

# FACT SHEET



## Building Health Equity in Virginia

August 2021 Special Session

**Problem:** Health inequities are often determined by economic, racial, and social conditions that are shaped by the distribution of money, power, and resources. These conditions create unfair and avoidable differences in health status, and collectively are identified as “social determinants of health.” In Virginia, 340,000 family households live in poverty, and an additional 937,000 family households live above the poverty income line but do not earn enough to cover the “minimum budget” of basic human needs. Sustainable access to healthy food, affordable broadband, and money are three important determinants of the health status of these family households.

**Solutions:** The American Relief Plan (ARP) money from the federal government can only be used for one-time expenses, not ongoing programs. VICPP advocates for the following one-time investments that support the overall well-being and health of low-income families.

**Expand the Women, Infant and Children (WIC) benefit to include more fresh foods.** According to Feeding America, four of the five U.S. localities with the greatest expected increase in child food insecurity due to the COVID-19 pandemic are in Northern Virginia. Before the pandemic, approx. 850,000 Virginians were food insecure, including 250,000 children. Rates increased by approximately 20 percent during the ongoing public health crisis, with an additional 150,000 Virginians experiencing food insecurity.<sup>1</sup> Most women who participate in Medicaid, SNAP and TANF programs do not participate in the WIC program, which serves low-income pregnant and postpartum women, infants, and children up to 5 years of age. The Department of Health has requested **\$4.6 million for WIC** to increase the benefit voucher’s coverage of fresh fruit and vegetables.

**Improve Virginia’s hunger reduction infrastructure.** Many low-income families rely on soup kitchens and food pantries to make ends meet, especially at the end of the month. These vital services are supported by the Virginia Federation of Food Banks, whose capacity has been stretched during the pandemic. The Federation has proposed **\$32.2 million to fund extra food and infrastructure improvements** for its food banks.

**Increase broadband access for low-income households.** Virginia is committed to extending its broadband infrastructure into rural and underserved communities. Virginia should commit **\$16.5 million to subsidize broadband access** to ensure low-income households can benefit from this essential infrastructure, as proposed by the Department of Social Services and supported by the Department of Housing and Community Development, Fund our Schools, and the Commonwealth Institute.

**Develop outreach and preparation services for the federal Child Tax Credit.** The lesson learned from the first allocation of federal stimulus checks for COVID relief was that using filed tax returns to identify eligible households by income marginalized the families with the greatest needs. Households with the lowest incomes do not file taxes. The new federal Child Tax Credit, which is one of the most important programs for reducing child poverty, is again being sent to families based on their income tax returns. If the Child Tax Credit is to benefit the families who most need this financial boost, outreach is critical to find them and encourage them to apply with provided resources. The Department of Social Services seeks to address this gap with a proposal of **\$750,000 to pay for outreach and tax preparation services** to ensure that all eligible families take advantage of the temporary expansion of the federal Child Tax Credit.

<sup>1</sup> Food insecurity information from Governor Northam press release of July 28, 2021.