

# VIRGINIA 2024 Policy Agenda



For over 43 years, the Capital Area Food Bank has served as the backbone of the region’s hunger relief infrastructure. In FY23, the Food Bank distributed more than 58 million meals to neighbors in need across the DMV. However, we know that ending hunger takes more than good food today; advocating for policies and programs that enable long-term food security, financial empowerment, and health equity is an essential aspect of our commitment to building brighter futures. The following policy priorities— informed by data, community partners, and those we serve—represent impactful interventions that the Food Bank will advocate for in 2024 to end hunger and its root causes.



## Increase the Minimum SNAP Benefit for Virginia Seniors

SNAP has proven to be one of the most effective anti-hunger programs in the United States. The program puts additional financial resources into the pockets of low-income individuals and households, supplementing monthly food budgets and reducing food insecurity by as much as 30%. During the pandemic, the federal government increased the average and maximum monthly benefits for SNAP recipients through “emergency allotments,” which provided at least 95 additional dollars each month to meet the nutritional needs of participating individuals and households. These increases were estimated by one study to have reduced child poverty by approximately 14% in states that made emergency allotments available to residents.

In Virginia, as in other states, the emergency allotments came to an end in February 2023, bringing the minimum SNAP benefit to roughly \$20/month, a significant loss of resources as many in our region continue to struggle with the lingering effects of the pandemic. However, states have the authority to utilize state funds to boost federal SNAP benefits, which can help offset some of the loss of federal resources. For example, Maryland allocates funds to raise SNAP benefits for all recipients aged 62 and older. **We call upon Virginia to follow a similar model and raise the minimum monthly SNAP benefit for seniors, which would increase their buying power and reduce food insecurity.**



## Continue Support for the Virginia Agriculture Food Assistance Program and the Food Crop Donation Tax Credit

In the 2021 legislative session, the General Assembly created the Virginia Agriculture Food Assistance Program, which reimburses farmers for the costs associated with donating their agricultural products to food assistance organizations. The Food Crop Donation Tax Credit was created during the 2016 legislative session and offers Virginia farmers and growers a tax credit of 30 percent of the fair market value of goods donated to nonprofit food banks (up to \$5,000/year). **We request that the General Assembly continue to fund these programs on an ongoing basis to support local farmers and growers while encouraging the utilization of local foods in hunger relief efforts.**



## Improve Client, Agency, and Food Bank Experience Through The Emergency Food Assistance Program

The Emergency Food Assistance Program (TEFAP) is a federal program administered by the USDA to help alleviate food insecurity through the provision of free emergency food assistance. Through the program, the USDA purchases a variety of surplus agricultural commodities and distributes funds to states based on various metrics of need. States lean heavily on food banks to oversee the delivery and administration of commodities to smaller recipient agencies throughout their respective regions.

Based on our experience administering this program across three states and after leading an extensive effort to survey other multi-state food banks across the country, we made a series of recommendations in 2023 to amend TEFAP to make it more streamlined, accessible, and beneficial for neighbors, partner agencies, and food banks. We have worked with the Federation of Virginia Food Banks and the Virginia Department of Agriculture and Consumer Services (VDACS) to introduce these recommendations and look forward to continuing to work with our partners to enact reforms this year.

### Increase Client Access

TEFAP's authorizing language and commensurate federal regulations require states to ensure that beneficiaries are "needy." Each state takes its own approach to assessing whether a client fits this criterion, often by calculating their percentage of poverty threshold or enrollment in social safety net programs; this equates to varying degrees of eligibility across states, for the same federal program. **We request that Virginia increase the neighbor income eligibility threshold to at least 200 percent of the federal poverty guideline, remove limitations on the number of times neighbors can access the program in a given timeframe, and loosen other restrictive requirements to increase access to and eligibility for the program.**

### Streamline Administrative Reporting Requirements

States have a significant amount of latitude to oversee, audit, and monitor TEFAP administration by food banks and participating agencies. However, based on conversations with food banks across the country, this degree of latitude results in widely different programmatic requirements, deadlines, technologies, and outcomes nationwide. **We request that Virginia set standards for reporting, site reviews, and audits that are streamlined and uniform with other states in the DMV and Mid-Atlantic USDA Region.**

### Diversify Commodity Offerings and Allow for Food Bank Input

Food banks have very little autonomy over the types and quantities of food provided for distribution. This can make administration difficult, given that food banks are consistently adhering to nutrition ratio standards, ordering for a range of cultures and dietary needs, and offering a range of products to supplement other services and food items. Additionally, although food banks must abide by the administrative and operational requirements put forth by states within the state distribution plan, food banks often have little input into said plan. **We request that Virginia continue to incorporate practices to diversify commodity offerings that reflect the cultural and dietary needs of clients and allow for requisite food bank input into its state distribution plan.**



### Ensure Administrative Funding for Summer EBT

During the COVID-19 Public Health Emergency, the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) operated the Pandemic-Electronic Benefits Transfer (Pandemic EBT) program. Pandemic EBT allowed states to issue benefits cards to children who otherwise would have accessed free or reduced-price meals at school but were precluded from doing so, either because of COVID-related closures or closures during the summer months. This program was one of many authorized to respond to the effects of the pandemic, yet even accounting for that more robust safety net, [studies showed](#) Pandemic EBT reduced food insufficiency among SNAP households and the share of families in SNAP households where children experienced very low food security.

When the COVID-19 Public Health Emergency ended, so did Pandemic EBT. However, beginning in summer 2024, states will have the ability to operate Summer EBT, which is a new, permanent program Congress authorized in December 2022. Under Summer EBT, states will be able to provide \$40 per month during the summer to all students eligible for free or reduced-price school meals. However, unlike during Pandemic EBT, states now need to [commit to a 50% match](#) of administrative funding to be eligible to participate in Summer EBT. **We request that the Commonwealth provide administrative funding in an amount sufficient to meet the 50% match requirement and commit to doing so each year moving forward.**



### Promote Food is Medicine and Prioritize an Amendment to the 1115 Medicaid Waiver

Food insecurity impacts the health and well-being of more than 700,000 Virginians and is estimated to be responsible for [nearly a billion dollars in preventable healthcare costs](#) in Virginia each year. In recognition of the role food and nutrition access can play across a variety of health outcomes, we believe that we need to do more to connect nutritious food and healthcare services to one another. **We request that the Department of Medical Assistance Services conduct a feasibility assessment for amending its existing 1115 waiver and the Commonwealth Coordinate Care Plus 1915(c) waiver to include coverage of food as a benefit for Medicaid enrollees. This assessment should identify high need populations and include the type of food and delivery options.**



### Support Efforts to Reduce Hunger on College Campuses

For many in our region, a college degree represents an opportunity to pursue a brighter future. However, a growing number of college students struggle with food insecurity, making it harder to pursue a diploma and unlock their full academic potential. Recognizing the need for additional resources, the federal government expanded access to SNAP during the pandemic to [include more individuals pursuing higher education](#), but those flexibilities came to an end with the expiration of the public health emergency. Some states, [including Maryland](#), have sought to meet this need by establishing “Hunger-Free Campus” programs, which provide grants to institutions of higher education that dedicate resources to addressing hunger on campus, including SNAP application assistance and access to on-campus pantries or other local food resources. **We request that the Commonwealth establish a similar program to reduce food insecurity among the college population so students do not need to choose between putting food on the table and achieving their full potential in the classroom.**



## Expand School Meals for Virginia Students

Throughout the pandemic, federal waivers allowed all Virginia students to receive free meals at school. When those national flexibilities ended in the summer of 2022, students and families were forced to revert to completing forms and navigating the administrative processes of demonstrating their eligibility. School meal programs have long been associated with a variety of positive outcomes, from improved attendance rates and standardized test scores to reduced overall food insecurity, and they were a vital component of the national response to COVID-19. **We call upon Virginia lawmakers to explore ways to make school meals more accessible to students, whether through increasing participation in existing options, like the Community Eligibility Provision, or providing state funding to offset the costs of providing meals to all students free of charge.**



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