



Nutrition and Food Security



Bill Crabtree Jr.

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Overview

Eating healthy and nutritious food is essential to the growth, development, and maintenance of a healthy body and overall well-being. It is important that people have access to affordable nutrient-rich foods that, when combined with physical activity, can help maintain a healthy weight, reduce the risk of chronic disease, and promote overall health.

Factors including environmental barriers and social disparities, such as income, race, ethnicity, and disability, prevent some Virginians from accessing healthy food. The proximity of restaurants and grocery stores, food prices, the existence of food and nutrition assistance programs, and community characteristics all contribute to the ability to access available healthy food. As with the cost of housing, food tends to be more affordable in rural areas. The cost per meal in Virginia's median rural locality is \$3.03, compared to \$3.23 in the median non-rural locality.

However, food insecurity is still a problem in rural Virginia. As reported by County Health Rankings in 2018, 13.1% of residents are food insecure in Virginia's median rural locality, compared to 9.8% in non-rural localities. Food insecurity is particularly high in far Southwest Virginia, affecting over 17% of the population in several localities there. According to the USDA, food insecurity refers to a "lack of access, at times, to enough food for an active, healthy life for all household members and limited or uncertain availability of nutritionally adequate foods (1)." Food-insecure individuals "may be at an increased risk for a variety of negative health outcomes and health disparities" (2). A commitment to community institutions such as supermarkets and grocery stores helps to

relieve the negative effects of food insecurity while also stimulating local economic growth.

Children are also impacted by food insecurity with 66.7% of rural students eligible for free or reduced lunch in rural places, compared to 42.3% in non-Rural places. Additionally, 15.4% of rural households are eligible for Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) benefits, compared to just 7.6% of non-rural households. Efforts to enroll eligible students and households in these or similar programs could improve health and well-being, while bringing in funding to support groceries and other businesses.

Leading Practices and Approaches

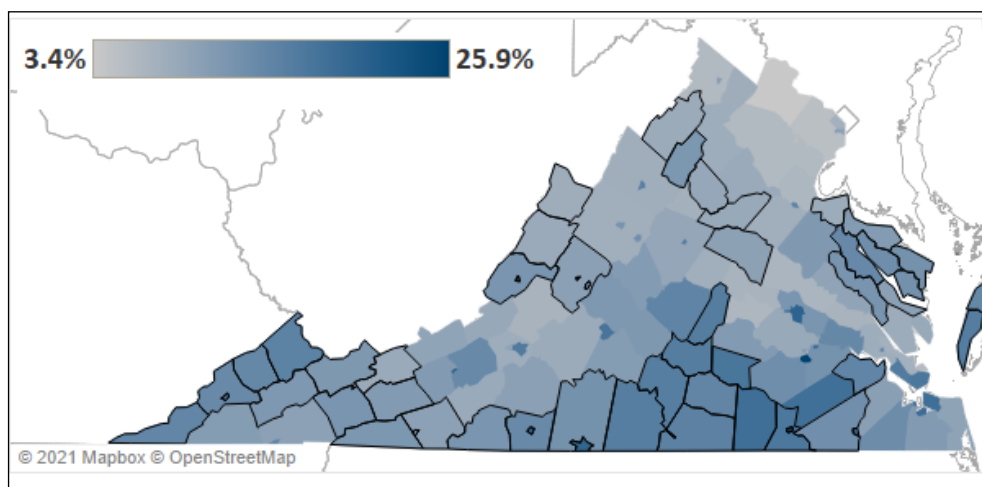
Whenever possible, examples of leading practices and approaches were taken from rural Virginia communities. Otherwise, examples were gathered from localities with comparable demographic characteristics.

The Local Environmental Agriculture Project (LEAP)

Need: Virginia's Roanoke Valley has struggled with food insecurity for years due to inadequate food distribution practices, inequitable access, and lack of consumer education.

Approach: The Local Environmental Agriculture Project (LEAP) uses two approaches to improve food access in the Roanoke Valley. The LEAP Food Hub helped connect over one hundred farmers to a wholesale market, and provided access to other diverse markets in 2019. The LEAP Kitchen provided supplies and lowered start-up costs for Small, Women-owned and Minority-owned businesses (SWaM) (3).

Food Insecurity Rate



Source: County Health Ranking, 2017; County Health Ranking, 2018

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LEAP has also created several healthy food incentive programs, including the SNAP Double Value program, funded by Virginia Fresh Match. This program allows people who receive Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) benefits to double the amount of money they can spend at fresh fruit and vegetable markets (4).

Outcome: Since 2018, the number of farms participating in the LEAP program has almost doubled. In 2019, the Local Environmental Agriculture Project served over 2,000 Roanoke Valley residents and almost 160 food businesses. As a result, almost \$250,000 was generated for those food businesses and farmers, bringing the locally grown fruit and vegetable variety count to 182 (3).

Bland Ministry Center: Food Pantry

Need: A 2015 study conducted by Feeding America determined that almost 150,000 people in Central and Western Virginia regions experience food insecurity (5). Southwest Virginia's Bland County is part of that region.

Approach: The Bland Ministry Center operates many programs to physically and spiritually assist its community, one of which is its food pantry. Bland Ministry partners with large organizations like Walmart and Little Caesars to obtain and distribute food to families in need. Once the ministry receives food donations from the organizations, they report what they received to one of the nation's largest hunger relief organizations, Feeding America (6). Individuals are invited to come to the ministry's main office, provide photo identification, proof of residency and income, and leave with a food box (6).

In times of emergency, the Bland Ministry can partner with social services organizations such as Mount Rogers Community Services to deliver food directly to individuals and families in need (6).

Outcome: The Bland Ministry Food Pantry provides food assistance each week through their food pantry and effective partnerships, and also builds handicap ramps and helps with home repair projects. The ministry operates a clothes closet and performs special events and services such as distributing school supplies and running two of the largest free dental clinics in the region (6).



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Farm to Virginia Child and Adult Care Food Program

Need: Although Virginia is the second largest agricultural exporter on the East Coast, its population still struggles with access to food (7).

Approach: The Farm to Virginia Child and Adult Care Food Program (Farm to CACFP) aims to educate Virginians on nutrition and gardening opportunities within their own communities. This program is an extension of the more widely known Virginia CACFP, comprising Child Care Centers, Adult Care Centers, Emergency Shelters, and Family Day Care Homes. The Farm to CACFP facilitates a variety of community activities, including taste tests, farm visits, and food seasonality and gardening education. The program also helps connect Virginians with local food, local partners, and educational resources (7).

Outcome: For many years, the Virginia Child and Adult Care Food Program has allotted grant money and various forms of assistance to its participating organizations in order to increase food access to Virginians and facilitate nutrition education. Farm to CACFP takes this service a step further by connecting Virginians to one of their state's most essential export categories, agriculture (7).

The National Farm to School Network

Need: There are citizens in each state that lack access to fresh, nutritious foods. Likewise, the youngest generations are experiencing a disconnect with food that humans have never experienced before while local farmers struggle.

Approach: The National Farm to School Network, aims to enhance the connection between communities and healthy food. Farm to school engages students using a combination of procurement, school gardens, and education. The program often supplies schools with food from local farms so that students may try them, and then educates the students on agriculture and nutrition. Farm to school also encourages students to participate in gardening (8).

Outcome: The National Farm to School Network has grown from a few schools to over 40,000 schools in the past thirty years. The program has granted over \$400,000 to its core partners in all fifty states and US territories (8).

Healthy Harvest Community Garden

Need: The Healthy Harvest Community Garden (HHCG) is funded by the Virginia State Office of Rural Health with partners in Halifax County including Sentara Halifax Regional Hospital, Halifax County Cooperative Extension, and Halifax County Public Schools. HHCG is an effort of the Southern Virginia Botanical Garden and Environmental



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Education Center (SVBG). In 2017, a community survey conducted by the health district found that obesity, a chronic condition and precursor to other health problems, is ranked first in a list of health problems, with 61.2% of 539 survey respondents reporting it as a major health problem. Access to healthy food is ranked third in health problems, with 41.2% of respondents choosing that item.

Approach: Originally conceived as a way to introduce people to the importance of nutrition and healthy eating, and a way to provide healthy produce to individuals who otherwise may not have access to fresh food, the garden has become a way for community members to explore healthy eating while learning about growing and cooking nutritious produce. Ten summer interns are assigned to the community garden and have opportunities to learn about programs like the SNAP food assistance program and other programming that teach healthy food habits. Harvested produce is provided to low income residents of Halifax County. Written information on healthy food choices and cooking techniques is distributed with the food to provide education on the health benefits of good food choices.

Outcome(s): Efforts are ongoing to expand the operations of the community garden that has become a hub for information and activity supporting healthy food habits and nutritional knowledge while supplying the most vulnerable Halifax County residents with a source of healthy, fresh produce. At least ten local public high school students will be introduced to careers that focus on food and nutrition in a community setting while they



Caroline County • Sarah Hauser, IG account: @virginiaflair

assist in the mission of the garden. At least 80 low-income residents of Halifax County will be provided with fresh produce they would otherwise not be able to obtain, enriching their diet and giving them opportunities to improve their health.

Opportunities for Growth

1. Increase access to nutritious foods by coordinating pre-existing social programs

- The Virginia Farmers Market Association and the Virginia Fresh Match Program
 - The Virginia Farmers Market Association (VAFMA) states that people eat a greater variety of fresh fruits and vegetables instead of processed foods when they shop at a local farmers market rather than a grocery store (9). For this reason, the VAFMA created the Virginia Fresh Match program. This program allows a customer to double the value of their food stamps. For example, if a customer spends \$25 worth of their SNAP benefits, Virginia Fresh Match will provide an additional \$25 to spend on fresh fruits and vegetables.
 - This approach not only benefits the children and families challenged with access to food but also helps small and medium-sized farmers to sell their products. Farmers are connected with dependable markets where families enrolled in the Virginia Fresh Match program use their extra SNAP benefits to purchase fresh fruits and vegetables (9).
 - In 2018, over 2,500 Virginians benefitting from SNAP utilized the Virginia Fresh Match Program which resulted in over five hundred Virginia farmers earning about \$250,000 more than they would have otherwise. The connections between families and farmers that the Virginia Fresh Match Program creates benefits the community from the smallest child to mid-sized farms in rural Virginia (9).

2. Establish and support infrastructure that enables local organizations to secure surplus food

- If it weren't for logistical complications, it is likely that many more grocery stores would donate their nearly expired food to charities and nonprofit organizations.
 - There is a misconception that grocery stores will be held liable if their near-expired, donated food causes illness. However, the federal Bill Emerson Good Samaritan Food Donation Act protects entities from "civil and criminal liability should the product donated in good faith later cause harm to the recipient" (10).
 - For organizations that still have concerns the USDA has released a three-page FAQ about what can be donated, by whom, and to whom (10).
- Exceptionally large organizations such as Feeding America are able to support the logistical costs of transportation and storage, but few small, local organizations have the consistent staff, volunteers, and funding necessary to regularly transport surplus food from grocery stores.
- The addition of available grant monies or publicly funded infrastructure to transport surplus foods from grocery stores to local nonprofits that work to decrease hunger may be a viable solution.
 - The Conservation Fund reports that the Grant Program for Transporting Healthy Food is a similar program that helps fund the transport of healthy food from farmers and fishers to local markets in underserved populations. This program has served 19 states and 317 counties and has been able to help provide an additional 4.5 million healthy meals (11).



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3. Encourage the creation of institutions that support local farmers and provide nutritious food.

- It is beneficial to support as many aspects of rural communities as possible when deciding which solutions to implement. Grocery stores that provide fresh, nutritious food to their customers, support local farmers, and financially empower their employees achieve this goal.
 - Food City, a prominent grocery store in Southwestern Virginia and Tennessee, partners with local farmers to bring their customers fresh-from-the-field fruits and vegetables. The grocery stores offer a plethora of food items that are delivered directly from the farm to the store on the same day they are picked, helping farmers to sell their crops quickly and allowing customers same-day access to high quality foods. Additionally, Food City reports that almost 15% of its company is owned by its associates through its profit-sharing plan. Food City also organizes a variety of community events such as food drives, school fundraisers, and local farm promotions (12).