

Virginia Food Access Investment Fund

Grant Guidelines

2024-2025

The Virginia Food Access Investment Fund (VFAIF) is a statewide program that focuses on equity and justice in local food systems by investing in new or expanding food retailers that address food access issues in the Commonwealth. VFAIF offers grants and loans to fund the business development, construction, rehabilitation, equipment upgrades, and expansion of grocery stores, small food retailers, and innovative food retail projects in low-income communities that experience low-access to fresh food.

Food acts as a common thread between history and culture, neighborhood empowerment and economic sustainability, and healthier lifestyles. The VFAIF program has been developed using the Equitable Food-Oriented Development model (EFOD), a development strategy that uses food and agriculture to create economic opportunities and healthy neighborhoods and that explicitly seeks to build community assets, pride, and power by and with low-income and low-access communities.

The USDA Economic Research Service (ERS) defines low-income and low access as: census tracts where at least 500 people or 33% of the population live more than 1.0 mile (urban areas) or more than 20 miles (rural areas) from the nearest supermarket, supercenter, or large grocery store.

Under this measure, an estimated 17.3 million people, or 5.6 percent of the U.S. population, live in low-income and low-access tracts and are more than 1 mile or 20 miles from a supermarket. More information can be found here: <https://www.ers.usda.gov/data-products/food-access-research-atlas/>

In these communities, the objectives of this program are to:

- improve access to fresh foods and reduce food deserts across the Commonwealth;
- create wealth and leadership in low-income and low-access communities;
- improve access to private capital in low-income, low-access, and vulnerable communities, including for Black, Indigenous, and People of Color;
- assess, support, and transform existing or potential businesses into sustainable community-informed businesses;
- foster innovative solutions that uplift and share successful food business models; and
- reduce food insecurity, strengthen food systems, and improve health outcomes for low-income and low-access communities.

VFAIF is administered by the Virginia Department of Agriculture and Consumer Services (VDACS) in partnership with a Community Development Financial Institution (CDFI).

Eligibility

The VFAIF program is a unique grant opportunity that is focused on low-income and low-access communities. Specifically, VFAIF and EFOD are focused on low-income, low-access communities which have been disproportionately affected by unequal investment and growth, including a lack of access to capital.

Applicants may be individuals, farms, nonprofits, organizations (faith-based or others), or for-profit businesses.

Eligible projects include the business development, construction, rehabilitation, equipment upgrades, or expansion of:

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- Grocery stores that primarily sell meat, seafood, fruits, vegetables, dairy products, dry groceries, household products, sundries, and healthy food options
- Innovative food retail projects such as mobile markets or delivery models, including food trucks
- Small food retailers, such as small-scale stores, neighborhood stores, small groceries, farmers' markets, or corner stores
- Small, limited resource or socially disadvantaged farmers and ranchers; small, limited resource or socially disadvantaged farm co-ops, community gardens, restaurants or cafes with a direct food retail component or in partnership with a qualified food retailer, food hub, Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) Community Supported Agriculture (CSA), and/or farm stand

Eligible uses of funding may include, but are not limited to, seed money or funds for implementation, such as site development or the purchase of equipment.

VFAIF will not fund stand-alone business entities without a food retail component or food retail partner, traditional food banks/food pantries, farm/production equipment or expenses, or the purchase of land.

Mandatory Requirements

Projects must meet the following requirements to be considered for funding:

- Be located in the Commonwealth of Virginia
- Have a retail component where consumers can purchase fresh meats, seafood, dairy, produce, and/or healthy food options
- Directly serve residents within low-income, low-access communities
- Demonstrate a history of community engagement, work in the community, and community support for the project
- Accept SNAP benefits and offer Virginia Fresh Match incentives
- Purchase a minimum of 25% of fresh products from Virginia's small, beginning, limited resource, Veteran, and/or socially disadvantaged farmers and ranchers (as designated by USDA/ERS ers.usda.gov)

Additional Considerations

Prioritization will be given to projects that meet the following criteria:

- The entity receiving funds is owned or substantially led by individuals from low-income, low-access communities, or is working in an active, ongoing partnership with these individuals, which must include shared leadership, decision-making, resources, and/or shared economic benefit
- Integrate community culture and artistic expression in the business model and/or customer experience
- Provide a path for financial sustainability and positive outcomes to the community, including education, leadership and youth development, employment of community residents, job training, or workforce development

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- Demonstrate success in creating partnerships and/or efforts to leverage additional funding.

Application Process

The VFAIF application period will be announced annually. Grant award amounts will range from \$10,000 to \$50,000 per project, per year. Successful projects may apply for additional funding in subsequent years upon completion of the previous project (for instance, an applicant could receive \$10,000 to purchase refrigeration in year one and then apply for \$50,000 to expand processing capability in year two).

To apply, applicants must first complete the pre-proposal and schedule a call with VDACS program staff, followed by completion of the application. Successful applications will show a clear vision and plan, including a timeline and deliverables; will have a comprehensive budget; and will demonstrate a path to financial sustainability or profitability.

Grant Resources and Support:

The VDACS Food Access Program Coordinator, who primarily focuses on the administration of the Virginia Food Access Investment Fund and Program, will provide technical assistance and outreach to grant applicants to assist with the application process and grant implementation. The Coordinator will serve as the main point of contact for questions regarding how to complete the grant application, prepare the proposal, and participate in the grant interview process. The Coordinator will work alongside successful grant recipients to assist them in identifying and partnering with other potential financial resources and to ensure they have or are able to accept SNAP benefits and the Virginia Fresh Match incentive. In addition, the Coordinator will work with partner food-based organizations to develop one-time and ongoing educational workshops and technical assistance to aid grant recipients in becoming sustainable and successful.

The Community Development Financial Institution (CDFI) serves as a critical partner to VDACS in grant program administration and implementation in support of VFAIF grant recipients. The CDFI will assist grant recipients with business development resources and connect them with financial resources, such as low-interest or no-interest loans, to provide additional sources of funding.

Please visit the [VDACS website](#) for information and services that can help you successfully develop and sustain your community-based business.

If you have any questions about the process or need help completing the application, please contact:

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Technical Assistance (Provide by Locus Group)
Locus Impact Fund
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