



IMAGE: COURTESY OF CHESTERFIELD FOOD BANK

Food Banks: Lifelines to Those in Need

For millions, food banks fill a crucial gap. How do they do it and just how big is the need they address?

It's a Friday night and food distribution at the Chesterfield Food Bank Outreach Center, pictured above, is in full swing. Inside the cavernous warehouse in suburban Richmond, across the street from a veterinary clinic and an auto shop, staff members keep everyone on task while the latest pop hits keep the beat. Scores of volunteers — retirees, religious and scout groups, and families — work the different sections of fresh fruits and vegetables, frozen meats, canned and dry goods, and more. Many sing along as they fill the shopping carts of other volunteers cycling through a canyon of pallets and boxes of food, making their way outside. There, another volunteer will direct them to one of the lanes with a waiting car, where they'll unload a week's worth of groceries, then return inside to load up and do it again.

This scene repeats the first and third Friday of each month at the food bank's main facility, as well as every second and fourth Monday at a local church, and every Saturday at a nearby school or similar venue. Nick Jenkins, the food bank's community outreach director, says that about 20,000 to 25,000 visitors use their services each month, representing almost 5,000 families in the surrounding area. "I think most people don't associate Chesterfield County or America with hunger, but I think it's important to understand what food insecurity here is," he says. "It's people that are maybe not going seven days without food, but they don't have the security to know that when they go home, they have food in their pantry or the means to purchase food."

The need is striking: Food distribution starts at 4:30 p.m., and by the end of the night around 9 p.m., somewhere between 400 and 600 shopping carts of food, usually one per car, will make their way to the homes of some of the community's most vulnerable residents.

Food banks and other charitable food organizations like this one exist to meet the nutritional needs of community members throughout the Fifth District and across the country. Doing so requires an

array of partnerships to acquire food, staff and operational funds, an understanding of communities' needs and challenges, and logistical creativity to ensure food gets to those who need it.

WHAT DO FOOD BANKS DO?

The core mission of food banks is to provide food to those in need. General distribution efforts like the one in Chesterfield are common, but theirs is just one of the many approaches. Other programs directly support food access for children. For example, the Capital Area Food Bank in Washington, D.C., participates in the U.S. Department of Agriculture's (USDA) Summer Food Service Program, hosting 22 sites where children under the age of 18 in and around the capital can receive a free nutritious lunch. Seniors and homebound residents also benefit from specialized programs, including the well-known Meals on Wheels, which is run out of food banks such as Feed More in central Virginia.

What is a food bank? There is flexibility in the term, but, generally, food banks are large, regional organizations that store and distribute food to more local programs like food pantries. Food pantries then distribute the food to those in need. Some food banks serve vast geographic areas, such as Feed More, which has a coverage area of 29 counties and five cities from Virginia's southern border to the Northern Neck. Others, like the Capital Area Food Bank, serve more densely populated urban areas. Chesterfield Food Bank operates as both a food bank and a food pantry, and it is a part of the Feed More distribution network. Both food banks and pantries supply prepackaged food, as well as fresh produce and frozen meat, which are taken home and prepared. They differ from soup kitchens, which cook and serve food at a set time.

According to Feeding America, a nationwide network of 200 food banks and 60,000 partner food pantries, food banks acquire their food through donations, purchasing, and federal programs. First, community partners like local grocery stores, restaurants and bakeries, and small businesses donate their overages, the surplus food beyond what is needed to stock their shelves or serve the day's customers. Food drives also allow those within the local community to help out, as individuals, community organizations, and businesses can all collect, then donate, food that they have gathered. Local farmers also play a key role in supplying healthy and fresh produce, as they will oftentimes donate "perfectly imperfect" food — produce that is fine but might not meet the aesthetic expectations for retail sale. For example, Feeding the Carolinas, a network of the 10 regional food banks across North and South Carolina, established Farm to Food Bank, a program pairing the food banks with over 50 Carolina farmers who make available over 35 different varieties of produce for families in need.

Second, food banks and pantries purchase food — which, when sufficiently scaled, can be done at much lower prices than when individual consumers visit the grocery store. Doing so allows a food bank to tailor its offerings to meet the specific cultural or medical needs of its clients. Third, food banks also receive food through government programs

like the Commodity Supplemental Food Program, which provides necessary items to senior citizens, such as milk, fruits and vegetables, cereal, and cheese.

Food banks and pantries could not operate without volunteers. Community members might volunteer for a range of reasons: Many belong to scouting or religious groups, some are looking to fulfill service hours for school, and others are families or retirees wanting to give back to their communities. Jenkins says volunteers contribute about 60,000 hours per year at the Chesterfield Food Bank, with between 30 and 50 people working shifts daily at the main facility doing data collection and reporting or working in the warehouse and pantry. An additional 75 to 150 usually work at distribution events, and others help with outreach, staffing programs to make sure community members in need know how to access their services.

These outreach efforts — which include visiting local motels and homeless encampments, purchasing advertising space on local television, and ensuring Chesterfield Food Bank comes up whenever anyone in the area searches "food insecurity" online — are crucial. "We constantly assume that no one knows us," says Jenkins. "So we share our name in a hope that it gets in front of people who need help." Some organizations maintain eligibility requirements (for example, that recipients must be under 200 percent of the poverty line to receive food or must be referred by another social service organization), while others encourage anyone in need, regardless of the circumstances, to use their services.

Like many charitable organizations, food banks and pantries rely heavily on philanthropy to fund their operations. For example, the Summer Food Service Program administered by the Capital Area Food Bank is sponsored by several partners, including grocery store chain Harris Teeter, as well as DC United, the city's professional men's soccer team. Many charitable food websites, from Feeding America at the national level to state-level networks like Feeding the Carolinas and local facilities like the Chesterfield Food Bank, make it as easy as possible for individuals to donate money, and they frequently tell donors exactly what their money will do. In Chesterfield, more than half of the food bank's funding comes from donors in the community who give a recurring donation of \$25 to \$50 a month. The remainder comes from grants from local governments, businesses and civic organizations, as well as national charitable foundations such as the Walmart Foundation.

THE PROBLEM OF FOOD INSECURITY

People turn to food banks in varying circumstances. In some cases, a job loss or other disruption can lead households to seek food assistance to cover short-term needs, perhaps just for a month or two. In other situations, such as for households on fixed incomes, reliance on charitable food may be built into their standard approach for meeting basic food needs.

Feeding America reported that in 2022 alone, 49 million people relied on free food assistance, and that its partners distributed over 5.3 billion meals. The Urban Institute's Well-being and Basic Needs survey found that the following year, in 2023, one in six, or 16.6 percent of adults in the United

States, reported receiving charitable food; in 2019, prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, that number was closer to one in eight.

These numbers indicate how many people rely on charitable food organizations like food banks, but do they accurately reflect the real level of need? Maybe not: A deeper look into the data from the 2023 Urban Institute survey reveals that those who stated they used food bank services were only about 40 percent of the overall number of those who reported experiencing food insecurity.

The USDA defines food insecurity as “the limited or uncertain availability of nutritionally adequate and safe foods, or limited or uncertain ability to acquire acceptable foods in socially acceptable ways.” Households are classified as food insecure if “they had difficulty providing enough food for all members at some time in the past year because there wasn’t enough money for food.” The National Institute for Minority Health and Health Disparities notes that this insecurity puts people at risk of other dangerous health conditions such as diabetes, obesity, heart disease, and mental health disorders. It’s also important to note that food insecurity is distinct from hunger, which the USDA defines as a physiological condition that “results in discomfort, illness, weakness or pain that goes beyond the usual uneasy sensation.”

At the national level, a 2023 USDA report found that 44.2 million people experienced food insecurity in 2022, which was 10.4 million more than in 2021. More than 13 million children experienced food insecurity in 2022, as well — a nearly 45 percent increase over the prior year. Food insecurity also tends to be concentrated in poorer and minority households; the Urban Institute survey found that for adults with family incomes at 200 percent of the poverty line and below, 52.2 percent reported experiencing food insecurity in 2023, compared to 46.6 in 2022. Also, nearly 39 percent of Hispanic adults and about 35 percent of Black adults reported experiencing food insecurity, both of which were increases over previous years. (Other racial and ethnic groups did not experience any increases over the prior year.) Finally, adults who lived with children, identified as LGBT, or were low-income renters (as opposed to homeowners) were more likely to report experiencing food insecurity at some point in 2023.

Food insecurity exists in every county in every state. According to the Food Research and Action Center, a hunger research and policy center, West Virginia has one of the highest food insecurity rates in the country at 15 percent, or almost 270,000 residents. Approximately 74,000 children in the state face food insecurity. North Carolina isn’t far behind, according to their estimates: Nearly 1.5 million North Carolinians (14 percent of the population) experience food insecurity, and 448,000 of them are children. Almost 750,000 (12.5 percent) Marylanders — 221,000 of whom are children — are food insecure, as are 679,000 South Carolinians, or 12.8 percent of the population. 197,000 of those residents are children. In Virginia, just under 964,000 residents (11.1 percent) have experienced food insecurity, and of those, over 252,000 were children. Finally, in Washington, D.C., 11 percent of the population, about 74,000 people, experience food insecurity, and 18,000 of them are children.

FEEDING PEOPLE ISN’T EASY

An eye-catching data point from the Urban Institute survey: Only 37 percent of food insecure respondents felt comfortable using charitable food. Kassandra Martinczek, who studies food insecurity at the Urban Institute, suggests that the stigma attached to needing free food may keep many away. Turning to free groceries and meals oftentimes brings up questions of whether people feel they are deserving or should access these resources that are available to them.

A separate Urban Institute study of Arlington County, Va., asked individuals reporting food insecurity who did not take charitable food to explain why. “I think I’m like everybody else,” said one respondent. “We tend to be proud. In fact, that would be probably my last resort because I just believe in, I guess, pulling yourself up by your bootstraps. I wouldn’t want to do that [accept charity], but I do know where the resources are if I had to.”

While some may know how to access charitable food, if necessary, others acknowledge they lack that information; under half, about 42 percent of those identifying themselves as food insecure, were aware of local charitable food resources such as food banks or pantries. Beyond the sense of pride keeping some from exploring the options available to them, this lack of awareness may also stem from a number of other factors, including not knowing where to look, unreliable or limited internet capability, and, for those who do not speak English, information not being available in their language.

Not knowing about the charitable food resources that are available is just one dimension of the larger problem of access. Finding transportation can be difficult for many such as the elderly and disabled, and even if a charitable food site is within a reasonable distance and can be reached via public transportation, operating times may not match up with the schedules of those in need, particularly if they are working. Arlington County, for example, had 56 total charitable food sites as of 2022. Forty-eight of those were open year-round, but only 21 had no eligibility requirements. Of those, only 10 made food available to residents at least once a week. Finally, of those 10, only six were open during weekends or evenings.

For food insecure households with adults working during regular business hours, these limitations pose a serious risk to their ability to get enough food. To combat this, charitable food organizations have developed several approaches intended to make it easier to get food to the people who need it. The Food Bank of Central and Eastern North Carolina, for example, has experimented with a grab-and-go model, where clients who aren’t able to pick up food during working hours can do so at a time that works for them. “If someone’s working eight to six, we need to make sure that we get food resources to them at a time and place that they can access them or else we’re not doing our job,” says Marlowe Foster, the food bank’s former senior vice president for development and business strategy.

Others have leveraged emerging technologies to ensure people get the food they need. In San Francisco, DoorDash, the online food delivery platform, partnered with local food

organizations in 2018 to develop Project DASH, a home delivery service that, according to its clients, helped them save money, cut down on trips to the grocery store, save money on transportation, and extend the duration of their other public benefits. The program partnered with more than 300 nonprofits by the end of 2022, and food banks and United Way affiliates around the country have now adopted the approach. Still others, such as Feed More in Virginia, partner with local schools to send home weekend backpacks full of food and host farmer's market-style distributions, which oftentimes will have music, games, and other community resources.

While Project DASH has delivered about 15 million meals to rural areas since its creation in 2018, putting food into the hands of people experiencing food insecurity in those regions has been a persistent challenge, as they may be hours away from a food bank or grocery store. Feeding America notes while 63 percent of all counties in the United States are rural, 87 percent of counties with the highest rates of food insecurity are rural. A 2017 paper by researchers at Feeding America and the University of Illinois showed that charitable food providers are heeding this reality, as there is twice as much coverage in terms of the number of food providers in rural areas compared to urban ones. There are also more distribution days per person in rural areas and more food given out per person. This is due in large part to the significant presence of permanent food pantries, as well as mobile pantries, where food can go straight from a delivery truck to families in need.

PANDEMIC-ERA BENEFITS AND INFLATION

The COVID-19 pandemic had a dramatic effect on food insecurity and the work of food banks. Prior to the pandemic in 2019, 4.4 percent of American households reported they used a food pantry that year, but that number jumped to 6.7 percent in 2020, the year the pandemic began. With job losses mounting, the federal government increased the monthly payment (known as emergency allocations) to recipients under the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), the largest federal anti-hunger program. It also relaxed eligibility requirements, which, until then, included a work requirement. The number of individuals participating in

the program went from about 37 million in February 2020 to 43 million later in the year.

But in the first half of 2023, the work requirement was reestablished, and states eliminated the emergency allocations. While the number of recipients remained above 40 million, the average SNAP recipient lost between \$91.50 and \$112.18 per month. This reduction was hard for low-income families, who, like everyone else, were also experiencing the reduced value of their dollars at the grocery store because of the worst inflationary episode in 40 years. Sixty-five percent of Feeding America's food bank partners reported an increase in the number of people seeking assistance between February and March of that year, suggesting the lower SNAP amount coupled with crippling increases in food prices was leading to more widespread need.

Wages in the aggregate are now outpacing inflation, but many lower-income households who qualify for SNAP are still struggling to get by, as the benefit doesn't last them through the month. As these households turn to charitable food to fill those gaps, food banks are also experiencing the effects. Martinchek of the Urban Institute notes while food banks and pantries received increased funding and donations in the immediate wake of the pandemic, these funds have expired, even though demand exceeds pre-pandemic levels. She suggests "it could become increasingly challenging for these food banks to be able to fully meet the needs their communities have, especially when are also facing inflationary pressures when they're purchasing food for their communities."

In addition to providing food, many charitable food organizations also make available wraparound services that foster self-sustainability, including job training programs and mental health or substance abuse treatment. Foster, the former head of development for the Food Bank of Central and Eastern North Carolina, says that the process of connecting people to these services is a "slow build" requiring trust and communication.

But the children experiencing food insecurity don't understand any of that, which is why in Chesterfield, cars with a child in them will receive a cake or pack of cupcakes. "A kid sitting in a line for an hour and a half at the food bank waiting for groceries is not really understanding everything that's going on," says Jenkins. "But at the end of it, if they get a cake, it makes them happy." **EF**

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