

Food for THOUGHT

Foodbank of Southeastern Virginia and the Eastern Shore

SUMMER 2023

From Farm to Foodbank

New pilot project aims to yield more than just crops

The Canadian poet and novelist Brian Brett once said, “Farming is a profession of hope.” For that reason, and so many more, the professional lives of farmers and foodbankers are deeply intertwined. With that in mind, the Foodbank of Southeastern Virginia and the Eastern Shore is embarking on a new pilot project in Western Tidewater to lease land, partner with a farmer, and produce our own crops.

“The spirit of partnership is woven throughout this project, and I think the level of collaboration we are working toward will touch a lot of lives,” says Foodbank President & CEO, Christopher Tan.

It all began when New Life Church in Franklin, which owns 20 acres of farmland, offered to lease it to the Foodbank at a favorable rate. We chose Elisha Barnes, a local minority farmer who owns Popson Farms, to farm the land.

“It was important to us that we partner with a minority farmer,” says Christopher. “Historically, minority farmers have been systemically blocked from the support and resources commonly available to white farmers. Evidence spanning eight decades of USDA denial of loans to socially disadvantaged farmers demonstrates a long history of discrimination. That’s why we want to partner with a family farmer of color to strengthen the food system in the Franklin area and develop a means of production that results in food security for the region.”



Site of the Foodbank farm in Southampton County, Virginia

Here’s how it will work: Mr. Barnes will tend to the entire 20 acres, of which he will retain all the crops he chooses to grow on 10 of those acres. On the other half, he will care for crops selected by the Foodbank, most likely cabbage, collards, and broccoli in the fall and melons and corn in the spring and summer. Students from local schools will assist in harvesting.

Once harvested, the nutritious fresh food will be distributed through the market at the Foodbank’s Western Tidewater Branch and food pantries throughout the region.

As a pilot program, results will dictate what happens going forward. However, if all goes well, the Foodbank plans to initiate similar projects on the Eastern Shore and in South Hampton Roads.

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Dear Friend of the Foodbank

As we approach the final months of the fiscal year, I am feeling a bit reflective. Since arriving one year ago, I have viewed each day leading this organization as a gift. Among the many things for which I am grateful is the incredible team of dedicated people who make our work possible. Our staff, volunteers, partner agencies, and donors reflect a shared sense of values that always put those in need at the center of our work.

It really is remarkable what we can accomplish working together. The sheer volume of food we share with our neighbors, along with the programs we maintain, are a testament to great teamwork and singular focus. This year, we plan to set a record for food distributed. The opening of our Western Tidewater Branch has been a tremendous success, exceeding all expectations and making a real difference in the lives of so many people.

We've had much to celebrate, but there is so much more to do. Sometimes that means doing something different. For instance, we are about to begin growing some of our own fruit and produce, and you can read all about it in this edition of *Food for Thought*.

As CEO, I believe the only thing that has ever changed a person's life is the compassion and care of another human being. Compassionate, caring people are, and always will be, our primary asset. We grow compassionate, caring people throughout this community, beginning with our more than 150 partner agencies and culminating in our staff and volunteers here at the Foodbank. Every day, we pledge to work hard to make sure we recognize this asset and protect it. As you read on, you will learn about some of our amazing partner agencies.

The battle against food insecurity really does require all hands on deck. Good ideas come from everywhere. As CEO, I recognize that diverse points of view can lead to a stronger, more capable organization. Different views, perspectives, and life experiences effectively managed and thoughtfully considered lead to better practices, processes, and outcomes. Each one of you plays a pivotal role in our shared mission, and I value your thoughts, support, and commitment.

With tremendous gratitude,

Christopher Tan, President & CEO



Western Tidewater Branch Exceeds Expectations

After 6 months of operation, lives are being changed

After nearly two years of planning and development, the Foodbank of Southeastern Virginia and the Eastern Shore opened its new Western Tidewater Branch in the City of Franklin last September. Six months into its operation, the impact of this new facility is being profoundly felt.

In terms of food delivered, the numbers are striking. Throughout the region, the Foodbank has distributed nearly 1.4 million pounds of food, which translates into more than 1.1 million meals for our food insecure neighbors. Of that, nearly 38 percent was fresh produce.

“We get regular stories from our neighbors about how much this food means to them,” says Foodbank Donor and Community Partnerships Manager Teri Zurfluh. “We’ve had people tell us that if it weren’t for us, they wouldn’t eat at all. We’ve also heard several stories about how people have gotten good reports from their doctors about their A1C levels and other health measures.”

Aside from the food being distributed through partner agencies, pantries, and the branch’s market, this new facility also has space for community partners to provide services that address the root causes of food insecurity such as issues related to health, employment, housing, education, and financial literacy. “This facility

is a game-changer for this community,” says Teri. “The first floor offers unprecedented food access to our neighbors in Western Tidewater, but the second floor is where the magic happens. By tackling the root causes of food insecurity and providing access to experts and resources, we are changing lives here.

“We work with the Medicare Resource Center, and their representative helps our neighbors know more about the ins and outs of Medicare and how to pick the right plan. She saved one elderly couple several thousands of dollars a year by getting them into a more affordable plan that was better for them.”

Another success story: a local contractor lost his job just before the holidays. In reaching out to the Foodbank, he discovered that we do more than just provide food. He had no computer and had been attempting to take some complicated online classes for a potential employer using his phone. Foodbank staff set him up in our computer lab to take a series of OSHA modules. Upon completion, he was able to print his certificates for that employer and was hired immediately for a highly sought-after position. Each day, we are reminded that the fight against food insecurity is not won by a single battle, but rather a series of little victories just like these.



Above and Beyond

Doing More Than His Share

For more than two decades, Elliot Simon has been getting the job done ... and then some

This year, the Foodbank of Southeastern Virginia and the Eastern Shore is trending toward distributing about 20 million pounds of food. That is a large number. Historic, in fact. How does the Foodbank move that much food? With team members like Elliot Simon.

A truck driver for the Foodbank for nearly 21 years, Elliot is a beloved member of the Foodbank family. “My favorite thing about Elliot is that he truly cares about our organization and he isn’t afraid to challenge us,” says Foodbank Transportation Manager Sarah Mathews. “He is constantly giving feedback about how we can improve logistics and operations, which is very helpful to me as a new leader in this department.

“The second thing I appreciate about Elliot is he is always there no matter what. This past Saturday, we called him at 5:00 a.m. to cover a mobile pantry at the last minute. He came right in and took care of it with a smile on his face. He is always there for us when we need him. What’s more, he’s got an infectious smile. Once you get him talking and smiling, he can light up a room!”



Over more than two decades, there is little doubt that Elliot has had opportunities to work elsewhere. Why has he stayed? “I love my job, doing what I do,” he says. “I love helping people and giving back. God blessed me, so I’ve got to bless others. That’s what He’s asked me to do. When you wake up in the morning, can you pay for that first breath? No, you just say thank you and do what you can to show you’re grateful.”

The Karrie Kares Project: a Legacy of Devotion

In 2009, and at just 9 years old, Karrie Phillips held her first food drive for the Foodbank on the Eastern Shore. For her birthday party that year, she asked for food donations instead of presents. Being born in Parksley, just minutes away from the Foodbank’s Eastern Shore Branch, she realized the importance of advocating for her local community.

When Karrie entered high school, she started a nonprofit called The Karrie Kares Project. This organization benefits not only the Foodbank, but other community organizations on the Shore as well. This amazing young woman has spent many hours volunteering at the Foodbank to organize and assist with our weekly food distributions. To date, she has



volunteered more than 600 hours and donated more than 4,000 pounds of food!

Through the years, even after she left for college, Karrie has continued hosting a variety of seasonal food drives, including Fill the Pool, Christmas Reverse Advent, and Town of Parksley Halloween and

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757 Mobile Market Relaunch

Using data to create better outcomes in food deserts

In 2021, the Foodbank rolled out a new method of delivering nutritious food to those who need it most. Customizing large RV-like vehicles filled with fresh vegetables and produce, lean protein, and other healthy foods, we steered our shiny new 757 Mobile Markets toward food deserts throughout the service area.

Though the markets were well received, we saw mixed results. Leaders at the Foodbank determined that we needed hard data — information that could help us determine exactly where to go, when to go, and how often. Areas where few people have their own transportation or convenient access to public transportation would be given high priority.

After relaunching in January of this year, the results thus far have been encouraging. While we are serving fewer sites, we are visiting them more often and at varied times. Using a computerized self-enrollment intake tool, we are also improving the client experience, speeding up the intake process.

After initial registration, neighbors receive a key tag that can be scanned at future visits. Currently, we are serving approximately 50 households per visit. Since the Market is large enough to accommodate up

to 70 households, we will continue to refine the process.

These improvements are not solely the result of data analytics. The Foodbank has also enlisted eight community partners to help us further engage the people living in these food deserts.

- Center for Global Diplomacy
- New Light FGB Church
- Seatack Recreation Center
- JenCare Senior Medical Center
- Revival Center
- Tidewater Community College Joint Library
- Colony Mobile Home
- Colonial Run Mobile Home

“I’m really excited about where the 757 Mobile Market is headed,” says Foodbank Community Impact Manager Nancy Flores Rodriguez. “At the moment, we are focused on Virginia Beach, but as we progress, we look forward to extending this program throughout the service area, bringing even more food and care to our neighbors.”



Purposeful Partners

Burning Bush Worship Center Provides Lifeline to Seniors Living in Food Desert

When Sarah Peoples Perry feels led to do something, there's no stopping her. A volunteer at the Burning Bush Worship Center in Norfolk, her partner agency serves those who live in the Berkley area of Norfolk, a neighborhood classified as a food desert. Each month, Burning Bush distributes nearly 14,000 pounds of food to its food insecure neighbors.

It all began about four years ago when this retired educator and her husband, a retired engineer, became concerned about seniors living in the area who had no access to healthy, nutritious food, along with limited mobility to get around. They took \$2,000 of their own money and bought as many fresh fruits and vegetables as they could, bagged them up, and delivered them to seniors throughout the neighborhood. Soon after, they got the church involved, which provided a delivery truck, and then began partnering with the Foodbank of Southeastern Virginia and the Eastern Shore.

From those modest beginnings, a ministry was born, and now they serve nearly 300 seniors every week. Each receives a bag of groceries delivered to their door filled with fresh fruits and vegetables, eggs, meat, and toiletries. The Burning Bush ministry has

even enlisted the help of the Norfolk Police Department, which assists with deliveries.

What started as a quiet retirement has blossomed into a mission that is a source of great devotion.

"Sometimes I get tired, but all the people who volunteer with us keep me energized," says Ms. Perry. "I've always felt like I was born to serve others. We've got so many seniors in the neighborhood on fixed incomes who would otherwise be unable to find healthy, nutritious food. Many of them are also raising grandchildren. There's one person we serve who is caring for seven of her grandkids. Doing what we do takes a lot of effort, but we are making a difference in their lives and ours as well."



Small, but Mighty

Wesley Grace United Methodist Church does a lot with a little

On any given Sunday, there are about 50 to 60 people worshipping at Wesley Grace United Methodist Church. In total, there are approximately 200 people on the church roll. And yet, this relatively small community of worship is doing miraculous things to serve its community. There are other Foodbank partner agencies that seem to do the impossible, and each one is a story worth telling.

Wesley Grace operates as a client-choice food pantry, meaning that it sets up tables with all the available items so neighbors can come in and shop for the food they need at no cost. While doing this may



not be possible when serving large volumes of people, at the pantry level, it provides each person the dignity of choice and allows volunteers to really connect with the people they serve.

Pantry Coordinator Diane Collins says they see

about 175 families each week, opening their doors Wednesday evenings and Saturday mornings. It's a pretty big job for a small congregation, but they have help — 40 regular volunteers from other churches and the community. Some are actually former clients. "It's good to have different ideas, ideologies, and points of view," says Diane. "The common denominator is that we're all here to help and support others."

Forty volunteers may seem like a lot, but it's barely enough to keep things running. In addition to what they receive from the Foodbank, they visit four different grocery stores every week with a caravan of volunteers' cars and pick-up trucks to recover food that

is no longer for sale but still healthy to eat. Each week, they see about 10 new families, and the weekly total has more than doubled during the past year.

"We will rise to this challenge," says Diane. "We've got people out there making tough choices, whether to pay for medicine, rent, or food."

In addition to food, Wesley Grace also operates a clothes closet on the first and third Saturdays of every month, and also hosts an agency that provides free cell phones to clients who qualify. "We're just everyday people who decide to, in our heads and hearts, to be God's hands and feet," says Diane. "That's just what we do."

Prince of Peace Catholic Church: Much More Than a Food Pantry

As churches go, Prince of Peace Catholic Church is quite active, serving more than 700 people per month through its food pantry. However, this Foodbank partner agency also has another feeding ministry outside of its food pantry called Agape Feast that goes the extra mile (actually, many miles) to find people in need of a nutritious meal. Three years ago, the church launched this new mission, which travels throughout the City of Chesapeake providing food where needed to people experiencing homelessness.

It began when the city opened its Hotel Sheltering Program for people who were homeless at the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic. Agape Feast scheduled dinner nights in conjunction with faith groups, high school clubs, civic organizations, and restaurants that provided meals for all of the guests in the program for the next two years. In addition, it provided each of those groups with canned goods, boxed food, plastic utensil packs, and many other items to defray their costs.

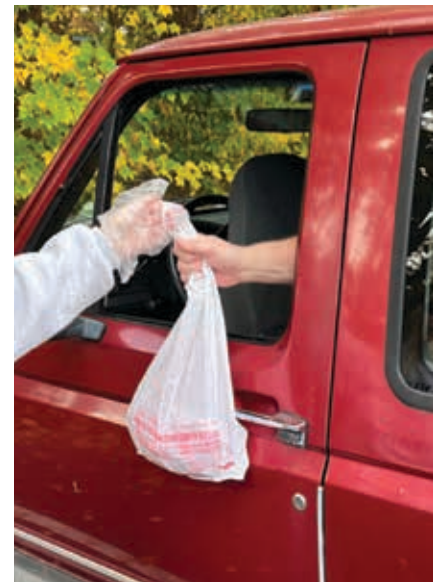
Volunteers still visit parking lots where people live in their cars. Twice a week, they bring bags filled with sandwiches, fruit, water, granola bars, tuna/cracker packs, and fruit cups. During the colder months, they provide hats, mittens, scarves, and blankets.

The ministry added another feeding program in 2022, serving lunch at the South Norfolk Library. Three times a week, volunteers serve soup, sandwiches, and fruit plus needed items like socks, gloves, hats, and hygiene items. They also deliver

sandwiches to Chesapeake's We Care Resource Center.

The ministry just announced yet another program called Raise One. It's challenging every church in the city — more than 200 of them — to help raise just one person out of homelessness. It may not seem like a lot, but Agape Feast Director Sandy Shepard says the collective impact could be most impactful. She's a fan of the old adage that many hands make light work. "I'll hear potential volunteers say, 'I don't have a lot of time ... all I can do is this' and I tell them that we can all do something no matter how large or small and together, do great things."

"I believe God is a master quilter," says Sandy. "He takes each person and sews us together to make something beautiful." It's an approach that's worked exceptionally well for the past three years. Collectively, they have brought together more than 1,000 volunteers and distributed over 46,000 meals. Many of those volunteers are from outside of the church. "God has called us to be there for one another," says Sandy, "and this is how we put our faith into action."





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The Karrie Kares Project: a Legacy of Devotion

Christmas events. She also partnered with the Eastern Shore Railway Museum and hosts a monthly bingo where attendees can receive a free bingo card with the donation of a canned good.

Fourteen years since she first began, Karrie is still holding her birthday food drives. She has now

graduated from college and works at the Eastern Shore Community Services Board, one of the Foodbank's community partners. Her ability to know when someone needs assistance has guided her to truly make a difference in her community.