

Virginia Food Access Investment Fund Grant Guidelines 2024-2025

Updated January 31, 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 to fund business development, construction, rehabilitation, equipment upgrades, and expansion of grocery stores, small food retailers, and innovative food retail projects in low-income, low-access communities.

Food is a common thread between history and culture, neighborhood empowerment and healthier lifestyles. Robust regional food systems help drive economic development and fosters environmental resilience. 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, 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 (urban) or 20 miles (rural) from a supermarket.

The objectives of the VFAIF 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 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 focuses on supporting low-income and low-access communities, specifically those that have been disproportionately affected by unequal investment and growth, including a lack of access to capital. Applicants may be individuals, farms, nonprofit organizations (faith-based or others), or for-profit businesses.

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

- grocery stores that primarily sell meat, seafood, fruits, vegetables, dairy products, dry groceries, household products, sundries, and healthy food options;

Virginia Food Access Investment Fund
Grant Guidelines
2024-2025

- 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; and
- 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 funds may include, but are not limited to:

- Pre-development costs, such as market research or site development; or
- Implementation costs, such as equipment or construction.

Please note that projects that include vehicle purchases require additional documentation and agency agreements.

VFAIF Grant will **not** fund:

- stand-alone business entities that do not have a food retail component or food retail partner;
- traditional food banks/food pantries;
- farm/production equipment or expenses;
- cost associated with production of prepared food;
- projects that do not currently accept or do not have a plan to accept SNAP EBT;
- purchase of land;
- personnel/staffing; or
- indirect costs.

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 low-income, low-access communities;
 - ⊖ If your project serves low-income, low-access communities but is located outside these areas, please explain how it reaches and impacts these populations.
- 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 (or other nutrition incentive program);
 - if the applicant is not an active SNAP retailer at the time of application, the proposal must describe, in specific detail, the applicant's activities completed to-date to become an eligible SNAP retailer. This criteria is required for award.

Additional Considerations

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

Virginia Food Access Investment Fund Grant Guidelines 2024-2025

- prioritize and use grant funds for food-retail related expenses;
- purchase a significant volume 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);
- employ members of the community;
- reflect the ethos and mission of the community and its customers and is clearly rooted in the place it serves;
- support new enterprises and create sustainable economic opportunities for low-income, low-access communities;
- provide positive outcomes to the community, including education, leadership and youth development, employment of community residents, job training, or workforce development;
- demonstrate success in creating partnerships and/or efforts to leverage additional funding; and
- 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.

Application Process

The VFAIF application period is open from February 3-28, 2025. Grant award amounts will range from \$10,000 to \$50,000 per project. Successful projects may apply for additional funding in subsequent grant cycles upon completion of the previously funded 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 have first submitted the [pre-proposal](#) and been invited to apply. If an eligible entity did not submit a pre-proposal, they will not be permitted to submit an application regardless of project alignment with VFAIF goals.

Applicants must use the provided [Microsoft Form](#) to submit their applications by 11:59 pm EST on February 28, 2025. Successful applications will show a clear vision and plan, including a timeline, comprehensive budget, and deliverables, that respond to the program priorities. Projects should explain their path to financial sustainability or profitability.

Grant Resources and Support

[Locus](#), a Virginia-based Community Development Financial Institution (CDFI), serves as a critical partner to VDACS in grant program administration and implementation in support of VFAIF grant recipients. Locus can 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.

The VDACS Grants Specialist and a member of the Locus food systems team are available to provide technical assistance and outreach to grant applicants to assist with the application process and grant implementation. [Use this link to schedule a 1:1 technical assistance meeting.](#) The Grants

Virginia Food Access Investment Fund
Grant Guidelines
2024-2025

Specialist and Locus staff member will serve as the main points of contact for questions regarding how to complete the grant application, prepare the proposal, and participate in the grant interview process.

The Grants Specialist and Locus staff member 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 (or similar) nutrition incentive. In addition, the Grants Specialist and Locus staff member will work with partner food sector organizations to develop educational resources and technical assistance to aid grant recipients. 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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Or

Food@locusimpact.org