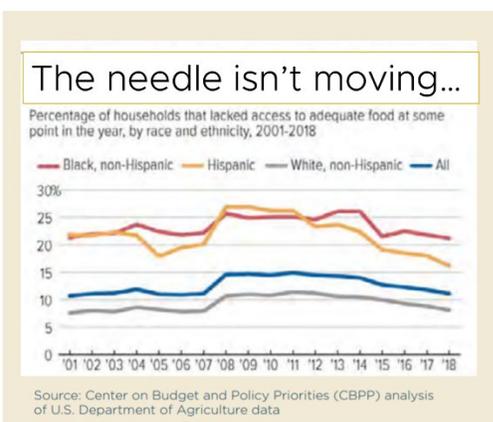


# Food Insecurity Roundtable

Report out and lessons learned

## Executive Summary

On Sept 10, 2021, Science for Georgia and their presenting partner, Inspire Brands Foundation, hosted a food insecurity roundtable. Over 4 hours, approximately 25 people who work in food organizations in Georgia, met, reviewed the state of food insecurity, and identified 3 evidence-based solutions that are short-term steps toward a long-term solution to ending *limited or uncertain access to adequate food*.



Food policy in the last half century has been based on a [1969 White House Conference](#). While COVID-19 caused an acute spike in the people who were food insecure; over the past 20 years, the percentage of people without access to adequate food hasn't dropped noticeably. Current food policies and program provide acute support but have not worked at removing underlying causes.

The past 18 months have illuminated shortcomings in our current policies and programs. At the same time, they have given rise to many creative ideas. We should not waste this opportunity to leverage these creative solutions and develop solutions that create long-term change.

The three solutions identified by the roundtable participants were:

1. Create an aggregated food-data system that measures metrics across all aspects of programs addressing food insecurity in Georgia. This allows measurement of progress, identification of impactful programs, and helps policy makers learn which programs serve Georgians best.
2. Develop local community task forces that coordinate activities, information, and access to programs addressing food insecurity across Georgia.
3. Replicate the successful Farm to School Programs. These programs are examples of public-private partnerships that uplift local farmers, provide nutritional food to children in need, and educate families about nutrition.

Taken together these ideas work to identify the problem, understand where it is most acute, measure progress against universal metrics, involve the community in crafting solutions that meet their unique needs, and support public-private partnerships. The cycle continues as metrics identify successful programs that can be replicated. These steps strengthen the overall food system and are similar in scope and spirit to those in the Virginia Roadmap to End Hunger and the Georgia Broadband Program.





## Background

In 2019, 1 in 8 Georgian's were food insecure, that's over 1.2 million Georgians.

Covid-19 caused more people to experience inadequate access to food, and it is estimated that about 1 in 6 Georgia children were food insecure in 2020-21.

Food insecurity is more than just hunger. Food insecurity is linked with numerous health conditions including diabetes, hypertension, and depression. Without a full stomach it is difficult to learn and concentrate, leading to poor performance in school and at work. This cycle of lost wages, lost school days, and poor health cost the US Economy approximately \$165 Billion annually.

Agriculture, an important part of the Georgia Economy, also is trapped in a vicious cycle that raises the cost of food production: leading to more economic stress on farmers (who are often food insecure themselves) and costlier food for consumers.



*The cycle of food insecurity.*  
<https://www.acfb.org/stories-of-hunger/>

## Definitions

The United State Department of Agriculture (USDA) has a formal definition of food insecurity, hunger, and food desert. These definitions are the starting point for federal and state aid.

### Food Insecurity

**“Food insecurity**—the condition assessed in the food security survey and represented in USDA food security reports—is a household-level economic and social condition of *limited or uncertain access to adequate food.*”

**“Hunger** is an individual-level physiological condition that may result from food insecurity.”

- [USDA](#)

### Food Desert

A Food Desert is a census tract (approximately 4000 people) that is low-income and low-food-access.

A Low-Income Census Tract is designated as eligible for USDOT New Markets Tax Credits and is defined as having a

- Poverty rate  $\geq 20\%$  OR
- Median family income  $\leq 80\%$  of metropolitan area's (in metro areas) or statewide (in non metro areas) median family income

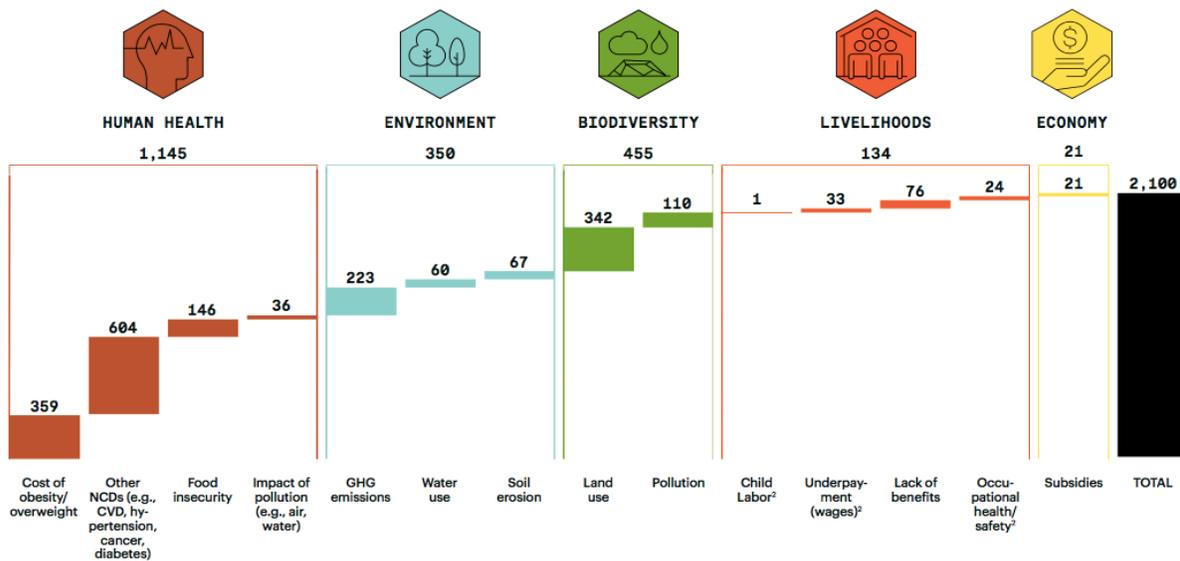
Low food access is defined as census tract where over 33% or 500 people live more than 1 mile in an urban setting or 10 miles in a rural setting, from a large grocery or supermarket. Where a large grocery or supermarket is a store with over \$2M in sales and has all major food departments.



## The Cost of Food (Insecurity)

Traditional metrics estimate that United States consumers spend at about [\\$1.1 Trillion a year](#) on producing, processing, and selling food. The Rockefeller Foundation expanded on this number in: [The True Cost of Food](#), adding an additional \$2.1 trillion for healthcare costs related to food insecurity and diet related diseases and environmental costs such as emissions, pollution, and land use. This \$2.1 trillion is shown in the image below. Measuring the true cost of food adds transparency to the entire food system and enables investment to lower costs in impactful regions.

COSTS FROM QUANTITATIVE METRICS ACROSS 14 KEY METRICS<sup>1</sup>, ANNUAL (bn USD)



### Additional food system costs.

Currently, aid agencies assume that Americans spend one-third of their income on each of four things: food, housing, healthcare, and childcare. Thus, 120% of a family's budget is allocated. Americans are then forced to either operate on a deficit or sacrifice the quality or quantity of one of these four vital aspects of their lives.

- 30% on food: [The SNAP formula assumes families will spend 30% of their net income on food.](#)
- 30% on housing: HUD labels those who spend over 30% on housing as cost burdened. [30% of Americans are cost burdened.](#)
- 35% on healthcare: Lowest income earners spend [35% of pre-income incomes on healthcare.](#)
- 33% on childcare: [Childcare costs families who make under \\$52K over a third of their income.](#)

## Supply, Access, and Utilization

Eliminating food insecurity and food deserts requires a multipronged approach. [In a recent study](#), the Brookings Institute argued that just increasing supply of healthy food is meaningless unless we look at a broader picture.

The [Report on the 50th Anniversary of the White House Conference on Food, Nutrition, and Health](#) stated that 50 years ago the singular focus of food policy was a lack of calories for people. Now, the system is more complex. The problem is not lack of calories, but lack of nutritious calories that meet the needs of



people in a humane, healthy, and culturally appropriate manner. This current situation requires us to think about how to provide nutrient-rich calories in a sustainable way.

Given these multiple reports about reframing how we think about the food system, one way to look at the impact of a program on food insecurity is to think about its effect on food in terms of supply, access, and utilization.

*Supply* refers to the amount of food in existence. Is there enough food out there to feed people? Does it have adequate nutrient content? And is the land and water being utilized sustainably to ensure that we can continue to produce enough food?

*Access* measures the availability of food to people. Do people have access to healthy food? Can they afford it? Do people have the agency of choice available to them? Is food being provided in a way that is culturally acceptable and relevant?

*Utilization* tracks if people are buying and eating the food available. Is it being purchased and consumed? This ties in with cultural appropriateness and agency of choice.



### Supply (Environment & Sustainability)

- Amount of food produced
- Soil erosion / runoff into waterways
- Amount of farm acreage utilizing sustainable farming techniques
- Percent of BIPOC land ownership
- Nutritional content of food



### Access (Cost, Location & Transportation)

- Average distance to a grocery store / walkability of a city
- Public transportation availability
- Cost of healthy food compared to unhealthy
- Ease of accessing food in a rural / sparsely populated area
- Availability of culturally acceptable food
- Existence of culturally acceptable food distribution



### Utilization

- Purchase rates of healthy food
- Rate of non-communicable diseases (obesity, heart disease, asthma)
- Gentrification
- Food waste vs. composting rates
- Source and type of food education



## Successful Exemplar Programs

Several programs have been established at local, state, and national levels that provide blueprints for implementing change. The programs focus on strengthening current systems to achieve short-term wins and while working toward long-term change.

### The Baltimore City Urban Agriculture Program

This program, also known as [Homegrown Baltimore: Grow Local](#) grew out of the Baltimore Sustainability Plan which was adopted by Baltimore City Council in 2009. This food program aims to increase production, distribution, sales, and consumption of food grown locally within Baltimore. Three components: grow local, buy local, and eat local are centered around key recommendations in five different categories: land, water, soil, capital, and support.

So far, this plan has created a food policy initiative to help build partnerships between farmers and policy experts, led to changes in zoning ordinances to permit urban agriculture in almost all residential areas, and implemented an urban agriculture property tax credit which gives a 90% tax break to farmers producing five thousand dollars' worth of crops annually. There are now 17 urban farms and over 75 food producing community gardens in Baltimore city alone.

### The Virginia Roadmap to End Hunger

Virginia released a [Roadmap to End Hunger](#) in 2020. The roadmap outlines how state agencies and local communities should coordinate and work together. It establishes universal metrics to track progress, and a central agency to record and track these metrics. There are three main pillars to success: maximizing participation in federal nutrition programs, empowering local communities via community partnerships, and investing in regional food systems. Combined, these pillars meet acute food insecurity needs and work toward building strong public-private partnerships on a regional level to uplift communities.

### The Georgia Broadband Deployment Initiative

This [Georgia Broadband Program](#) to increase broadband access and reliability can serve as a model for a food insecurity plan. [So far](#), it has created detailed maps of broadband access, enabling people to qualify for federal connectivity aid. It works with communities to categorize their broadband readiness levels and to set up public-private partnerships that are utilizing all grant and aid programs available. It also identifies needed legislation and/or legislative updates to streamline access and remove roadblocks.

These steps: mapping access and utilization, working on a community-level to understand unique needs, supporting public-private partnerships, and removing roadblocks to success are exactly the components of a successful food security plan.

## Suggested Starting Points in Georgia

The assembled roundtable participants were charged with identifying solutions. Three were identified: transparent and accurate collection and distribution of data, community partnerships, and expansion of farm to school programs.

All three of these programs have similar components to the GA Broadband Deployment Initiative and are also seen in the VA Roadmap to End Hunger.



## 1. That which can be measured can be improved

Multiple Federal and State Agencies including the Depts of Agriculture, Health and Human Services, Natural Resources, and Education have programs that directly or indirectly impact food insecurity. To understand the overall scope of the situation and if it is getting better, programs need to be measured based on universal metrics.

A single state agency should be charged with setting data standards, collecting the data, and making it available to the public. This data can be used to track and analyze where outcomes are improving, the effectiveness of food cycle programs, and the utilization of resources. This leads to more efficient distribution and prevents duplicate efforts.

Detailed maps and information should include:

- Availability and locations of fresh food
- Cost of healthy vs. unhealthy food
- Income levels
- Participation rates in programs of eligible recipients
- Grocery delivery access and food delivery ranges
- Rates of obesity, heart disease, mental health days, missed school days, and data that is a proxy for, or directly related to, food insecurity
- Location of green space, agriculture space, community gardens

[The Baltimore City Program](#) has worked with Johns Hopkins to create detailed maps of the local food environment. Georgia has a host of great universities with data science and public health programs that can utilize this same model.

## 2. Community Capacity Building

Creating food programs without community interaction and support is not beneficial. Many communities are already working on multiple projects to support community members in need. What they lack is a way to convene, share, and coordinate.

There is a need to support creation of community task forces that are made up of public and private organizations. The main focus of these task forces will be on increasing community access, strengthening coordination, and providing information. By coordinating all organizations that focus on this issue, it is easier for people to utilize programs that already exist and prevents overlapping efforts.

These task forces need to be managed at the local level to ensure programs are meeting the unique needs of each locality.

A second step would be creation of a physical community hub; for example, the [Augusta HUB for Community Innovation](#), that centralizes access to resources such as a food pantry, farmers market, adult education services, family services, and a health clinic. This builds a permanent, local, trusted infrastructure that inspires more community confidence than the clearly temporary pop-up tents that are used by many services.



### 3. Support Farm to School Programs

Ironically, many farmers and farm workers also suffer from food insecurity because they operate on thin margins. Rural districts, which are surrounded by farmland, often have lower access to fresh produce because farmers must sell their food in bigger, more lucrative, markets.

One method that can focus on both these issues are [Farm to School \(FTS\) programs](#). Founded in 2007 by Georgia Organics these programs [involve 40% of Georgia school districts](#). [A statewide alliance](#) was launched in 2014. FTS programs work with local school districts to encourage and facilitate buying fresh produce from local farmers.

[The Golden Radish Awards](#) were started in 2014 by the GA Departments of Agriculture, Education, Early Care and Learning, and Public Health, along with Georgia Organics and the UGA Cooperative Extension to recognize FTS accomplishments.

#### Notable accomplishments in 2019

- **68 participating districts**
- **1406 school gardens**
- **119 Million locally grown meals served, 67% increase from 2016**

FTS has many benefits including:

- Children get more nutritious food
- Children learn about agriculture and nutrition
- Georgia local farmers have access to expanded markets

The Burke County FTS program, highlighted by the roundtable attendees, has a nutrition coordinator, expanded facilities to enable meal prep (not just heat-and-serve), and actively work to source from local farmers. Because of increased business from the school system, [local farms have expanded their capacity and production](#).

*The Farm to School program current serves many Georgians; however, it needs further support to continue to grow.*

To properly implement FTS, school systems need support such as:

- Additional staff to both coordinate purchasing and training food service
- Infrastructure for food preparation (many school cafeterias are heat-and-serve only)
- Facilitation of connections to local produce suppliers.

To expand Farm to School programs, the Golden Radish committee can be leveraged to identify exemplar programs, replicate those best practices, and analyze and identify where economies of scale could be utilized to support implementation in more districts.

While each district has its own unique needs, example places where the state can provide economies of scale could include:

- Collating and distributing best practices and healthy recipes
- Identification of funds or grants for additional staff, equipment, and infrastructure upgrades
- Coordinating connections between local districts and local farms
- Central hubs for processing of food
- Establishment of standards around nutrient content, farming practices, farm size, etc. that ensure food safety and that buying local provides a boost to small farms.



## Science for Georgia's Call to Action

The roundtable produced impactful ideas. To carry the momentum forward, Science for Georgia will produce a webpage to share programs and explain evidence-based solutions in accessible language. Working with the greater food insecurity community, we will help to amplify community needs, pilot programs, and long-term solutions.

Please contact us to learn more and to get involved.

Science for Georgia. [info@sci4ga.org](mailto:info@sci4ga.org)