

# WASHINGTON, DC 2026 Policy Agenda



For 46 years, the Capital Area Food Bank has served as the backbone of the Washington metro area's hunger relief infrastructure, supplying nutritious food to kids, families, and seniors throughout the DMV.

Last year, major changes to federal jobs and funding profoundly impacted people across our region, plunging many of our neighbors into economic hardship for the first time, and worsening already difficult financial circumstances for others. Many hard-working families suddenly faced fear of foreclosure and eviction, along with uncertainty about how to afford the groceries they needed. These difficulties were exacerbated by a government shutdown in the fall, as thousands more federal workers and contractors went six weeks without paychecks.

Simultaneously, federal cuts also affected CAFB directly, with the US Department of Agriculture cancelling dozens of semi-trucks' worth of food that had already been ordered, along with millions of dollars in funding that would have enabled the food bank to purchase produce, protein, and dairy products from local farmers.

To fill the gap and meet escalating need, the food bank leaned deeply into the support of our community. Thanks to our generous funders and over 13,000 annual volunteers, we provided nearly 62 million meals in 2025. This was fully 20% more than we had planned for at the start of the year.

In these times, it is clearer than ever that we must advocate for policies and programs that support those who are facing difficult times today, and enable long-term food security, financial empowerment, and health equity in the future. **The following — informed by data, community partners, and those we serve—represent the food bank's policy priorities for 2026:**



## Local Funding for Direct Food Assistance

The District's network of food assistance providers needs resources to source and store food so that we can stand ready to respond quickly to further disruptions and surges in need. Former federal workers and contractors will need ongoing help as they seek new jobs, gain fresh skills, and carve out new positions in the local economy.

We urge the District to directly fund the Capital Area Food Bank and the 90 local community-based organizations, food pantries, and faith communities that we work with to distribute food to those in need.



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## Increase Support for those in Upskilling & Re-skilling programs

Our Hunger Report found strong demand for career and professional skills among food insecure individuals, including interest in training to be able to get a job in a different field of work, particularly in-demand occupations. However, they face numerous barriers to upskilling and re-skilling, including cost, program length, transportation and childcare. Enabling upward mobility for these low-wage workers must go beyond increased access to training: it needs to incorporate supportive wraparound services that reduce the trade-offs people face when engaging (or deciding whether to engage) in skill development. Living stipends, food access, childcare support, and transportation are all powerful levers for increasing the enrollment, retention, and completion of these training programs.

CAFB's current programming supporting food insecure adult learners with access to food is a proven model for increasing student success and can be scaled in the District to increase upward mobility. These models include providing digital grocery store gift cards to students at six campuses, including the University of the District of Columbia and Trinity Washington University, as well as supporting on-campus food pantries at UDC, Trinity, The Catholic University of America, Gallaudet University, George Washington University and Howard University. Preliminary program evaluation suggests dramatic reduction in very low food security, as well as higher GPAs and course success rates for students receiving the additional support.

We urge the District to invest in strategies to scale these supports for adult learners at DC colleges and universities, as well as wraparound supports for high school students at the Advanced Technical Center (ATC) who are preparing for careers as clinical medical assistants, cybersecurity specialists, and emergency medical technicians (EMTs).



## Enact Universal School Meals

Research has linked the availability of school meals to greater student health, better attendance, improved learning, and higher participation in the classroom.

Throughout the pandemic, federal waivers allowed all District students to receive free meals at school. When those national flexibilities ended in the summer of 2022, some students and families were once again required to complete forms and navigate complex administrative processes to demonstrate their eligibility. School meal programs not only were a vital component of the national response to COVID-19; they have long been associated with a variety of positive outcomes, from improved attendance rates and standardized test scores to reduced overall food insecurity.

Every school in the District already offers free breakfast, and the majority of schools in the District also provide free school lunch through participation in the Community Eligibility Provision. That program allows schools in low-income areas to serve breakfast and lunch at no cost to all enrolled students without collecting individual applications.

We urge the District to extend free school lunches to every student in the District.



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## Advance Food Is Medicine Programs

“Food is Medicine” refers to a spectrum of programs and services that respond to the critical link between nutrition and chronic illness. These approaches - such as produce prescriptions, medically tailored meals, and medically tailored groceries – are part of a growing national strategy that recognizes healthy food as an important part of patient medical care and treatment.

Prior to 2025, the federal Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services had encouraged state Medicaid agencies to seek and use flexibility available under current law to provide nutrition support to Medicaid beneficiaries. These budget neutral waivers allow state Medicaid programs to help vulnerable patients access fresh produce and other nutritious foods.

The District’s Department of Health Care Finance applied for an 1115 waiver in 2024, and it is still awaiting a decision from federal authorities. It also conducted a collaborative program design process including community representatives, current and potential providers, managed care organizations, and health care advocates. We believe that the evidence of FIM’s potential to reduce health expenditures, improve health outcomes, and fight food insecurity makes it a triple-win for the District and that efforts to advance this work should not be held back by delays from the federal government.

The Capital Area Food Bank has collaborated with local health care institutions to pilot Food is Medicine approaches, launching food pharmacies in DC in partnership with Children’s National Hospital and Unity Health Care. The programs are contributing to the body of research demonstrating how access to nutritious groceries can support better health outcomes while also contributing to greater cost efficiency in health care.

We urge the District to continue its collaborative Food Is Medicine approach and expand FIM investments that include a complete menu of produce, protein, and healthy shelf-stable foods to address more residents with nutrition-related illnesses.



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