

2023 FOOD JUSTICE FOR OLDER ADULTS IN THE RICHMOND REGION



JULY 2024

PREPARED AND PRESENTED BY

POSITIVEAGE, A LEADINGAGE VIRGINIA FOUNDATION

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the Community Foundation for a Greater Richmond*

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

During the COVID-19 global pandemic, a temporary federal program introduced Emergency Allotments (EA) to persons receiving benefits through the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), increasing the monthly SNAP benefit amount to minimize the impact of economic disruptions caused by the pandemic. These EAs provided individuals and families access to nutritious food despite job losses and financial instability. However, March 2023 marked the end of the COVID-19 public health emergency, and therefore the termination of increased monthly SNAP benefits.

In July 2023, PositiveAge, a LeadingAge Virginia foundation, received a Community Impact grant from the Community Foundation for a Greater Richmond to assess the impact of reduced SNAP benefits on older adults in the greater Richmond region. PositiveAge launched the *2023 Food Justice for Older Adults in the Richmond Region* initiative, which aimed to engage older adults affected by the March 2023 SNAP policy change, providing them a platform to voice concerns, share their lived experiences, and suggest changes that would improve their everyday lives.

Between December 2023 and June 2024, PositiveAge conducted three formal in-person Listening Sessions, providing a platform for older adults to candidly share their experiences with SNAP benefits administration and its impact on them. The project team also administered the *Impact of SNAP Benefit Reduction Survey* at eight local food pantries and subsidized housing locations to include even more older adults' perspectives into the project findings.

The final data set includes 146 respondents from Listening Sessions, food pantry visits, and subsidized housing visits, with quantifiable results: among the 146 participants, prior to the March 2023 reduction, the average SNAP benefit amount was \$199 per month. After the March 2023 reduction, the average decreased to \$76 per month, demonstrating a 61% average decrease in monthly SNAP benefits.

This Summary Report details additional findings from the initiative, including suggestions from Richmond-based SNAP recipients for positive policy changes. The data and narratives gathered from the *2023 Food Justice* initiative will inform advocacy efforts to create policy and legislative changes to alleviate the articulated hardships faced by older adults in the Richmond community, with the long-term goal of reinstating enhanced SNAP benefits for all Virginians who qualify so that no household is experiencing food apartheid.

PROJECT PARTNERS

The Community Foundation for a Greater Richmond

The [Community Foundation for a Greater Richmond](#) enhances the quality of life in Richmond and Central Virginia by inspiring philanthropy and civic engagement, empowering donors and community partners and providing stewardship of community resources.

The Community Foundation graciously provided funding and support to PositiveAge for the *2023 Food Justice for Older Adults in the Richmond Region* initiative.

PositiveAge, a LeadingAge Virginia Foundation

[PositiveAge](#) is the 501c3 foundation for LeadingAge Virginia, an association of not-for-profit service organizations serving residents and clients across the older adult care continuum, including life plan/continuing care retirement communities, affordable senior housing, assisted living, nursing homes, adult day centers, hospice, palliative care and home and community-based services. PositiveAge leverages the association's resources and reputation, connecting with the association's 100 Virginia-based member organizations and their residents, clients, and caregivers. The PositiveAge vision of "*positive aging for each Virginian*" requires bold, collaborative engagement among stakeholders and community members alike to ensure that each Virginian truly has equitable access to aging services without institutional and systemic barriers.

PositiveAge is uniquely positioned to effectively engage aging services organizations, community members, and stakeholders in the Commonwealth to address the changing needs of older adults. The PositiveAge team readily mobilizes partners to enact community-driven solutions to challenges and has a history of leading successful programs that engage the community through advisory sessions as an essential component to these programs' success. In this way, PositiveAge operationalizes its DEIB commitment statement, which in part reads: "*We aim to be a leading advocate for all of Virginia's aging population. To maintain this status, we promote fair and open access to our services through continuous improvement of our policies and procedures targeted to remove barriers. We join our member communities in the embrace of the diverse perspectives of residents, employees and partners representing all genders, orientations, cultures, races, economic status, and ability.*"

PositiveAge is focused on the following strategic priorities:

- Advance efforts to recruit, retain and develop a qualified workforce.
- Support healthy communities, infrastructures, organizations, and systems that embrace diversity, create equity & build cultures of inclusion.
- Impact the future of aging services in Virginia.



SUPPLEMENTAL NUTRITION ASSISTANCE PROGRAM (SNAP) IN VIRGINIA

During the COVID-19 global pandemic, a temporary federal program was established in response to the public health emergency, which approved Emergency Allotments (EA) to provide additional funds to SNAP recipients, increasing recipients' monthly benefit and minimizing the impact of economic disruptions caused by the pandemic. These EAs aimed to ensure that families could afford nutritious food despite widespread job losses, economic crisis, and financial instability.

March 2023 marked the end of the COVID-19 public health emergency, and as such, the end of increased monthly SNAP allocations for recipients. As reported by Center on the Budget and Policy Priorities using SNAP administrative data from the USDA, Virginia was among many states whose recipients saw a marked decrease in monthly SNAP benefits (**Figure 1**). Figure 1 illustrates that, on average, SNAP benefits decreased by 33%, highlighting the significant impact of policy changes on recipient households. The average monthly benefit change after March 2023 per person in Virginia was -49%.

The intention of SNAP is to offer food benefits to qualifying low-income individuals and families to purchase nutritious food from authorized retailers. This monthly benefit is intended to supplement the recipients' grocery budgets to provide additional financial assistance to purchase eligible food items vital for health and well-being.

In Virginia, SNAP is administered by the Virginia Department of Social Services (VDSS), whose publicly available [**SNAP participation reports**](#) demonstrate the number of individuals receiving SNAP benefits within approved Virginia-based households.

State	Average Monthly Benefit Per Person (Dec 2022-Feb 2023)	Average Monthly Benefit Per Person (Mar-May 2023)	Average Monthly Benefit Change Per Person	Average Monthly Benefit Percentage Change Per Person
Texas	\$268	\$176	-\$92	-34%
Utah	\$274	\$124	-\$150	-55%
Vermont	\$277	\$217	-\$60	-22%
Virginia	\$294	\$149	-\$145	-49%
Washington	\$276	\$168	-\$108	-39%
West Virginia	\$269	\$161	-\$108	-40%
Wisconsin	\$269	\$151	-\$117	-44%
Wyoming*	\$181	\$181	-\$1	0%
Guam	\$240	\$284	\$44	18%
Virgin Islands	\$353	\$246	-\$107	-30%

FIGURE 1: CHANGE IN SNAP BENEFITS FOLLOWING THE FEDERAL END OF EMERGENCY ALLOTMENTS

Publicly available data shows that in February 2023, just before the SNAP reduction, nine localities in the Richmond region (including Chesterfield County, Colonial Heights City, Goochland County, Hanover County, Henrico County, Hopewell City, Petersburg City, Powhatan County, and Richmond City) had a large number of SNAP beneficiaries, but by April 2024, following the March 2023 SNAP reduction, there was a marked decrease in the number of SNAP beneficiaries (**Figure 2**).

Local food banks and community organizations report increased utilization of their services as families navigate hardships due to the end of EAs. This situation highlights the ongoing need for advocacy, robust social safety nets, and systems and policy change that adapt to changing economic conditions, ensuring that all individuals – including older adults, those with disabilities, and those from marginalized communities – have equitable food security, a basic human right and necessity.

	February 2023	April 2024	Percentage Change
SNAP Households	73,971	69,856	-6%
SNAP Beneficiaries (individuals)	144,020	136,413	-5%
SNAP Issuances	38.7 million	25 million	-35%

FIGURE 2: THE NUMBER OF SNAP HOUSEHOLDS, BENEFICIARIES, AND ISSUANCES ON FEBRUARY 2023 (BEFORE SNAP EAS EXPIRED) AND APRIL 2024 FROM NINE LOCALITIES IN THE RICHMOND REGION.

2023 FOOD JUSTICE FOR OLDER ADULTS IN THE RICHMOND REGION

PositiveAge was awarded a **Community Impact** grant from the Community Foundation for a Greater Richmond in support of an initiative that aimed to quantify the impact of reduced SNAP benefits on older adults specifically in the greater Richmond area, and to use those findings and stories to inform elected officials of the impact of reduced monthly benefits on these individuals. PositiveAge led the *2023 Food Justice for Older Adults in the Richmond Region* initiative by engaging individuals who have experienced hardships due to the March 2023 SNAP policy change, giving these individuals a forum to share their concerns, observed shortcomings in program administration, and to propose community-informed solutions. The findings from this initiative will be used to advocate for policies and legislation that alleviate the hardships faced by these individuals.

PROJECT GOALS

Short-Term Goals (complete within one year, by July 2024):

- Engage Richmond-based older adults in listening sessions to better understand food justice issues for older adults, and to quantify the impact of reduced SNAP benefits on these individuals.
- Collect impactful stories and data to inform elected officials of the impact of reduced SNAP benefits on older adults by sharing the findings of the *2023 Food Justice* initiative.

Activities to support Short-Term Goal:

- Conduct facilitated Listening Sessions by engaging older adults in the Richmond area;
- Capture older adults' perspectives on the impact of reduced SNAP benefits on their everyday lives through story banking and brief survey;
- Identify, collect and analyze data from strategic partners; and
- Compile data and challenges reported into a Summary Report that will enable grassroots, personalized advocacy.

Long-Term Goal

- By 2026, reinstate enhanced SNAP benefits for all Virginians who qualify so that no household is experiencing food apartheid.

Activities to support Long-Term Goal:

- Identify and introduce policy recommendations that positively address the main challenges reported for older adults using findings from activities listed above;
- Advocate for expanded SNAP benefits for older adults in the appropriate forums; and
- Develop new public/private partnerships to introduce new solutions.

GEOGRAPHIC AREAS SERVED

The Community Foundation for a Greater Richmond awards Community Impact grants to non-profits serving the nine localities that make up the greater Richmond area, shown below. As such, the *2023 Food Justice* initiative engaged older adults and partners – including local food pantries and other non-profits – located in this same geography. For a listing of all partners, please review Partnering Organizations on page [23].



FIGURE 3: IMAGE RETRIEVED FROM THE COMMUNITY FOUNDATION FOR A GREATER RICHMOND

TARGET POPULATION & LOCAL DEMOGRAPHICS

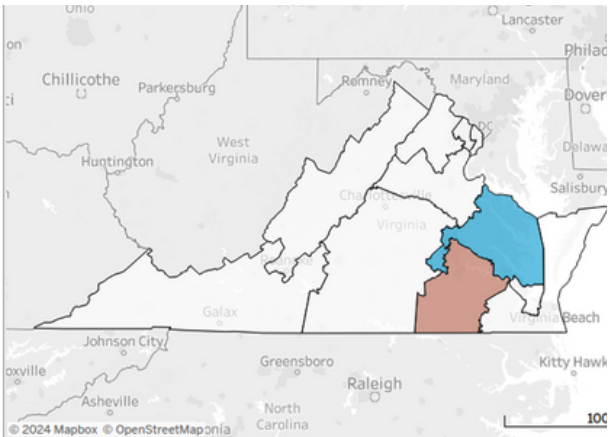
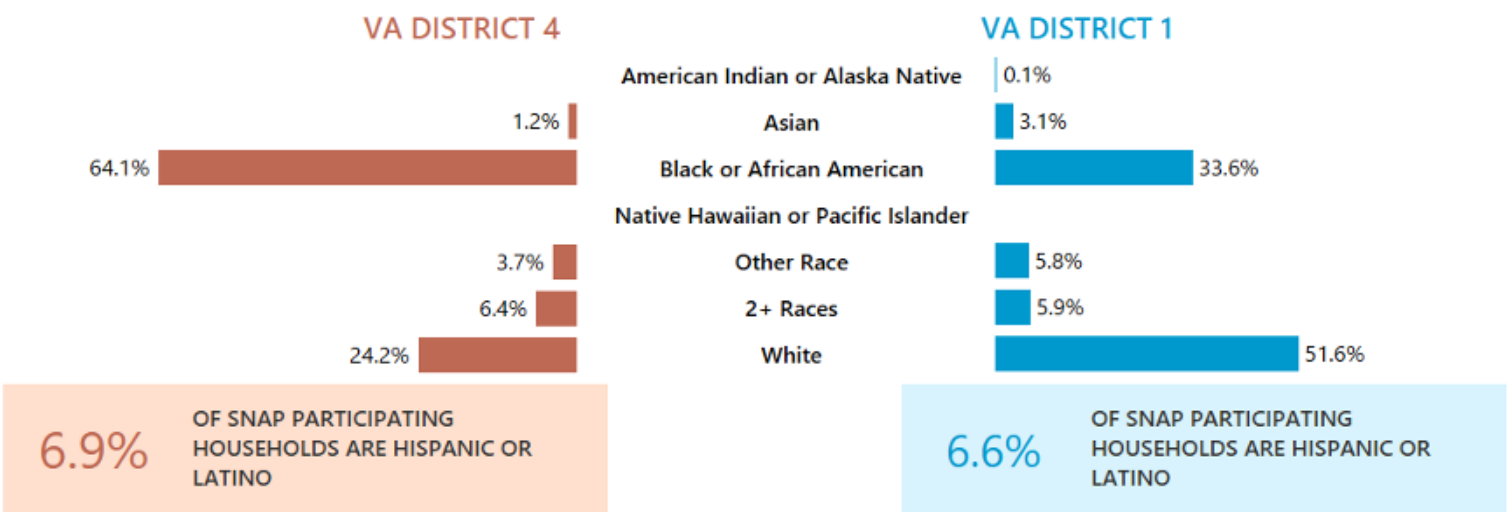


Figure 4 utilizes data provided by the [USDA FNS SNAP Community Characteristics Dashboard](#), which further describes the demographics of individuals living within these two Congressional Districts.

The First and Fourth Congressional Districts were chosen because they **encompass the nine localities** that comprise the greater Richmond area.

As of 2022, there were **47,597** SNAP participating households in Virginia’s Fourth Congressional District. Among the SNAP participating households, **35.7%** have an older adult living in their household. In District 4, there are an estimated **16,992** households with individuals aged 60 and older enrolled in SNAP.

In Virginia’s First Congressional District, there were an estimated **19,207** SNAP participating households, of which **44.8%** have an older adult living in their household. In District 1, there are an estimated **8,604** households with individuals aged 60 and older enrolled in SNAP.



GATHERING STORIES

Understanding the Impact of SNAP Benefit Reduction on Older Adults

PositiveAge aimed to engage Richmond's older adults to learn from their stories, concerns, and experiences with the SNAP program. Older adults were recruited as participants and were required to meet eligibility criteria to attend Listening Sessions and/or have their information included in the study dataset. Specifically, eligible participants were screened to ensure they were at least 60 years old and experienced a reduction in SNAP benefits following the conclusion of the COVID-19 EAs in March 2023. Multiple methods were utilized to ensure a diverse and comprehensive collection of stories, experiences, and perspectives, including in-person Listening Sessions and in-person survey completion. Flyers detailing the Listening Sessions were created and distributed to nonprofit organizations in the Richmond area, including Senior Connections and local food banks, pantries, and affordable housing units.

Listening Sessions

The project team engaged eligible participants in three formal in-person Listening Sessions, capturing their stories and sentiments about the reduction in SNAP benefits and its impact on their daily lives. These sessions provided both quantitative and qualitative data, effectively highlighting the challenges regularly faced by SNAP beneficiaries. Participants were given a unique opportunity and forum to candidly share their lived experiences with both their peers and the project team, who worked to objectively capture their impact stories to share them with the appropriate stakeholders.

Two Listening Sessions were held at Richmond-based [Senior Connections](#), with the third Session held at [Ettrick-Matoaca Library](#) in Chesterfield. Each of the three Listening Sessions were two hours in length, with most of the time spent engaging in a facilitated discussion, allowing 30 minutes for the completion of the *Impact of SNAP Benefit Reduction Questionnaire*. Listening Session participants were provided lunch and a \$50 VISA gift card as an honorarium for their participation.

Twenty-four individuals participated in facilitated Listening Sessions.

“Thank you for listening...hopefully it can be heard. That makes me feel good, that we can be heard and maybe can make a difference. There are so many people more than just us in this room going through this.”

-LISTENING SESSION PARTICIPANT

Community Visits and Survey Distribution

In addition to quantitative and qualitative insights collected during the Listening Sessions, the project team distributed the *Impact of SNAP Benefit Reduction Survey* during visits to community food pantries and subsidized housing locations. In total, **151 older adults completed surveys**, and after removing data outliers, **122 valid* responses** were collected. Survey respondents received a \$15 Kroger or Food Lion gift card as an honorarium for completing the Impact of SNAP Benefit Reduction survey.

Five local food pantries [1] were visited, during which the project team interacted with community members who were asked to share their experiences with the SNAP program.

- Moments of Hope
- Goochland Cares
- CARES Petersburg
- St. Thomas Episcopal Church
- Powhatan Food Pantry

Three visits were made to subsidized housing [2] communities, during which residents shared their experiences with the SNAP program.

- Dominion Place (two visits)
- The Rosa Apartments

In addition to Food Pantry and Subsidized Housing Visits to collect surveys, Senior Connections invited PositiveAge to attend their Foster Grandparent meeting, which provided an additional opportunity to engage with older adults within the community that have been impacted by EA expiration.

*Though participants were screened prior to formal Listening Sessions, the survey was completed in real-time with older adults that were visiting food pantries or housing units on the day the project team was also visiting. Therefore, they were not screened for eligibility. Any responses from individuals not meeting eligibility criteria were excluded from reported data.

[1] A food pantry is a community-based organization that provides free groceries and essential food items to individuals and families in need.

[2] Subsidized housing is housing provided at a reduced cost to low-income individuals and families through government assistance programs that aim to increase affordability.

RESULTS

As demonstrated by the following quantitative and qualitative data, the reduction in SNAP benefits has had a significant impact on many households that relied on the pandemic era EAs. As these EAs ended, many households had to adjust to lower monthly benefit amounts. This reduction has left many SNAP recipients struggling to make ends meet as the cost of living and inflation continue to rise and affect the prices of essential products and food. The decrease in SNAP benefits has particularly affected populations including low-income families, older individuals, and those living with disabilities. Following the loss of EA benefits, many individuals must make difficult choices between purchasing food or other necessities such as housing, healthcare, and utilities.



75% of Listening Session attendees and survey respondents reported that their primary source of income is Social Security, Supplemental Security Income (SSI), or Social Security Disability Insurance (SSDI). Older Virginians completing the survey also reported that they are currently managing chronic health conditions, including diabetes, obesity, mental health disorders, stress, heart disease, hypertension, and hypercholesterolemia, to name a few.

“The impact has a lot to do with the community you live in. For most of us, I know the pantry, if you have one, is low stocked. Or they have expired stuff, and don’t have what you need. A lot of us don’t have transportation... If you don’t have a pantry in your community you have to go through extra effort to get a ride or catch 3 buses, or it’s just inconvenient, especially on a day like today when it’s raining. It’s hard for us to get around, so it’s more of a burden of where you can go to procure it, what they have, and what you need. After all of that, it’s about how much money you have or can scrounge up. That’s what you have to live on until the next time SNAP puts it in your account. In my case, it’s \$50. \$50 isn’t going to do anything.”

-LISTENING SESSION PARTICIPANT

Listening Session attendees and survey respondents were asked to share demographic information so that data could be evaluated for disparities among those affected by SNAP benefit changes, and to better understand if the data subset is representative of the Richmond population overall. These demographic statistics are provided in **Figure 5**.

Figure 5: 2023 Food Justice Participant Demographics		
Data set includes 146 respondents from Listening Sessions, Food Pantry Visits, and Subsidized Housing Visits between December 1, 2023 and June 1, 2024		
Age	Count	Percent
60-69 years	88	60%
70-79 years	51	35%
> 80 years	7	5%
Race	Count	Percent
Black or African American	121	83%
White or Caucasian	24	16%
American Indian	1	1%
Ethnicity	Count	Percent
Not Hispanic or Latino	146	100%
Gender Identity	Count	Percent
Female	88	60%
Male	58	40%
Highest Education Completed	Count	Percent
Middle School	13	9%
Some High School	37	25%
Completed High School	48	33%
GED	6	4%
Some College or College Degree	39	27%
No Response	3	2%
Marital Status	Count	Percent
Divorced	27	18%
Single	65	45%
Married	14	10%
Widowed	27	18%
Separated	10	7%
Prefer not to say	3	2%
Geographic Area	Count	Percent
Chesterfield	7	5%
Dinwiddie	2	1%
Colonial Heights	1	1%
Goochland	16	11%
Henrico	12	8%
Richmond City	90	62%
Powhatan	3	2%
Petersburg	14	10%
No Response	1	1%

Figure 6 provides a list of questions and the responses provided by the 146 survey responses collected from Listening Sessions, food pantry visits, and subsidized housing visits. Participants were asked about the number of individuals in their household, which totaled **230** individuals reflected in survey responses. This indicates that although 146 individuals were directly impacted by the reduction, the effects also extend to their family members.

Figure 6: 2023 Food Justice Participant Survey Responses

Data set includes 146 respondents from Listening Sessions, Food Pantry Visits, and Subsidized Housing Visits between December 1, 2023 and June 1, 2024		
Question	Yes	No
Has the reduction in SNAP benefits negatively impacted your lifestyle or habits? (1% declined response)	121/146 83%	23/146 16%
After the reduction in SNAP benefits, do you feel like you have access to healthy food? (2% declined response)	55/146 38%	87/146 60%
Since March 2023, have you had to make difficult decisions between paying for food paying for other essential items such as medications, utilities, etc.? Example: Making the decision to buy food and then not being able to pay a bill on time	101/146 69%	45/146 31%

Among the 146 participants, prior to the March 2023 reduction, the average SNAP benefit amount was **\$199/month**, compared to **\$76/month** after March 2023, demonstrating a **61% average decrease** in monthly SNAP benefits.

COMMON THEMES

The effect of diet on physical, mental, and emotional health

Participants frequently reported challenges managing chronic health conditions such as diabetes, heart disease, high blood pressure and mental health disorders, sharing that these conditions are exacerbated by poor diet, lifestyle, and food insecurity. Some participants with these conditions shared challenges in obtaining healthy food options from food pantries, noting the prevalence of processed foods, high sodium, and fatty foods.

Deciding between food and other necessities

Older adults experiencing reduced SNAP benefits have had to make difficult decisions between buying food and other essential expenses (housing, medications, utilities, insurance, hygiene products, etc.)

Reliance upon local non-profit organizations and government assistance

Richmond area SNAP beneficiaries depend heavily on local food pantries, leading to longer wait times and reduced food availability per person, while others also face transportation barriers that hinder pantry resource utilization.

The impact of COVID-19 EAs

Since the March 2023 reduction, older adults are now experiencing food insecurity and eating fewer meals each day due to restrictive budgets for purchasing grocery store food, resulting in hunger and poor nutrition. Inflation has only compounded this issue.

Change is needed

Participants shared challenges they commonly encounter when interacting with SNAP administrators, including communication breakdown, lengthy delays, and anxiety or embarrassment.



STORY BANKING

The following Story Banking sections share verbatim comments provided by Listening Session attendees and survey respondents. In total **230+ quotes** were shared. For brevity, only a selection of quotes are included, while others have been modestly edited for clarity.



The effect of diet on physical, mental, and emotional health

Throughout all three Listening Sessions, participants commonly shared their concern for how their diet impacts their health. Participants frequently discussed their management of health conditions such as diabetes, heart disease, high blood pressure, anxiety, and depression, sharing concerns that the food that is readily available and affordable often exacerbates these conditions. Participants detailed their eating habits, their inability to afford more nutritious foods such as produce, and the food they obtain from local food pantries such as canned goods, processed foods, rice, pasta, and other non-perishables.

Participants also described the impact of food insecurity on relationships with family and friends, sharing how the stress and strain of not having enough food can lead to tension and conflict within households. Some described feeling ashamed or embarrassed about their situation, which can result in social isolation and withdrawal from supportive relationships. Others mentioned relying heavily on family and friends for food assistance, which, although necessary, can create feelings of dependency and guilt. These dynamics illustrate how food insecurity not only affects physical health but also disrupts social bonds and emotional well-being, highlighting the multifaceted nature of this issue.

*"I have **diabetes and high blood pressure** and a lot of times the insurance does not want to cover a lot of medications because you can make simple dietary changes but unfortunately with the reduction in SNAP benefits it's not always room to buy healthy fruits and vegetables. That stuff is more expensive"*

*"**Mental health issues** are rising due to the situations we are dealing with. It can lead to depression which leads to not eating right, which leads to, "why should I take my meds because I don't have a support mechanism," or not being able to sleep. Mental health is worsened by outsiders like family or friends thinking it can't be that bad. That's why we're getting put on hold for 30 minutes at a time, they [SNAP administrators] want to stay out of it. You can't trust the agencies who hold your well-being in the palm of their hand. They reduce SNAP and now you're struggling to make it day to day. We don't talk to anyone because we think no one wants to hear it. Feels like no one believes you."*

*"[Food insecurity is] so widespread that if it can affect us, it's going to affect our children who have children, who are trying to get through the struggle too. **How can the economy be good when there are people that are starving?** I'm not going to ask my sister for help when she has four kids, just for my own piece of mind..It affects family, friends, and neighbors. It's more intense in food deserts, especially for African Americans."*

*"It is hard, it is **embarrassing**. It makes you feel like you haven't done anything. I am disabled."*

*"It makes you have **depression** and then you have to go to the doctor for it... more appointments and gas to get there."*

"I am going to be honest, I retired from Verizon making a decent salary. But when I got to the point that I found out I had to resort to going to the food bank, I really felt like "I can't believe it. I am forced to go into a food line." I had to get over it and walk in there with my head held high." 15

Deciding between food and other necessities

Participants reported facing the difficult decision between purchasing nutritious food and reserving enough of their modest monthly budget for other essential expenses such as housing, utilities, and hygiene products like toilet paper or cleaning products. This difficult decision-making process highlights the financial strain experienced by many of Richmond's older adults, which leads to daily hardships, sacrifices in dietary quality, and poor health.



*"After you pay bills, **there isn't anything left.**"*

*"Well, it boils down to whether you want to **pay your bills in full or put food in the house.**"*

*"In the wintertime you have to decide if you want to put the electric or the heat on because **you can't pay both bills** at once."*

*"I have to be late with my rent so that I can go get something to eat. I am lucky that I have an understanding landlord, or **I would be on the street.**"*

*"You have to pay car insurance. **That is the law.** And when they screen you for SNAP benefits, they do not count that in[GU1] . The money I am paying in auto insurance every month is a necessity and **they don't count that as a necessity.**"*

*"Forget using the good stuff, it's Dollar Tree. I haven't had a professional haircut in five or eight years. [We] just snip it ourselves because **we can't afford that kind of stuff.**"*

Reliance upon local non-profits and government assistance

Participants shared their experiences with being unable to purchase food from grocery stores, causing many older adults to rely heavily on food banks, food pantries, and other community-based service organizations to meet their basic nutritional needs. Reliance on these non-profit organizations also highlights other related challenges, such as transportation barriers, increased demand for food pantry services and resources (e.g., serving more people, longer lines), and the emotional impact of relying on these assistance services.

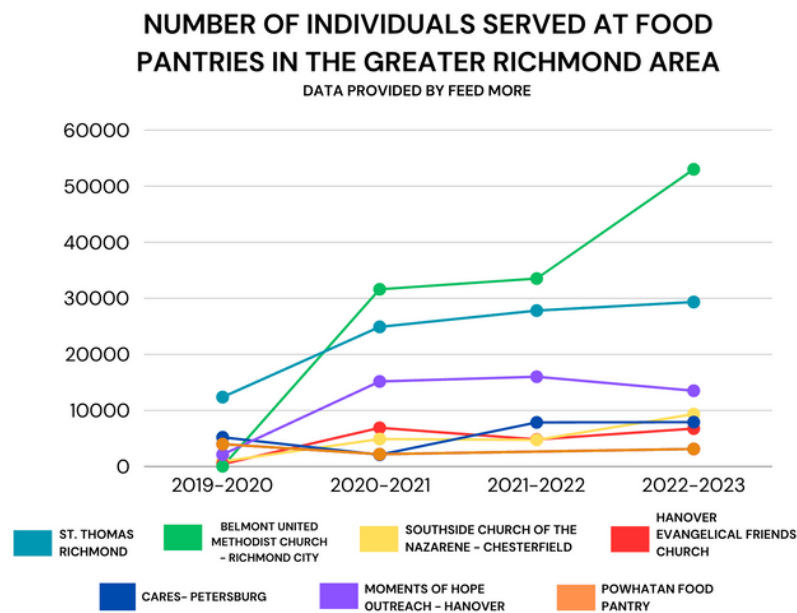


FIGURE 7: SEVEN FOOD PANTRIES IN THE GREATER RICHMOND AREA WERE RANDOMLY SELECTED FROM THE 160 PANTRIES REPRESENTED IN THE FEED MORE DATA TO ILLUSTRATE FOOD PANTRY TRENDS FROM 2020-2023.

Increased Food Pantry visits

Feed More pantry data includes over 160 pantries in the Greater Richmond area with data reported from Fiscal Year (FY) 2020 to FY 2023. Through mature data for FY 2023-2024 is not yet available, visits to pantries and discussions with pantry staff during the 2023 *Food Justice* grant anecdotally support the theory that **the number of individuals served at local pantries has significantly increased since the reduction in SNAP benefits in March 2023.**

"I don't know how we would get food half the time if we didn't go to the food bank."

*"[Food pantries] make you stand and **wait for three hours**. When I get back, **my body is hurting so bad** I have to go to bed. Depending on the weather I can't even go at all - especially in the summer when it's 100 degrees. I can't stand out there. If I end up in the hospital, I still can't eat!"*

*"Grocery prices have shot sky high. My whole check goes to my rent, and they [SNAP administrators] still only give me \$149. That is not even feasible to make it through a week. **I am going from food bank to food bank just to eat**. When you start getting up in age, that is a lot of wear and tear."*

*"I don't have a car. **I take 3 busses, about an hour and 40 mins one way** on Tuesdays and Thursdays to get to the food bank."*

*"I don't have a vehicle, so I have to look for one every week. I rely on someone to take me. Sometimes they can't take me so I can't go **so you skip more meals**."*

The Effect of COVID-19 EAs

During the pandemic, EAs increased the monthly benefit amount for SNAP recipients. During that time, many participants reported feeling a sense of relief and security, alleviating the stress of food insecurity and allowing them to meet their basic needs without as much financial strain.



After the March 2023 EA reduction, many older adults reported anxiety and uncertainty about how they would afford necessary food items. Problems with SNAP administration – unclear or delayed communication – contributed to beneficiaries' stress, leaving individuals and families feeling frustrated and overwhelmed. The sudden decrease in benefits disrupted recipients' ability to plan and budget effectively, leading to financial strain and increased food insecurity.

Quotes regarding temporary EAs during COVID-19 public health emergency:

*"It took the stress off us when we were buying food. Now **we are worried about where we are going to eat**, extra work running around to food banks. Now that they took it back, it is putting a whole lot of stress on us."*

*"We were **scared** because... you know... COVID and everything. But at the end of the day, if I am being realistic, we were kind of **thankful** because we had a lot more coming in. We wouldn't have to worry about food as much, even though we were scared of a pandemic."*

*"That is the only time I can remember **not having food insecurity**. Right now, you cannot meal plan, there is not enough money to meal plan"*

Quotes regarding the March 2023 reduction in SNAP benefits and related food insecurity:

*"I was in a **state of shock**. We are dropping you down to \$23. \$23?! I went down to \$23 from 2 [hundred] something. I got the letter. It said these are your new food stamps. What can I buy with \$23? A loaf of bread is \$3."*

*"I usually skip breakfast. And I get really hungry - almost nauseous by lunch - that I make sure I buy saltine crackers to **kill the hunger pain**. That has been my way of life for a long time. By lunch, I usually have a sandwich or a banana. If I am lucky both."*

*"It is really tough when you go to the grocery store. I am with a calculator saying, "Well I can't get that. Oh, but I can get this. We need this." And to be honest... No one should ever think like this, but for my diabetes I was **prescribed Ozempic**. And I was like, "**Thank goodness it reduces my appetite, so I don't feel hungry, and I don't have to worry about eating.**" Since I skipped eating, I will have an extra meal for tomorrow. And that is no way to live. And it is not fair"*

*"I am down to one or two meals a day. I skip breakfast. Breakfast used to be my favorite meal. Now I don't eat until 2 o'clock and then a little supper around 9 o'clock. **I am not eating much anymore.**"*

*"Sometimes one of **my sons won't eat because he wants me to eat or wants his brother to eat.** So, I feel the same way, I don't eat so that they can eat, and I make their plates first."*

*"I knew it wouldn't last forever. But I didn't think it would be such a **drastic cut.** The inflation...that is why I really did not think they would cut it that much."*

*"It was sad that we were losing [the increased EAs] because it was helping so much, and **we relied on it.**"*



The need for change

Participants described challenges with SNAP program administration, including lack of communication, time-consuming delays in renewing their eligibility, and other shortcomings. They were also asked to share potential solutions, as captured below.

*"Food stamp office is **not communicating with us.** No communication whatsoever."*

*"I have been made to feel like a **bother.** Some people are very rude to you. I sent in my paperwork early so I should not have had a lapse in coverage but when I called and left messages, it was like I was a bother."*

*"Trust me, **I wish I wasn't disabled.** I wish I had money; I wish I didn't have to depend on the government and have to make these calls. It is just not a good feeling."*

*"Ten to **twenty day** wait for a phone call back just to get food."*

*"It took me **six months** just to get re-certified...a lot of back and forth."*

"It is like pulling teeth, you hate to say, "Can I speak to a supervisor." And then you are worried that your worker is going to get ugly with you. I am not trying to get anyone in trouble, I just feel like they should do their job."

*"[SNAP administrators should] be nicer and offer more suggestions. Maybe they should be educated about some things to **tell the community about ways we can supplement** and just information and get it out there in some type of way. A lot of people just don't know about the pantries and stuff like that."*

OLDER ADULT ADVOCACY

The following are verbatim responses provided by Richmond-based older adults receiving SNAP benefits who were asked, ***“What do you want to tell policy makers about the impact of the reduction of SNAP benefits?”***

The following themes summarize responses by multiple participants:

- **SNAP Administration Changes**
 - Minimum SNAP Benefit Implementation: Establishing a mandatory minimum benefit level for all qualifying households to ensure basic needs are met.
 - Improved Communication: Addressing issues of poor communication and administrative inefficiencies within SNAP to enhance user experience and accessibility.
 - Adjustment for Inflation: Regularly updating SNAP benefits to reflect rising costs of living and inflation.
 - Inclusion of Essential Expenses: Advocating for SNAP administration to consider mandatory expenses such as car insurance when determining eligibility and benefits, similar to how other bills like cell phone bills are taken into account.
- **Empathy for SNAP Recipients**
 - Understanding and Compassion: There is a strong demand for those administering aid to have a deeper understanding of the lived experiences of SNAP recipients, fostering a more empathetic and effective support system.
 - Recognition and Respect: Recipients desire to be treated with dignity and recognized as individuals rather than merely beneficiaries of aid.
- **Injustice**
 - Unfair Benefits: Many comments underscore the insufficiency and perceived inequity of current SNAP benefits, which do not adequately cover basic needs.
 - Impact on Health and Well-being: Insufficient support from SNAP often forces recipients to make difficult choices between essential needs, adversely affecting their overall health and well-being.
- **Advocacy**
 - Active Involvement of Policymakers: There is a clear call for policymakers to engage more actively and responsively with the communities they serve to better address their needs.
 - Increased Support for Those in Need: Emphasis is placed on the necessity of providing targeted assistance to individuals such as veterans, older adults, and those with health issues.
- **Health Inequity for Older Adults**
 - A significant number of responses highlighted the unique challenges faced by older adults, advocating for policies and support systems that specifically address their needs.

*"I want them to make me feel like **I am a person.**"*

*"There should be a **minimum** for every family that qualifies. These are people that really need that and need food on the table just to be able to function and live day to day."*

*"Things like car insurance. **If it is a law you have to pay it, they should consider it...** they take in consideration about cell phone bills not but your auto insurance."*

*"We are not asking for shopping trips or fancy things; **I am a simple person.** I want to pay my bills; **I want to be warm** and have **the food** that we need. **That is all that my dream is.**"*

*"**I'm a veteran.** They should have discussions like this more often. If you want to impress me, in the future, a representative with power should sit in here and listen, not patronize us, and share their timeline. The ailments I have today are due to my service in the military. I go to bed hungry. **No veteran or civilian should experience that.**"*

*"Everyone should get **at least \$100** a month. More personal experience needs to be included in the decision-making process. Community members should have a say"*

*"I have to control my diabetes with a healthy diet, I am not able to buy the food I need. **Please walk a mile in my shoes**"*

*"I rely heavily on the food bank. I have also seen that there is a lack of communication from SNAP, difficult to refile and bad timing causes **delay in my benefits.**"*

*"I am heavily relying on the food pantry and the clothes closet. This has definitely impacted my grocery buying. **I only have access to healthy food because of the food pantry.** The policy makers need to come into the communities and talk to people, they should be more involved."*

*"Please raise it enough so we have a chance at **surviving.**"*

*"I am **diabetic** and need healthy food. People 65+ may not be able to work. Plus, sometimes, we can't access proper food."*

*"Poor communication with SNAP, and they treat us poorly. **I was a nurse, and now I need to be cared for.**"*

*"I am **scared** every month. I have to make so many decisions about medications, food, and essential items. We (older adults) are see through people, **the government doesn't see us.**"*

*"I need healthy food because of my **diabetes.** Sometimes, we can't buy more food because of our other bills. During the pandemic, I could get more. **Grocery prices are increasing.**"*

*"Once benefits are reduced, you can only buy so much. **They are jeopardizing people's lives,** forcing them to decide between essential medications and food."*

*"They don't look out for seniors. We have health issues. **Seniors are starving.** Have to decide between getting food and medical expenses."*

*"When SSI increases, SNAP **decreases.** Meanwhile, food prices and rent are **increasing.**"*

*"**Can you live off of \$25 a month?** I want people in charge to try this and see how they feel."*

CHANGING THE FUTURE FOR OLDER ADULTS

Grassroots advocacy is at the heart of the *2023 Food Justice* initiative, which addresses the needs of older adults long affected by systems and structures that promote inequities by giving power back to those that these policies most greatly affect. By convening, engaging, and elevating voices from marginalized groups within the community, they tell us their stories, their needs, and their hopes for their future. The initiative's design does not assume that leaders already know all the answers, but rather, it calls upon older adults themselves to articulate their perspectives, and actively engages them in their own advocacy. By sharing the *2023 Food Justice* findings with stakeholders, older Richmonders voices are amplified so that they are acknowledged, respected, and effectively used to inform positive aging policies that when implemented, truly originated with those most impacted.

Future work to address the impact caused by the SNAP reduction should include shifting efforts towards grassroots, personalized advocacy to promote systems changes to remove challenges reported by the SNAP beneficiary community. Based on findings from the *2023 Food Justice* initiative, a multi-pronged strategy including two tracks: 1) influencing change at the community level and 2) influencing systems change at the state legislative level would be most effective.



PARTNERING ORGANIZATIONS

PositiveAge is thankful to each older adult who contributed their powerful thoughts, experiences, and data to this program. Without their engagement, effective aging-friendly policy change is impossible.

The team partnered with the following organizations in the greater Richmond region who helped empower older Virginians to share their stories and experiences with the *2023 Food Justice* staff. The project team is grateful to these organizations who graciously hosted Listening Sessions, provided data, assisted with participant recruitment, and/or allowed survey distribution and response collection at their organization. These informal partnerships demonstrate that through collaboration, nonprofits in the Richmond region can pool resources to support, empower, and advocate on behalf of older adults facing systems barriers to equitable health.

**The Community Foundation for a Greater Richmond
Senior Connections, including the Foster Grandparents Program
Virginia Commonwealth University- Mobile Health and Wellness
Program (MHWP)
Chesterfield Community Engagement and Resources
Moments of Hope
Goochland Cares
CARES Petersburg
St. Thomas Episcopal Church
Powhatan Food Pantry
Dominion Place
The Rosa Apartments
Feed More
Alex Guzmán Consulting (Listening Session facilitator)**

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