

Feeding the Gulf Coast fights hunger through community partnerships and programs by creating equitable access to nutritious food and resources for those facing crisis, systemic poverty, or disaster. Feeding the Gulf Coast has earned a four-star rating from Charity Navigator for its commitment to excellence and efficiency. With over 98% of all donations directly supporting its mission, it ranks among the most efficient nonprofits in the nation. Feeding the Gulf Coast was founded and incorporated in 1981. In 1988, the food bank became a partner food bank of Feeding America, the nation's largest hunger-relief organization.

Since its founding, the food bank has distributed nearly 460 million pounds of food across the 24 counties it serves—including nine counties in South Alabama, eight counties in South Mississippi, and seven counties across the Florida Panhandle. In 2024, the food bank distributed 35 million meals through our network of more than 800 community partners, consisting of child nutrition sites, church pantries, soup kitchens, and other nonprofit organizations. The food bank also relies on community support. Sponsored by various local organizations and businesses, food drives play a critical role in fighting hunger by stocking the food bank year-round with shelf-stable items. In 2024, food drives brought in more than 393,900 pounds of food and more than \$76,400 in funds, providing nearly 710,450 meals. Additionally, Feeding the Gulf Coast has a robust volunteer program. Volunteers are critical to Feeding the Gulf Coast, enabling the food bank to maintain the fast pace of checking and sorting food to ensure donations are ready for agencies to receive. In 2024, nearly 22,000 volunteers contributed more than 196,450 service hours to the food bank, saving an estimated \$2.9 million of paid staff and operation time.

To assist in its mission to increase food access and provide educational opportunities, Feeding the Gulf Coast operates the following programs and initiatives:

Advocacy

Feeding the Gulf Coast operates daily through a network of community partners to provide food to people in need. However, to truly address the root cause of hunger, we must strengthen food assistance programs and invest in anti-hunger policies to help ensure no one goes hungry. Feeding the Gulf Coast operates several Federal Nutrition Programs that help us efficiently use available means to fight hunger. These programs are critical in our ability to help expand our community partners' capacities to serve their communities. Therefore, the food bank works at the federal, state, and local levels to amplify voices and engage key representatives in driving change and strengthening policies that create systemic progress in ending hunger.

Benefits Enrollment Outreach Program

The Benefits Enrollment Outreach Program began in 2010 by conducting Supplemental Nutrition Assistance (SNAP, formerly the Food Stamp Program) outreach on behalf of the Alabama Department of Human Resources throughout Alabama. Four years later, the food bank expanded SNAP outreach to Mississippi through the Mississippi Department of Human Services. In 2016, thanks to funding from the National Council on Aging, the food bank opened the Benefits Enrollment Center to assist households with applying for SNAP, Low-Income Home Energy Assistance Program, Medicare Savings Program, Farmers Market Vouchers, and other budget-relieving benefits.

In addition to serving low-income households, the Benefits Enrollment Outreach Program seeks to assist seniors, rural communities, and formerly incarcerated individuals re-entering the community. The food bank currently provides SNAP outreach to every county in Alabama and Mississippi and the seven Florida counties in our service area. In 2024, the Benefits Enrollment Outreach team helped more than 7,700 individuals apply for benefits, creating the potential for nearly 8 million meals.

Child Nutrition Programs

Afterschool Meals Program (CACFP)

The Afterschool Meals Program is funded through the federal Child and Adult Care Feeding Program (CACFP). Through this program, Feeding the Gulf Coast provides snacks and meals to afterschool enrichment programs in low-income areas to serve children. The children who attend these programs receive free meals that meet federal guidelines for nutrition. This program is essential because hunger limits children's growth potential both physically and academically. Teachers consistently state that they see connections between behavioral and discipline problems when their students do not have enough to eat (No Kid Hungry). Children who are not nourished every day of the week will struggle to excel in school. In 2024, the food bank served 443,433 snacks and meals to nearly 9,500 children through the Afterschool Meals Program.

Backpack Program

The Backpack Program, which began in 2004, meets the needs of chronically hungry children by providing them with nutritious and easy-to-prepare food to take home on weekends and breaks when school meals are unavailable. The Backpack Program is located at schools with a high incidence of children in need. School counselors identify which children are in need and discreetly place the food in each child's backpack on Friday afternoons. Each backpack provides children with six meals and two snacks. In 2024, the food bank distributed 97,096 backpacks (582,576 meals and snacks) to nearly 10,000 children.

School Pantry Program

The School Pantry Program provides students with easy access to nutritious, nonperishable, and easily consumed food and other necessities. The program allows children dignity, privacy, and comfort in selecting food and other items that the student and their family need. Teachers, counselors, and school nurses identify students based on their level of need and as they demonstrate signs of hunger in the classroom. Students can visit the school pantry weekly to select nutritious, easy-to-prepare food and toiletries for personal use. In 2024, the food bank distributed nearly 101,340 meals to 7,171 children at 75 schools.

Summer Meals Program (SFSP)

Nationally, nearly 30 million children participate in USDA's school breakfast and lunch programs on an average school day. Kids lose access to these healthy meals when school is out for summer, putting them at higher risk of hunger, which makes it harder for them to get the nutrition they need to learn and grow. To ensure children in our region have access to free, nutritious meals during the summer, the food bank administers the Summer Meals Program when school is out for the summer along the central Gulf Coast. Sites in this program serve two meals daily (breakfast, lunch, or snacks) to children in their community. In 2024, the food bank distributed 364,573 snacks and meals to nearly 13,000 children.

Community Health & Nutrition

For people facing food insecurity, the challenge of adequate diet and nutrition, doctor visits, and medication is often unmanageable, creating a cycle of tough choices that results in otherwise manageable diseases becoming a health crisis. As part of our work to address this, Feeding the Gulf Coast established a new Community Health and Nutrition department in 2023 to ensure every community has access to a balanced, nutritious diet.

Healthcare Partnerships

Feeding the Gulf Coast is working to establish partnerships with healthcare professionals to address food insecurity as a social determinant of health. This "food as medicine" approach seeks to improve health outcomes by increasing access to nutritious food and nutrition education.

Mobile Market Program (Millie)

Millie provides highly subsidized produce to households who otherwise would not have easily accessible nutritious food. These produce items are offered at a minimum of 20% below area market cost. Additionally, Millie will soon have the ability to accept SNAP benefits and will participate in the Fresh Access Bucks program, allowing households to maximize their SNAP benefits. In 2024, Millie sold local produce at nearly 50 events throughout our Florida Service Area.

Nutrition Education

Nutrition Education engages vulnerable populations, including SNAP-eligible households and families residing in food deserts, in-person nutrition education classes, indirect education activities, and other nutrition nudges to help families better understand the vital role nutrition plays in their health outcomes. In 2024, nutrition educators taught nearly 80 classes, reaching almost 795 participants. The team reached an additional 4,476 individuals through indirect educational materials.

Disaster Response, Relief and Recovery

Feeding the Gulf Coast is also a disaster relief organization. It swiftly shifts into disaster response mode when storms or disasters impact the community while continuing to provide food assistance and support across unaffected areas. Through coordinated efforts with local, state, and federal emergency management agencies and Feeding America, we serve as first responders to provide emergency food and water relief immediately following a disaster. We continue providing support long after other response efforts have ended through agency and community partners, ensuring elevated levels of support are available throughout the recovery period. Our Theodore and Milton facilities are prepared for emergencies with backup generators and emergency supplies such as food and water. Over the past several years, the food bank has responded to multiple storms that have impacted its service area and neighboring food banks, helping to push more than 15 million pounds of food into communities recovering from devastation.

Military & Veteran Hunger

According to the U.S. Department of Defense, in 2020, nearly a quarter (24%) of active-duty service members experienced food insecurity. Among Veteran households, 1 in 9 is food insecure. Service members often face distinct challenges that make accessing the food they need to thrive difficult. Some of the factors that make it hard for our military members to afford sufficient food for themselves and their families are the low salaries of enlisted members, high rates of unemployment for military spouses due to the transitory nature of the military, a high cost of living near many military bases across the country and the high cost of child care. Feeding the Gulf Coast partners with the ten military installations across our Gulf Coast service area and partner organizations near military bases to support efforts in combating food insecurity for active-duty, retired, and Veteran military personnel. Through these partnerships last year, the food bank provided more than 115,800 meals to military families and Veterans in our community.

Mobile Pantry Program

The Mobile Pantry Program is essential in rural areas lacking regular food distribution sites, or where our partners have limited storage capacity, and in times of disaster, to quickly address the community's needs. In 2024, more than 5.5 million meals were distributed through nearly 750 mobile pantries across our service area. Each distribution delivers approximately 5,000 pounds of nutritious essentials—produce, meats, dairy, and bakery items—to provide 100 families with enough food for approximately one week. The food bank connects with partners in low-income neighborhoods to schedule and execute mobile pantries. A partner agency agrees to promote the mobile food distribution and recruit enough volunteers to bag or box the food that will be distributed to the community. On the day of the distribution, the food bank loads the food onto a refrigerated truck and drives it to the site, where the partner agency distributes the food immediately.

Senior Hunger Programs

Many of the individuals our partners serve are aging seniors who may struggle with choosing between spending limited funds on necessary medicines or food. Food is often the item they choose to sacrifice first. To help alleviate this choice between basic necessities, Feeding the Gulf Coast works through various programs to address the unique needs of aging seniors. Through both of the following programs in 2024, the food bank distributed nearly 7,000 boxes monthly to seniors in need.

Commodity Supplemental Food Program (CSFP)

CSFP is a discretionary program funded each year through the federal appropriations process, so the program may only serve as many eligible participants as federal funding allows. Seniors in the program receive a monthly box containing nutritious essentials to supplement their diet and stretch their limited food budgets.

Nutrition Equals Seniors Thriving (NEST)

Due to the limited availability of CSFP, the food bank established a privately funded initiative called NEST. This program supplies seniors with food boxes containing low-sodium vegetables and beans, whole grains, proteins, and fresh produce. This food-as-medicine approach will help combat prevalent chronic health conditions prominent in older adults who are facing food insecurity.

Store Donation Program

The Store Donation Program gives the food bank and its agencies access to various products, including produce, dairy, meat, and bread, by connecting the food bank with local retail grocery stores. Through the program, stores donate their wholesome but unsaleable food to the food bank. In some areas, Feeding the Gulf Coast trains and certifies select agencies to pick up food directly from these stores and distribute the donations to their clients through their feeding programs. Not only does this get food into the hands of those in need faster, but it also enables the food bank to use resources like trucks, employees, and monetary donations in other places. In 2024, nearly 280 retail store donor partners donated more than 14 million pounds of food, of which 83% of that product was fresh produce.

The Emergency Food Assistance Program (TEFAP)

TEFAP is a federal program that helps supplement the diets of low-income Americans by providing them with free emergency food assistance. Through TEFAP, USDA purchases a variety of nutritious, high-quality food that is made available to State Distributing Agencies based on the number of unemployed individuals and the number of people with incomes below the poverty level. States provide the food to local organizations they have selected, usually food banks, which distribute the food to community partners, such as soup kitchens and food pantries directly serving the public. Feeding the Gulf Coast is responsible for administering TEFAP in its service area for Alabama and Florida.