

# Virginia Roadmap to End Hunger *Update*



Commonwealth of Virginia  
2021

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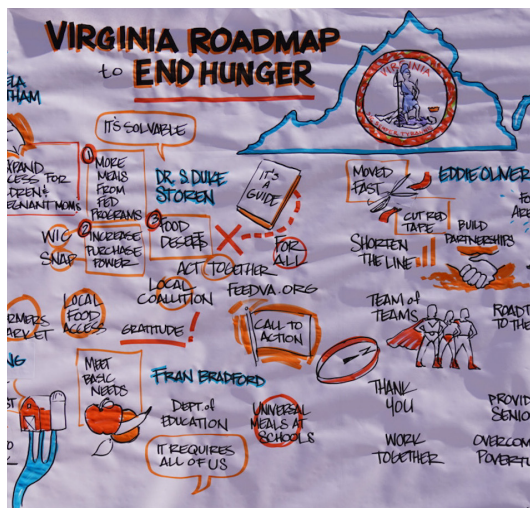


# 2021 ROADMAP TO END HUNGER UPDATE

In October 2020, Virginia Governor Ralph Northam released the 'Roadmap to End Hunger,' a comprehensive agenda to alleviate food insecurity in the Commonwealth. One year later, we document the economic impact and federal response to the COVID-19 pandemic, recognize the successes which have advanced our Roadmap strategies, and outline the path forward to eliminating food insecurity in Virginia.

## Impact of the COVID-19 Pandemic on Food Security in Virginia

- Virginia Tech Food Insecurity Study
  - » In December 2020, 81.2% of adults receiving Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) benefits reported being food insecure, compared to 59.3% in April 2020, suggesting that SNAP benefits simply were not enough to offset the drastic negative economic impacts of COVID-19.
- Feeding America estimates that the pandemic resulted in 150,000 more food-insecure Virginians
  - » Up from 799,600 in 2019 (including 214,200 children)
- Over the past year, Virginia food bank distributions increased 30%, amounting to approximately 170 million pounds of food.
- An April 2021 survey of the Virginia Community College System found that 32% of students reported being food insecure in the previous 30 days, meaning that they were unsure where their next meal would come from. The survey emphasizes the need for programs to reach at-risk populations.



Governor Northam and First Lady at Virginia Roadmap to End Hunger event (October 20, 2020)



- Unemployment high/total job losses
  - » Pandemic-related job loss was not as severe in Virginia as in other states, but still took a toll on Virginians, especially on low-income households. “From March 2020 to March 2021, the Virginia Employment Commission estimates that establishments in Virginia lost 182,000 jobs, a decrease of 4.5%.” The Commonwealth has continued to see job growth through 2021, though we are not yet back to pre-pandemic levels.
- The Annual Household Food Security Survey found an average food insecurity rate of 8.5% for Virginia, a decrease of 1.1 percentage points over the past decade.<sup>4</sup> Overall, the report indicates that the rapid expansion of federal nutrition programs helped keep food insecurity rates stable year-over-year, although households with children and Black households reported higher levels of need at the national level.<sup>1</sup>
- Increase in SNAP participation
  - » In February 2020, 679,702 individuals (333,669 households) received SNAP benefits. By February 2021, there were 758,962 SNAP recipients (378,933 households), representing an 11.66% increase.
  - » SNAP participation peaked at 785,411 (388,954 households) in July 2020.
  - » SNAP application rates remain elevated, months after the state of emergency and extended unemployment benefits have ended.
- Increase in Women, Infants and Children (WIC) participation
  - » In February 2020, there were 108,730 WIC participants. By February 2021, WIC participation had increased by 11.1% to 122,239 participants.

## Wins for Food Insecure Families

- **CACFP At-risk Afterschool Meals requirement:** During the 2021 legislative session, Virginia passed HB 2135, requiring all eligible schools to participate in the At-Risk Afterschool Child and Adult Care Food Program (CACFP), or partner with a community organization to make the program available. Introduced by Delegate Danica Roem, this bill is projected to expand access to afterschool meals in hundreds of schools across the Commonwealth, and encourage new coordination between schools and community partners. The legislation goes into effect in July 2022, and its impact will be realized during the 2022-2023 school year.
- **CEP requirement:** During the 2020 special session, Virginia passed HB 5113, requiring all eligible schools to participate in the Communi-

<sup>1</sup> <https://www.ers.usda.gov/webdocs/publications/102076/err-298.pdf?v=5472.7>

ty Eligibility Provision (CEP). Introduced by Delegate Danica Roem, this bill was projected to add approximately 180 new schools to CEP, expanding no-cost breakfast and lunch to 109,000 additional Virginia students.

- **Pandemic-EBT implementation:** Pandemic-EBT (P-EBT) was created as part of the federal response to the COVID-19 pandemic. Since November 2020, the Virginia Department of Social Services, in collaboration with the Virginia Department of Education, has provided over \$800 million in nutrition benefits to Virginia families through the P-EBT Program. P-EBT benefits supplement the cost of meals that students missed while schools were closed or placed on part-time attendance schedules due to COVID-19.
- **Virginia Agriculture Food Assistance Program:** House Bill 2203, sponsored by Speaker Eileen Filler-Corn, and Senate Bill 1188, sponsored by Senator Ghazala Hashmi, establish the Virginia Agriculture Food Assistance Program and Fund. This initiative allows Virginia farmers and food producers to directly donate or sell their food products to food banks, increasing the availability of fresh produce for food-insecure families.

- **Virginia Food Access Investment Fund**

- » In 2020, Governor Northam signed House Bill 1509, sponsored by Delegate Delores McQuinn, and Senate Bill 1073, sponsored by Senator Jennifer McClellan, creating the Virginia Food Access Investment Program and Fund (VFAIF).
- » In July 2021, Governor Northam announced that 15 projects across the Commonwealth will receive a total of over \$620,000 in the inaugural round of Virginia Food Access Investment Fund grants. List of projects receiving VFAIF grants can be found here: <https://www.governor.virginia.gov/newsroom/all-releases/2021/july/headline-902133-cn.html>
- » VFAIF follows the Equitable Food-Oriented Development model of using food and agriculture to create economic opportunities and healthy neighborhoods in historically marginalized communities.

- **SNAP Expansion**

- » Congress boosted SNAP benefits 15% with funds from the American Rescue Plan Act (ARPA) through September 2021; households continue to receive maximum benefit allotments under emergency provisions through December 2021.
- » The United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) recently re-evaluated the Thrifty Food Plan (TFP), used to set SNAP benefits, which increased the purchasing power of the plan by 21% for the first time since it was introduced in 1975.
- Nationally, the average benefits pre-pandemic were \$121 per person; Average benefits, once all emergency allotments end, will be an estimated \$169 per person, reflecting USDA's revised estimate of levels that will support a nutritious, practical, cost-effective diet.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>2</sup> U.S. Department of Agriculture, Food and Nutrition Service, 8/30/21



**Governor Northam and First Lady Pamela Northam at Capital Area Food Bank Bill Signing**

- » Broad-based Categorical Eligibility (BBCE)
  - Virginia expanded SNAP eligibility by adopting a provision known as BBCE, which increased the gross income test to 200% of the Federal Poverty Level, and eliminated the resource test. With this expansion, it is estimated that over 25,000 households are newly eligible for SNAP.

- **Head Start Nutrition Benefit:** The Virginia Department of Social Services, in collaboration with the Virginia Head Start Collaboration Office and the Virginia Head Start Association, designed and implemented a Head Start Nutrition Benefit Program that allocated approximately \$3.5 million dollars to families with children enrolled in a Head Start Program. The program provided a one-time benefit of \$300 to over 10,000 children, allowing families to purchase groceries and other nutritious food items.
- **Virginia Fresh Match:** In August 2021, Local Environmental Agriculture Project (LEAP), on behalf of the Virginia Fresh Match nutrition incentive network, was awarded a 3-year, \$2.2 million Gus Schumacher Covid Relief and Response grant (GusCRR) from the USDA. GusCRR funding enables Virginia Fresh Match (VFM) to increase the purchase of fruits and vegetables by SNAP participants and enhance the resilience of our local food systems.
- **WIC expansion:** In March 2021, the ARPA invested \$880 million in WIC services. The Virginia WIC Program received \$8.9 million to substantially increase the value of the WIC benefit for the purchase of fruits and vegetables. As a result, from June 2021 to September 2021, the monthly benefit increased from \$11 per woman and \$9 per child to \$35 per individual. Additionally, the ability to implement remote services has been a successful strategy in creating new



**Governor Northam packing 'We Care' boxes at Feed More in Richmond. More than 200,000 shelf-stable food boxes have been distributed by Virginia's food banks with the support of the Commonwealth, Sentara, and Truist.**

options and addressing commonly cited barriers of access and transportation. The physical presence waiver issued by the USDA remains in place beyond the Virginia State of Emergency declaration as it is tied to the Federal Public Health Emergency. This allowance has facilitated an increase in participation and a decrease in no-show rates.

- **Monthly Child Tax Credit**
  - » The Internal Revenue Service began sending out monthly child tax credit payments of \$250 - \$300 to approximately 35 million eligible families throughout the U.S. on July 15, 2021. The payments are set to continue through December 2021.
  - » The U.S. Census Bureau conducted a survey before and after the credit was sent out. In a span of just six weeks, it showed the credit coincided with a noticeable decline in food insufficiency and in those who reported having difficulty paying weekly expenses.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.npr.org/2021/08/13/1027397943/the-new-child-tax-credit-brings-a-drop-in-households-reporting-hunger>

## Opportunities on the Road Ahead

- **Advocate for permanent Summer EBT:** The Summer Electronic Benefits Transfer for Children (Summer EBT) program offers an exciting opportunity to reduce summer hunger by providing additional resources to purchase food during the summer months for families whose children are certified to receive free or reduced-price school meals during the school year. Summer EBT is a complement to the Summer Nutrition Programs (which support summer meal programs in low-income communities that are frequently combined with educational, enrichment, and recreational activities) and can help reduce food insecurity for low-income families, particularly in rural or other areas with limited access to summer meals. We must work with our partners in Congress to pass a permanent Summer EBT program.
- **Advocate for a permanent Child Tax Credit:** We have already seen the transformative impact of a monthly Child Tax Credit (CTC) for low income families. A CTC that the government delivers monthly, rather than as a lump sum after the year has ended, can help families make ends meet by boosting their incomes throughout the year. Struggling families need the Child Tax Credit expansion on a permanent basis, and we will see more food secure Virginia families as a result.
- **Sustain gains in school meal access:** We learned a clear lesson from the pandemic: school nutrition programs are vital components of any community food security strategy. As we continue this journey through COVID relief and recovery, let's maintain that momentum by recognizing and bolstering the link between school nutrition and classroom success; celebrating the hard work of school nutrition staff; deepening food access partnerships between schools and community organizations; and maximizing program access and awareness (both while school is in session AND during holiday breaks, summer vacations, and afterschool programming). Virginia also has an opportunity to advance the recommendations of the Task Force on Culturally Inclusive School Meals, which released its final report in September 2021.
- **Invest in healthcare partnerships:** The expansion of **Unite Us** into a statewide technology platform offers a tremendous opportunity to connect vulnerable Virginians to social services and food access programs. Working with Unite Us to build coordinated care networks of health and social service providers, the Commonwealth will implement an integrated e-referral system that unites government agencies, health care providers, and community-based partners. Virginia should continue to make investments in the capacity of the coordinated care network to strengthen service delivery mechanisms, establish sustainable funding streams, and improve health outcomes among food insecure households.
- **Expand Fresh Match network:** VFM will partner with 10 regional food access organizations, grow the network to 160+ food retail outlets who



offer community-based and affordable access to fruits and vegetables, provide viable sales outlets for 650+ Virginia farmers and food producers, and increase the purchase of fruits and vegetables by SNAP participants.

- **Expand and sustain the Virginia Food Access Investment Fund (VFAIF):** The VFAIF has funded food access projects all over Virginia in its inaugural year. Due to limited capacity at the Virginia Department of Agriculture and Consumer Services, not all the excellent projects could be funded. By sustaining and increasing the VFAIF budget, we can improve access to good food and catalyze economic development in under-resourced communities.
- **Produce Rx:** In 2021, Governor Northam signed HB 2065, sponsored by Delegate Delores McQuinn, directing the Department of Social Services (DSS) in coordination with the Department of Medical Assistance Services, to convene a workgroup to develop a plan for a three year pilot Produce Rx Program. The goal of the program is to incentivize consumption of fresh fruits and vegetables. The legislation requires DSS to submit a report outlining the activities of the workgroup and plan details to the Governor and General Assembly leadership by October 1, 2021. State financing will be required to support pilot implementation in 2022. ■





*The Virginia Roadmap to End Hunger was developed in partnership with:*



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