they make to our quality of life,” Ruby Lee said. “We get fruits, vegetables, milk, and eggs. Those are all things that are important to us that we cannot afford to buy. If it wasn’t for the Knights of Columbus, we wouldn’t be able to exist.”

Sound advice

If there are partners in the network thinking of starting home deliveries, Bill has some sound advice.

“First, I would gauge the need for a service like that. Try to figure out if this is the model that works for you, your area, and your clients. Second, secure a solid source of food that gives you access to good and healthy food. Last, make sure you have the volunteers you need to help you make these deliveries. Volunteers really make this model work.”

Food Ministry Program Director Bill Melvin



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“We do this because people really need help. We are 77 years old, and we’re not spring chickens, but we can still do something to help our community. It makes us feel good. We give back, it makes a difference and brings us joy. Every week when we’re done with our deliveries, we give each other a high five.”

— John and Donna Pearl



PII Grants Allow Us to Invest in Our Partner Network

This year, the Blue Ridge Area Food Bank is investing more than \$1.14 million through our Partner Impact and Innovation (PII) Grant Program to help strengthen the capacity, capability, and impact of food assistance organizations across our network. These investments help our partners better serve the needs of their communities today while building the infrastructure needed for the future.

Guided by our shared commitment to eliminate disparities in access to nutritious food, this year's awards prioritized projects that:

- improve food availability
- strengthen operations
- expand partners' ability to provide welcoming, dignified service

Nearly three-quarters of grant funding is supporting organizations participating in the Healthy Pantry Initiative, with cold storage and food availability emerging as the most common needs.

Funding will support projects ranging from shelving and pantry equipment to five refrigerated vehicles, three walk-in coolers, and 19 capital improvement projects. These will help partners safely distribute more fresh and perishable foods, improve the guest experience, and increase organizational resilience.

Many of these projects are not about serving more people, they are about serving our guests better.

We are deeply grateful to the generous donors whose support makes these investments possible and to the partners whose innovation and dedication turn dollars into meaningful impacts every day.



Left: Photo courtesy of Project GROWS

Right: Photo courtesy of JK Community Farm

Amazing Partnerships:

When Agriculture and Community Come Together

Across our service area, quiet but powerful partnerships help ensure families facing hunger have access to fresh, healthy food. Local nonprofit farms play a vital role in supporting our food pantry network and programs, donating produce, protein, and time to help nourish our neighbors who need it most.

Farms such as Radical Roots Farm, Vine & Fig, Project Grows, and JK Community Farm are not just growing food, they are growing solutions, strengthening local food systems, and reinforcing the idea that access to healthy food should never depend on income or zip code.

Farming with purpose

One example of this work can be found in Purcellville, where JK Community Farm operates a 150-acre working farm with a singular mission: donating 100% of its harvest to people experiencing food insecurity.

"Our food system is broken," said Samantha Kuhn, executive director of JK Community Farm. "We strongly believe that



everyone should have access to nutrient-dense produce and protein, no matter what their income is.”

Founded in 2018, the farm grows nearly 50 varieties of fruits, vegetables, and herbs, while also raising cattle to provide beef—an especially valuable and often scarce item in food pantries.

“We exist because there is a need,” Samantha said. “When we started in 2018, we produced around 50,000 pounds of food. This year, we’ll produce about 275,000 pounds.”

Despite its scale, the farm operates with a staff of just three and relies on thousands of volunteers to plant, harvest, and pack crops throughout the year.

‘Nothing short of inspiring’

Some of that food goes directly to Loudoun Hunger Relief (LHR) in Leesburg.

“JK Community Farm supports the health of the people that we serve,” said Trish McNeal, deputy director at LHR. “Sometimes we receive produce that was harvested that morning. That’s how fresh this food is. The work this farm does is nothing short of inspiring.”

LHR, in turn, helps amplify the farm’s impact.

“We have been a true partner of this farm since the beginning,” Trish said. “We redistribute their produce and beef to an additional 12 partners in the region. It ensures this healthy food reaches many who need it. And we are grateful to play our part.”

Growing access across the region

In the Shenandoah Valley, Project GROWS combines farming, education, and innovative food access programs to connect families with healthy food.

“Much of the produce grown on our farm is distributed through our mobile farmers market, The GROW Mobile, which visits 12 sites across the region where residents have limited access to healthy food,” Executive Director Clara Metzler said.

To expand the selection available to shoppers, Project GROWS partners with other regional producers to offer fruits, vegetables, meats, eggs, cheese, honey, and other local products. The organization also uses sliding-scale pricing, accepts SNAP benefits, and participates in incentive programs that help stretch food dollars further for families. Surplus produce is donated to local partners, helping ensure nutritious food reaches as many people as possible.

“Ultimately, our work is about more than providing healthy food. We strive to build a stronger, more resilient local food system by supporting regional farmers, expanding access to nutritious foods, and investing in

programs that improve the health and well-being of our entire community,” Clara said.

A unique partnership

Radical Roots Farm in Keezletown has been growing food for the local community for more than 26 years. In 2020, it partnered with Harrisonburg-based Vine & Fig to expand access to fresh produce during the COVID-19 pandemic.

“The Fresh Veggie Series evolved out of that partnership,” said Radical Roots Farm co-founder Lee O’Neil. “That initiative coordinates with over 20 community agencies to deliver fresh vegetables to agencies, who then distribute it to their clients.”

Produce is often delivered within 24 hours of harvest, ensuring peak freshness and nutrition.

“What is unique about this program is that we, the farmers, plan the harvest, pack the deliveries, and deliver weekly to all the agencies,” Lee said. “This makes the program extremely efficient.”

Vine & Fig coordinates with participating agencies while also providing educational materials and cooking resources that help families make the most of fresh produce.

More than food

Local nonprofit farms demonstrate what is possible when agriculture and community come together with a shared purpose. By growing food specifically to give it away, or creating innovative ways to make healthy food more accessible, they help strengthen local food systems and ensure more families can put nutritious meals on the table. Through partnerships with food banks, pantries, volunteers, and community organizations, their impact extends far beyond the farm field, nourishing both people and communities across our region.



Blue Ridge Area FOOD BANK

Everyone should have enough to eat.



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

OUR VISION: Nourishing food and better health—for everyone, every day.

OUR CORE BELIEFS: Hunger is unacceptable, everyone deserves access to enough food, food sustains life and nourishes health, and we are called to serve without judgment.

OUR LOCATIONS

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

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

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

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

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

Snackables

Make sure to subscribe to our **Partner Event Calendar** on the website to stay up to date on the latest events and training offerings. Click the Partner Resources link on the home page and scroll down!



Explore the **Learning Center** for valuable training opportunities for staff and volunteers. Learn about Healthy Pantry Practices, complete TEFAP trainings, strengthen your fundraising efforts, and prepare for monitoring visits. Scan the QR code to get started.



Do you have questions about advocating to elected leaders for hunger relief in your community? We're here to help. Check out the **advocacy resources for partners** to get started. Scan the QR code to get started.

