



Our Commitment to Addressing Rural Child Hunger



Save the Children®

2022 Annual Report

A Save the Children staff member gathers food from the pantry to hand out during a food distribution event in Batesville, Arkansas.

Photo: Shawn Millsaps / Save the Children

Introduction

Save the Children's vision is that all children in rural America have a healthy, strong foundation to thrive as learners and in life. Consistent access to nourishing food is required for this vision to become a reality. Hunger negatively affects a child's physical and cognitive development, preventing them from reaching their full potential. Children facing food insecurity are more likely to have lower math scores, repeat a grade, come to school late, or miss school entirely¹. Kids can't be hungry for knowledge if they are hungry for food.

With our school and community partners, Save the Children meets the immediate need for food assistance and increases food access through the distribution of nourishing food, strengthens government nutrition programs to meet the specific needs of rural communities, and works to develop new, scalable solutions to combat rural child hunger.

Increased Challenges in Rural Communities

In 2022, pandemic- and war-induced inflation sent the cost of food soaring with the largest 12-month increase in food prices since 1979². A staggering 1 in 8 children in the U.S. are growing up in food insecure households³.

Food insecurity is worse in rural communities. In fact, 9 out of 10 counties with the highest food insecurity rates are rural⁴. Families in rural communities have always been vulnerable to food insecurity due to a number of factors including economic instability, but the dual impact of the pandemic and inflation have made rural families even more vulnerable. Between June 2000 and 2022, rural household expenses rose by 18.5% overall, but earnings were not able to keep pace at 6.1%⁵. The net effect cut rural discretionary incomes by 49.1% - in comparison, urban disposable income only dropped by 13%. Expenses now consume 91% of rural take-home pay.

These challenges have coincided with the expiration of several pandemic-era programs that provided crucial safeguards that helped families keep nutritious food on the table.



Save the Children staff in Eastern Kentucky repurposed the Rosie the Readiness bus, one of our mobile learning units, to deliver meals and other essential supplies to families affected by massive flooding in the area.
Photo: Save the Children

¹ National Education Association, "Child Hunger is Exploding—and Public Schools Can't Fix it Alone," 2021, <https://www.nea.org/advocating-for-change/new-from-nea/child-hunger-exploding-and-public-schools-cant-fix-it-alone>.

² U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, The Economics Daily, "Prices for Food at Home up 13.5 Percent for Year Ended August 2022," September 2022, <https://www.bls.gov/opub/ted/2022/prices-for-food-at-home-up-13-5-percent-for-year-ended-august-2022.htm>.

³ U.S. Department of Agriculture, Economic Research Service, "Household Food Security in the United States in 2021," September 2022, pg. 8, <https://www.ers.usda.gov/webdocs/publications/104656/err-309.pdf>.

⁴ Feeding America, "Map the Meal Gap 2022," July 2022, pg. 8, <https://www.feedingamerica.org/sites/default/files/2022-08/Map%20the%20Meal%20Gap%202022%20Report.pdf>.

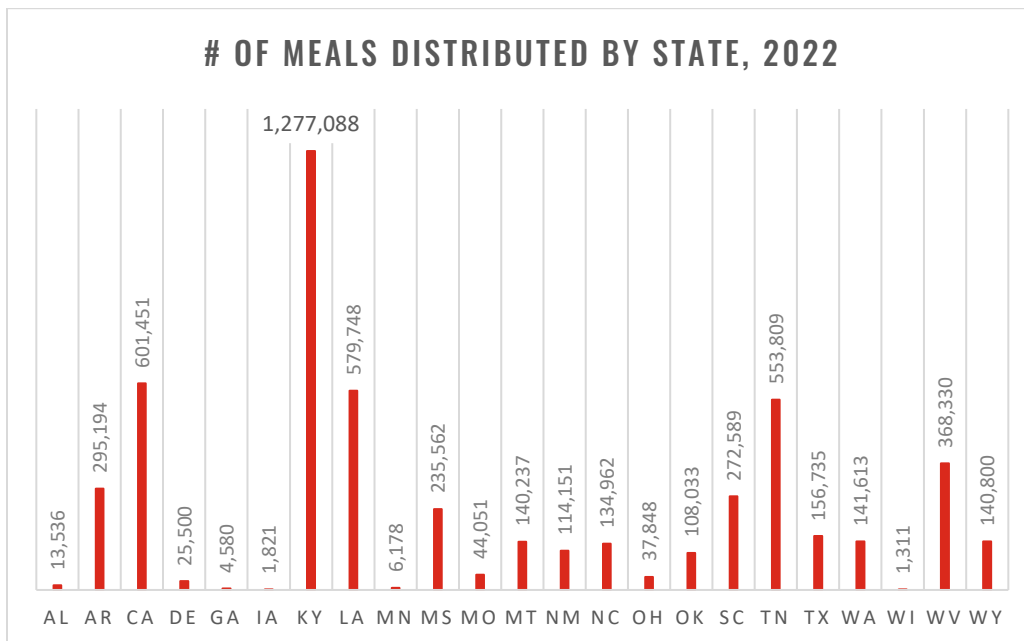
⁵ Iowa State University Extension and Outreach, Rural Sociology, "Impact of Inflation on Rural Household Expenses in the U.S., June 2020-2022," July 2022, <https://smalltowns.soc.iastate.edu/wp-content/uploads/sites/163/2022/07/STR1063.pdf>.

Our Response: Food Security Programs and Initiatives

In response to the challenges that families in rural communities face, Save the Children supported various programs and initiatives in 2022 to provide direct food assistance and strengthen the capacity of rural communities to ensure children and families had continued access to nourishing food. These initiatives, which are described in detail in the section below, included supporting established and innovative community-led approaches, providing training opportunities and technical assistance to local leaders, and convening cross-sector stakeholders to share strategies and best practices to respond to the challenges facing rural communities.

Save the Children supported the distribution of over 5 million meals to nearly 250,000 children in 23 states.

Through these efforts, Save the Children supported the distribution of 5,255,127 meals to 248,850 children in partnership with schools, food banks, and other community-based organizations in rural communities in 23 states: Alabama, Arkansas, California, Delaware, Georgia, Iowa, Kentucky, Louisiana, Minnesota, Mississippi, Missouri, Montana, New Mexico, North Carolina, Ohio, Oklahoma, South Carolina, Tennessee, Texas, Washington, Wisconsin, West Virginia, and Wyoming. The table below provides a breakdown of the meals distributed by state in 2022:



Meeting Immediate Need for Food Assistance: A Tiered Approach

Save the Children utilizes a tiered approach in which research, best practices, and local innovation drive implementation of our strategy and guide our efforts to address rural child hunger. A tiered implementation approach enables us to make strategic investments across states and communities to extend our reach and impact. Built on the recognition that rural communities may need or want varied levels of support, the scale and scope of interventions and investments are tailored to community context and factors with Tier 1 approaches

encompassing the broadest reaching efforts to disseminate resources and knowledge and Tier 3 approaches representing the deepest level of investment (see Figure 1).

In the sections below, we have provided a detailed description of each tier, as well as the interventions implemented under each tier and activities we have accomplished this year.

Tier 1 Approaches

Tier 1 involves **broad, expanded supports to all rural communities through national networks and partnerships**. Tier 1 approaches support partners in establishing or strengthening interventions through access to information and funding. Best practices are promoted by convening partners, facilitating communities of practice, disseminating high quality resources, supporting professional training opportunities, and providing grant funding and gifts in kind.

Rural School Nutrition Directors Network

An example of a Tier 1 approach is our Rural School Nutrition Directors Network (RDN), the first-ever professional peer network tailored to the unique strengths, constraints and needs of rural school nutrition departments. The RDN aims to strengthen the capacity of rural schools to serve more and better quality food and reach more schoolchildren through training, technical assistance, and access to resources.

Free and open to any director of a rural school nutrition department, the RDN provides opportunities for members to share ideas, experiences and effective practices. The goals of the network are to increase participation in best practices, share resources to strengthen rural school food service delivery, and strengthen connections with other practitioners in rural communities across the U.S.

In 2022, the RDN had grown to support **63 members** from **17 states** including Arizona, Arkansas, California, Florida, Idaho, Kentucky, Maine, Michigan, Mississippi, North Carolina, South Carolina, Tennessee, Texas, Virginia, Washington, West Virginia, and Wisconsin. Members met virtually on a monthly basis, benefiting from the following network services and activities:

- **Training and Technical Assistance (TTA)** through monthly webinars. Topics of discussion included updates on federal child nutrition waivers and the community eligibility provision, both of which help rural school districts increase the volume and quality of food distributed. Partnering national organizations

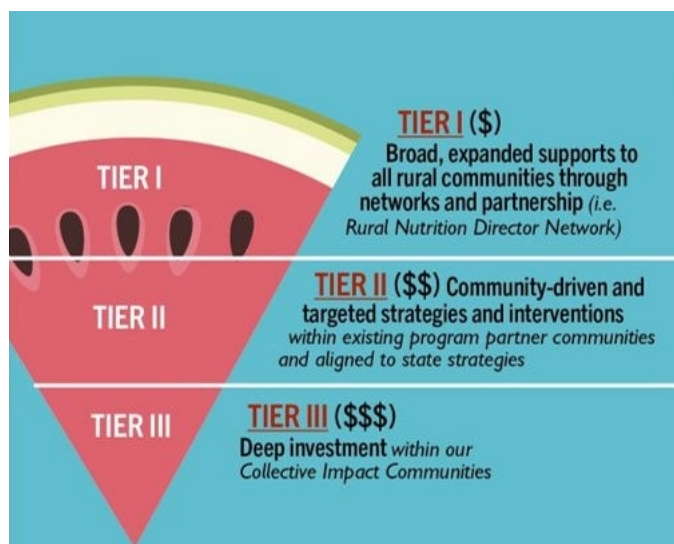


Figure 1: This graphic provides a visual representation of our tiered approach to implementation.



joined throughout the year to share information, including a USDA representative offering targeted TTA for the USDA's FY 2023 Farm to School Grant Program.

- **Financial and other resources** to equip members to address barriers and needs specific to their communities. This included providing \$278,512 in grant funding to purchase equipment to operate school feeding programs and establish best practices. Members also received materials to celebrate National School Breakfast Day in March, School Lunch Hero Day in May, and National School Nutrition Week in October, including cookbooks, nutrition information handouts, and educational posters.
- Access to national **professional development opportunities**, including nearly \$7,000 in registration and lodging fees for select members to attend the National Child Nutrition conference, and glean learnings and insights to apply to their day-to-day work in child nutrition.

Promising Practices Initiative

The Promising Practices Initiative was launched in 2022 to identify, document, and better understand promising practices within rural communities that increase food security for children. Save the Children collaborated with our partner **Share Our Strength** to issue a national open call for proposals in conjunction with the **2022 Rural Child Hunger Summit**. We awarded **\$624,000 to 15 organizations from 10 states** including Alabama, Georgia, Louisiana, Missouri, Montana, North Carolina, New Mexico, Ohio, Oklahoma, and Wyoming. Partners received grants ranging from \$10,000 to \$50,000 for a one-year period (August 2022 through July 2023). Their interventions include backpack programs, afterschool meals, pantries, mobile distributions, grocery vouchers, a farm-to-school program, and a federal child nutrition program outreach and enrollment.

Grantee Highlight: FAST Blackfeet

One of the grantees from the first round of the Promising Practices Initiative is the Montana-based [Food Access and Sustainability Team Blackfeet](#), known as FAST Blackfeet. The organization provides access to healthy and culturally relevant foods, nutrition education, and gardening/wild harvesting opportunities within the Blackfeet Nation. Grant funding is supporting efforts to provide more nutritious and culturally appropriate foods for the food pantry, perform an annual survey on pantry participants' needs, and increase outreach and enrollment assistance for federal nutrition programs.

A FAST Blackfeet pantry participant shared, "My family is very grateful for this food pantry. We honestly were not eating some meals to let our children eat, and now we are able to eat every meal with them."



A FAST Blackfeet team member with the O'yo'p' On Wheels Mobile Pantry. Photo: FAST Blackfeet

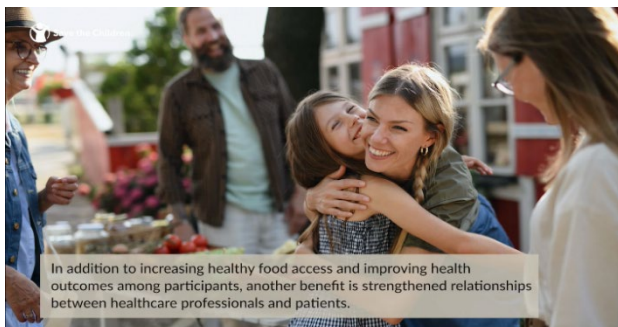
Tier 2 Approaches

Tier 2 encompasses **community-driven and targeted program interventions delivered through larger grants and more intensive training and technical assistance** provided to school districts, food banks, and community-based organizations in existing program partner communities. Through the Tier 2 approaches, Save the Children provides resources (e.g., funding and gifts-in-kind) and technical support to strengthen the capacity of communities to address food insecurity by distributing meals and ensuring families have access to services and programs. In 2022, we implemented several Tier 2 interventions including year-long and summer-specific feeding grants, holiday food distributions, and mobile learning and feeding.

Training and Technical Assistance

Save the Children food security experts provide ongoing training and technical assistance (TTA) to equip partners with resources, tools, and knowledge to implement high-quality, impactful child food security programs in their communities. The national food security team keeps up to date on best and promising practices, research, government nutrition policies and programs, collaborating with state-based food security staff to disseminate information and guidance to rural community partners. Both at the national and state level, the food security team serves as a support for project implementation. TTA is provided through emails/newsletters, phone calls, webinars, virtual and onsite/in-person trainings, peer learning, and site exchanges.

In 2022, the food security implemented a range of TTA activities, including compiling and disseminating rural and child food security research reports, distributing nutrition resources, and providing individualized assistance with grant applications, support on pre-implementation planning meetings on topics such as food safety and impact tracking, guidance on story gathering and public comments to enable partners to advocate effectively for child nutrition programs, and helping partners prepare for a speaking session at a conference. In November, we distributed *Good and Cheap: Eat Well on \$4/Day*, a cookbook featuring affordable, nutritious meals, to partners to give to families. The food security team created a corresponding TTA video to help partners facilitate the “launch” of the cookbook in their communities and highlight the connection between education and food security.



The above screenshot is from the TTA video on Produce Prescription Programs. Photo: Save the Children

A major TTA offering this year is our library of TTA videos sharing best practices in food distribution. **Eight TTA videos were developed** to provide overviews of specific food distribution programs that have been implemented successfully to increase food security, as well as strategies and tips for establishing the programs in their communities. These videos covered Backpack Food Programs, Double Dollar Programs, Grocery Voucher Programs, Mobile Meal Programs, Pop-Up Pantries, Produce Prescription Programs, School Food Pantries, and SNAP/WIC Outreach Programs; all videos are accessible to partners on demand online through the Save the Children Partner Portal.

Summer Feeding Initiatives

Millions of children lose access to healthy meals when school closes during the summer. Recognizing the importance of summer feeding programs, Save the Children invests in an annual summer feeding grant program to support community-led projects that provide nourishing meals to children during the summer, in addition to providing meals through our summer education programs like KinderBoost and SummerBoost. Save the Children

works with community representatives to develop and implement projects to bring about the deepest impact on child hunger during the summer months.

In 2022, Save the Children **provided \$2,400,000 in grants**, as well as technical assistance, **to 100 partners in 17 states** to support the community-led projects. Communities often used funding from Save the Children in conjunction with federal waivers that allowed for service flexibility. The combined funding streams enabled communities to distribute food creatively, keeping children safe and well fed during the summer.

Funded projects **supported the distribution of 2,324,920 meals to more than 117,000 children**. These projects included:

- Mobile meal distributions to central community locations;
- SNAP outreach and enrollment assistance to increase program awareness and participation;
- Pop-up pantries that distributed boxes of nourishing food in neighborhoods;
- Curbside drive-through meal distributions at schools and community-based organizations;
- Direct home delivery of meals;
- School food pantries to serve children attending summer school;
- Hot meals served to children attending summer school;
- Other congregate meal programs serving hot meals in community settings;
- Backpack meal programs to ensure children had access to nourishing food on weekends;
- Grocery voucher programs; and
- Partnerships with Farmers Markets to increase the quality of food distributed.

Emphasis this year was given to projects designed to increase the amount of nourishing food available to children, particularly fruits and vegetables. As a result, over 90 percent of grant recipients included fruits and/or vegetables as part of their summer feeding programs. More than half disseminated educational materials, such as age-appropriate books, or engaged children and families in learning activities alongside the food distributions to further their project's impact and connection to learning.

In Laurel, DE, the **Laurel Public Library** used their grant to host several themed family events during the summer, including a Healthy Family Night where families made a healthy recipe together and received fresh produce, pantry staples, and a recipe book to make meals at home. The **Peacekeeper Society**, a female, Indigenous-led nonprofit organization located on the Yakama Indian Reservation in Washington, used their grant to support food distributions at a local school district and tribal housing parks, in addition to providing food during the Wapato Community Center's Summer Reading Program. This [video](#) highlights the work of Batesville School District, an existing program partner and a 2022 summer feeding grant recipient.



A child shows off the bag of fruit he and his family received during a distribution event in Arkansas. During the distribution, children also received books and learning activities, and families received information on SNAP information. Photo: Shawn Millsaps / Save the Children

Save the Children operates summer education programs to keep children learning and prevent learning loss during the summer. These programs include our full-day SummerBoost program and our 10-day kindergarten readiness program, KinderBoost, as well as other alternative summer programs such as the half-day Taste of

Kindergarten transition program. As part of these educational programs, we distribute meals to participants to ensure children have healthy meals throughout the program day. In 2022, we **supported the distribution of 211,340 meals** through these summer programs.

Together, Save the Children's summer feeding initiatives supported the distribution of 2,536,260 meals to more than 125,000 children in partnership with schools, food banks, and other rural community-based organizations across 171 counties.

School and Community Program Year Initiatives

Save the Children continued our investment in community-driven solutions to rural hunger by providing grants during the program year to support child hunger programming in schools, food banks, and other local organizations. Recognizing that local leaders and community-based organizations have the solutions but often lack the capital to address the causes of food insecurity in their communities, these grants support communities in implementing the projects that best meet emerging or ongoing needs around child hunger and nutrition.

During Program Year 2021-2022, we awarded **\$472,000 in grants to support the distribution of 469,534 meals to reach more than 50,000 children in 8 states.** Funded projects included before and after school meal programs, a backpack program, a grocery voucher program, mobile feeding programs, school food pantries, and a SNAP outreach and application assistance program. Save the Children staff also provided training and technical assistance to support successful project implementation. A success story from Program Year 2021-2022 is below:

Grantee Highlight: Wilsona School District, California

Emma and her mom participate in Save the Children's early childhood and home visiting program, Early Steps to School Success. Last fall, the Early Steps Early Childhood Coordinator for Wilsona School District facilitated virtual nutrition and fitness groups, which Emma and her family learned about the importance of including various fruits and vegetables in their meals. Emma's mom says, "I learned that feeding fruits and vegetables help my children grow up healthy and is helping them learn."

Like most families in their rural community, Emma's family has faced financial struggles due to the pandemic. Affording fresh produce is sometimes hard, because the prices are high, and the nearest grocery store is outside the community. Wilsona School District received a program year grant to create a mobile food distribution program, which delivers fresh produce to families on a weekly basis.

Emma's mom says that Emma loves helping in the kitchen. "Every time we get a food box, she gets so excited. She wonders what yummy surprises we got in the box. Last time, we used the oranges and apples to make some juice. I cut up the pieces, and we counted them together as she helped me put them in the machine to make juice. The fruit and vegetables boxes are a great help for our family."



Emma helps her mom make juice with fruits their family received in their produce box. Photo: Save the Children

During Program Year 2022-2023, we prioritized projects that focused on creating or improving capacity for cold storage or expanding existing feeding interventions to increase their reach and impact. We awarded **\$2,449,741 in grants to support 109 food security partners across 12 states**. These projects included community-led efforts to help stretch tight family budgets during the holiday season, a new initiative this year. Of the total grants awarded, **\$810,124 in grants supported 35 holiday food distribution projects** including food box distributions, grocery vouchers, outreach, and community feeding programs. Holiday food distributions reached **37,567 children and families with 395,401 meals** during the 2022 holiday season. Impact information from all Program Year 2022-2023 grants is not yet available.

Mobile Learning and Feeding Units

Mobile programming is a key component of our strategy to address food insecurity and early learning. Mobile learning and feeding units (buses and vans) allow us to reach children and families living in poverty in remote, rural areas who lack access to nourishing food and early learning resources. Mobile units reimagine program delivery options – reaching families ‘where they are’ by bringing meals, early learning activities and materials, and other services directly into their neighborhoods. This innovative approach effectively mitigates the transportation and access barriers that are so prevalent in rural places.

In 2022, Save the Children, with our partners, launched **13 new mobile learning and feeding units**. With the addition of these new mobile units, we maintained a fleet of **30 mobile units this year in nine states** – Arkansas, California, Kentucky, Mississippi, New Mexico, South Carolina, Tennessee, Texas, Washington, and West Virginia. Each unit reaches an average of 1,945 children. To see one of these mobile units in action, watch a video of how [Sunny the Bus](#), which distributes food boxes that include fresh fruits and vegetable on a biweekly basis, provides a lifeline for families in remote communities in rural southern California.

The mobile units are multi-purpose, adaptable, and can be used to respond to the unique and evolving needs and challenges present in each host community. In Eastern Kentucky, Save the Children used our [Rosie the Readiness Bus](#) – one of the first mobile units established prior to the pandemic – to deliver hot meals, in partnership with **World Central Kitchen**, to families hardest hit by the severe flooding in the area. Together, we delivered around 200 meals every day as part of our response. “They’ve really saved us,” said one resident. “We have no kitchen; can’t cook, obviously. We don’t have water.”



Described as a work of art on wheels, Lola the Bus goes to some of the hardest to reach communities in Luna County, NM. Lola hit the road in summer 2022, but it is already changing the lives of kids in rural New Mexico.

“I think **Lola brings a lot of hope** [to children], because they know that inside of that bus, there comes food and they’re not going to be hungry,” said Yaha Aguilera, Save the Children’s New Mexico State Director, pictured here in front of Lola the Bus during a food distribution event. Photo: Paul Ratje / Save the Children

Partnerships

Strong partnerships with nonprofit organizations and corporate partners are integral to our food security program work. Our partnership with **Feeding America**, for example, enables us to cultivate and enhance relationships between community partners and food banks that serve rural areas. Through a place-based approach, we aim to identify avenues for collaboration to expand services into communities that have been challenging to reach due to their rural nature.

We have highlighted our partnership with **Once Upon a Farm**, below, which is helping to increase our food distribution efforts:

Partner Spotlight: A Million Meals

Once Upon a Farm is a leading organic child nutrition company, committed to nurturing children to help them reach their full potential for a happier, healthier tomorrow. Recognizing the important link between food security and education, Once Upon a Farm has been a strong supporter of both our early childhood and child hunger programming since the partnership was formed in 2018.

In 2021, deepening our multi-year partnership to provide a better start for kids in the U.S., Once Upon a Farm launched **A Million Meals** initiative to help provide one million meals by 2024 to kids in need living in food insecure communities. The initiative consists of financial investments, product donations, company-wide volunteer opportunities, and other programming that support Save the Children's early education and food programs delivering nutritious meals to kids in need.



In 2022, Once Upon a Farm and Save the Children distributed **113,557 cold-pressed fruit and vegetable blends** to food insecure, rural communities in California and Texas. Once Upon a Farm employees also donated over 100 volunteer hours to support Save the Children.

Tier 3 Approaches

Tier 3 represents our deepest investment to establish a cohort of geographically and racially diverse rural communities deploying a collective impact approach that drives innovation and program enhancements to advance community-level outcomes.

Rural Accelerator Initiative

Save the Children's Rural Accelerator Initiative is an ambitious collective impact approach to achieving larger-scale, population-level results in rural communities. To achieve transformative change for children, we have incorporated the collective impact approach into our U.S. Programs strategy, seeking to complement our established direct service programs with a holistic, results-based approach that activates, aligns, and leverages community assets to address structural issues identified and prioritized by community members. A collective impact approach strengthens cross-sector collaboration among local stakeholders, building and enhancing the capacity of local coalitions by intentionally engaging key leaders, co-designing and delivering training and technical assistance to stakeholders, and aligning financial and strategic resources to support local efforts.

Collective Impact, with integrated food security efforts, is currently piloted in five rural communities: Perry County, Kentucky; Quitman County, Mississippi; Orangeburg County, South Carolina; Cocke County, Tennessee;

and Yakima Valley, Washington. Each community has established local structures charged with developing, executing, and improving locally identified strategies to improve outcomes for children, focusing on kindergarten readiness and third grade academic proficiency. Addressing rural child hunger is a key strategy in each Collective Impact community for achieving their identified positive educational outcomes for children.

In 2022, Save the Children provided financial resources and training and technical assistance to support the development and implementation of food security strategies. In Cocke County, Tennessee, for example, **the Food Security Coordinator facilitated the Food Security Working Group** to help define the food security strategy for the Cocke County Cradle to Career Coalition (C5), which serves as the lead institution for the Rural Accelerator Initiative for the county. Group members designed a Community Food Assessment to document the movement of food resources in the county, bringing people together to identify community members making a difference, build relationships with leaders and volunteers, find mutual goals, aligned missions; and listen from the perspective that we don't have the answers.

With a goal of accelerating progress toward cradle-to-career outcomes for children through proactive, collaborative engagement of community stakeholders, the C5 has identified the following outcomes:

- All children will enter kindergarten ready to learn.
- All children will exit third grade reading on grade level.
- All students will graduate from high school as ready graduates.

In Cocke County, 23% of the overall population meets the USDA's definition of food insecurity. To advance its educational goals and outcomes, the C5 has prioritized food security as a focus: children must be nourished to learn effectively.

Advocating for Legislative Solutions to Hunger

Government nutrition programs are integral to fight child hunger, yet don't reach everyone in need. That is why, together with our political advocacy arm Save the Children Action Network (SCAN), we advocate for strengthening and expanding government programs to meet the needs of communities impacted by inequalities across the country. Advocacy is a major accelerator for change and is key to seeing our vision of improving outcomes for all children in rural America. Strong partnerships, such as with Share Our Strength and the National WIC Association, are key to this strategy.



Advocates from across the country – including high school and college students – came together in Washington, D.C., for our annual 3-day Advocacy Summit. Photo: Save the Children

Throughout 2022, we continued to advocate for the Child Nutrition Reauthorization (CNR) and robust funding for child nutrition programs, such as the Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants and Children (WIC). Save the Children and SCAN's years-long advocacy efforts led to the House Education and Labor Committee putting forth a comprehensive CNR that includes all but one of our policy priorities. Within WIC, we were thrilled to see our collective advocacy efforts extend the boost in fruit and vegetable benefits, which more than tripled the benefit amount.

In parallel to our CNR efforts, as pandemic flexibilities started to subside, we advocated for some to continue due to rising food prices and ongoing supply chain and financial difficulties faced by school districts and childcare facilities. We are proud

to have helped Congress move forward the **Keep Kids Fed Act** in a bipartisan matter, which had significant implications for summer 2022 and the 2022-2023 school year. This piece of legislation included some of the previously mentioned flexibilities, such as all pandemic flexibilities continuing for summer 2022 and increased reimbursements for meals served at schools and childcare centers.

A significant win in 2022 was the completion of the **White House Conference on Hunger, Nutrition and Health**, attended by our President and CEO, Janti Soeripto. Leading up to the conference, we participated in biweekly meetings with the Biden Administration and met individually with key congressional offices to discuss our suggested solutions to ending child hunger in the U.S. We are pleased to report that most of our suggested solutions were included in the administration's National Strategy following the conference.

At the end of the year, we celebrated passage of an omnibus package for Fiscal Year 2023 that included **historic wins for domestic child nutrition**. Notably, the Summer Electronic Benefit Transfer (Summer-EBT) program was made permanent and nationwide, spring boarding off temporary programs that have successfully provided children with grocery funds when schools are closed. The omnibus also allowed for service model flexibilities – like grab-and-go and home food delivery – to better serve children in rural communities who do not have access to centralized meal sites.

At the state-level, our grassroots advocates have been vital in advocating for child nutrition-related legislation. In 2022 alone, we mobilized our base of supporters to **secure \$146,389,000 and other legislative wins** to improve access to school meals and nutrition programs across multiple states. These wins included statewide investments in food support programs via an Electronic Benefit Transfer match at farmers markets for fresh produce (Louisiana), the creation of universal school meal program (Colorado), and legislation to end the practice of sending parents to debt collection for overdue school meal balances (South Carolina).

In 2023, we look forward to leveraging the strides we made in 2022 to keep up the momentum and ensure all children have access to the nutrition they need to thrive.

Innovation

Organizations and community leaders in rural communities are mobilizing resources and finding inventive ways to make food more accessible and affordable for rural families. Through the **Rural Child Hunger Research and Innovation Lab**, Save the Children is investing in community champions. The Lab creates the space for community leaders to design, test, and pilot food security solutions that leverage the strengths of their communities. Our hope is to develop these locally driven solutions into scalable models that can be shared and adapted in even the hardest-to-reach areas.

In 2022, organizations located in and/or serving a rural community in our 13 priority states (Arkansas, California, Kentucky, Louisiana, Mississippi, North Carolina, New Mexico, Oklahoma, South Carolina, Tennessee, Texas, Washington, and West Virginia) were invited to apply for funding and technical assistance to bring their ideas for combatting rural child hunger to life. For this first round, we awarded **\$100,000 each to five grantees** to implement their innovative ideas. Teams from each awarded project will participate in an incubation workshop facilitated by Save the Children, IDEO.org, and the Baylor Collaborative on Hunger and Poverty in January 2023 to refine their ideas, build innovation skills, and create project plans before implementation begins in February 2023.

The first cohort of Lab participants represent diverse communities across the country:

- **Bidii Baby Foods**, an entrepreneurial family farm on the **Navajo Nation in New Mexico**, seeks to increase farm-to-school sales of indigenous foods and last-mile delivery of fresh produce to community members in San Juan and McKinley Counties.
- **Delta Fresh Foods Initiative**, a grassroots organization located in the **Mississippi Delta** and anchored within food justice, will provide youth with nutrition education and culturally appropriate foods through their demonstration farm and kitchen, and a healthcare partnership.
- In partnership with DoorDash, **Mountaineer Food Bank** in **West Virginia** will be among pioneers of home deliveries through ride-share services to children and families in areas with less access to healthy foods in Mercer County.
- **San Diego Hunger Coalition** will equip local partners and residents in **California's Mountain Empire region** with the Hunger Free Navigator™ training to increase access to food assistance resources.
- In partnership with the local health coalition, **Southern Carolina Housing**, a public housing authority in **North Carolina**, plans to bring a mobile market to its public housing communities in Robeson County, where traditional grocery stores may be hard to reach. The mobile market will sell healthy foods alongside providing healthy recipe cards, nutritious meal kits, cooking demos, and taste tests.

Thought Leadership

Save the Children partners with national hunger relief organizations and other entities interested in food security on summits, webinars, and similar events to provide thought leadership and create opportunities to exchange ideas within the field. In 2022, Save the Children co-hosted the [Rural Child Hunger Summit](#) with **Share Our Strength** in April, which focused on the disparities driving child hunger in rural communities. The two-day virtual summit brought speakers from Save the Children and our school and community partners, as well as other community organizations, to share and celebrate innovations that are community-based, user-centered, and evidence-informed and identify promising practices and policies that amplify the impact of existing nutrition assistance programs or reduce the incidence of rural child hunger. **Keynote speakers included Secretary of Agriculture Tom Vilsack and Secretary of Education Miguel Cardona.** Summit registrants included 990 participants from 49 states.

Save the Children also supported Concordia's 2022 [Lexington Summit](#) by helping plan and moderate a post-Summit roundtable: *Tackling Child Hunger in Rural America*. Roundtable participants included Dr. Ryan Quarles, KY State Agriculture Commissioner; Dr. Jim Ziliak, Director of the Center for Poverty Research, The University of Kentucky; Erin Grant, Corporate Affairs Manager, Kroger; and Mark Broadhurst, Vice President, Impact & Advocacy, Chobani.

Another national conference supported by our staff included Baylor University's [Together at the Table: Hunger and Poverty Summit 2023](#). We led a breakout session titled "Fueling Innovation to Combat Rural Child Hunger," which addressed the unique barriers and opportunities faced by rural communities to consistently access nutritious food. The session served as an introduction to the [Rural Child Hunger Research and Innovation Lab](#) and highlighted our journey of gathering community insights to design a grantee experience that is trust-based and conducive to innovation, with the vision to bring about widespread impact on rural child food security.

Looking Ahead

Children in rural communities across the country continue to struggle from inconsistent access to the food they need to learn, succeed, and thrive. In 2022, Save the Children deepened our commitment to developing and implementing best practices and new solutions to rural child hunger. As part of this commitment, we expanded our food security team to include state-based food security experts to provide additional support to community partners, increasing our training and technical assistance capacity.

We are excited to continue supporting the development, implementation, and scaling of community-developed solutions to rural child hunger in 2023. The Rural Child Hunger Research and Innovation Lab is a momentous opportunity to catalyze community innovations, and this year will bring together the first cohort of the Lab to allow us, in partnership with Baylor University, to invest in capacity strengthening opportunities in fresh, new ways and build a community of practice.

Driven by our theory of change, Save the Children understands what it takes to make meaningful and lasting change – listening and learning from the rural communities tackling child hunger, investing in locally driven and sustainable solutions, and fueling innovation and equitable access to food across rural America.. We have much work still to do to end child hunger in rural America and remain committed, now more than ever, to breaking down the barriers that stand between rural children and a bright future.