

Centralizing Food Access and Primary Healthcare Services For Strengthened Community Well-being

BOONE, NORTH CAROLINA





The Food is Medicine program is a cross-sector collaboration anchored by The Hunger and Health Coalition in Boone, North Carolina.

The program began as a food pantry and has evolved into a comprehensive food and health access collaborative, improving community members' access to healthy, fresh, locally-sourced food and primary healthcare services in one centralized location. With support from The BUILD Health Challenge®, the collaborative expanded its capacity to connect with residents, streamlined access to integral health services for residents, and worked together to provide emergency relief following the devastation of Hurricane Helene in 2024.

COMMUNITY IMPACT



Developed a new model for rural health by integrating access to healthy, locally-sourced food and primary healthcare services in one centralized location in response to community needs.



Pivoted operations to jointly provide emergency relief services in the aftermath of Hurricane Helene.



Solidified cross-sector partnerships to address upstream determinants of health, such as food access, and improve community well-being in the long-term.

IN PARTNERSHIP WITH





A Region of Neighbors Helping Neighbors

Situated within the majestic Blue Ridge Mountains, the town of Boone, North Carolina, is a place of awe-inspiring natural beauty. Boone residents describe it as “grounding” and say you can actually feel the history and spirit of the Appalachian Mountains.

Boone has long had a culture of neighbors looking out for one another, stemming from its complex past as a geographically isolated region. The community has not always been receptive to outside help, particularly from the government, so they look to each other for support.

“So neighbor helping neighbor — it’s just second nature for our community,” shared Maura McClain, Director of Strategic Initiatives at The Hunger & Health Coalition (HHC).

McClain explained that the community coming together to support one another was especially evident during the aftermath of Hurricane Helene, a Category 4 storm that caused significant flooding in Boone and damaged infrastructure in 2024. McClain said, “I cannot tell you how much support there was from people. Our whole staff showed up the very next day, unshowered and just there to work. That’s how everyone in the community is — if you need something, even if I don’t have anything else, you’re getting the shirt off my back.”



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— MAURA MCCLAIN

The Hunger & Health Coalition

Inequitable Food Systems Led to an Alarming Increase in Diet-Linked Disease

Boone has undergone major changes over the last few decades with the onset of tourism to the region. The local food system was hit hard and replaced with chain restaurants; residents' diets went from being produce- and bean-heavy with less red meat and saturated fats to diets mostly consisting of fast food and ultra-processed foods. The rural area became a food desert with limited access to fresh foods or produce from local farmers.



This has resulted in Boone residents, particularly lower-income residents, making more frequent trips to the emergency room for diet-linked reasons. A lack of access to healthy food has taken its toll on community members' long-term health.

McClain, who is also a registered dietitian, recalled one of the first residents she met with when she joined HHC: a single mother in intensive care for ketoacidosis from uncontrolled type 2 diabetes. McClain learned that this mother couldn't afford her medications or healthy food for herself because she was prioritizing her resources to meet her young daughter's needs, with almost nothing left over.

"I was seeing firsthand the backend of what's happening with chronic disease and diet-linked diseases, and I knew I wanted to do something in prevention," McClain said.

Growing Access to Healthy Foods Through Cross-Sector Collaboration

HHC began its Food is Medicine program in 2014 with support from the local hospital system, UNC Health Appalachian, and Appalachian State University.

The program started as a food pantry and has evolved into a comprehensive, cross-sector collaborative focused on strengthening food and health access. The collaborative works to reduce the onset of diet-linked diseases, such as type 2 diabetes, hypertension, and heart disease, in the community through access to healthy, fresh, locally-sourced food and primary healthcare services — all under one roof.

Key members of the collaborative also include the Blue Cross Blue Shield of North Carolina Foundation (Blue Cross NC Foundation) and AppHealthCare, the local public health department. These long-standing partnerships were integral in shaping the community-centered Food is Medicine effort. An award from The BUILD Health Challenge® (BUILD) in 2023 afforded the collaborative the opportunity to expand the Food is Medicine initiative to reach more residents.



Unexpected Transitions and a Pivot to Emergency Relief After Hurricane Helene

The collaborative in Boone has navigated challenges, unexpected transitions, and necessary pivots. When HHC first applied for the BUILD award, it planned to open up a wellness center with a gym and community computer lab. Shortly after the application process, HHC tragically lost its executive director — who had been a driving force for the Food is Medicine program — to brain cancer. In addition, the project faced delays at the county level in acquiring the building for the wellness center. As conversations with residents surfaced other, more pressing community needs, the collaborative decided to move away from their initial plans.

It was around this time that Hurricane Helene hit Boone, causing widespread devastation. Members of the collaborative knew that the local government would be overwhelmed with responding. HHC pivoted its day-to-day operations to providing emergency relief, opening its doors to impacted community members immediately after the hurricane.

HHC set up a triage center and sent out mobile volunteers to deliver healthy food to people trapped in their homes following the storm. “Our food drivers turned into hub distributors,” McClain said. “We started driving out to rural fire departments and schools and seeing what they needed, and seeing if they had too much of an item, we’d bring it back, and distribute it somewhere else.”

HHC’s pharmacist dispensed emergency medications, and its registered dietitian dispensed oral nutrition supplements to people working to clean up their homes, ensuring they had proper nutrition and hydration. It was a large-scale effort that would not have been possible without community engagement and trust.

Expanding Beyond Food Access for “Full-Person Support”

With its healthy food boxes filled with produce from local farmers, HHC made it easier for people to access foods that were good for them and helped boost the local economy.

Not long after Hurricane Helene, HHC joined forces with the free Community Care Clinic in their building to provide accessible primary healthcare services. This integration created a new model for rural health in the High Country region by enabling the collaborative to treat food as an integral piece of health, treating the whole person rather than offering services in silos. It also established better avenues for data collection and outcomes collection.

“If someone comes to the clinic and they’re newly diagnosed with type 2 diabetes, on the spot, they’re getting a primary care clinician, they’re getting lab work, they’re able to talk to our dietician on the way out and get a freshly made, medically-tailored [food] box to meet their needs,” McClain said. “We wanted to reduce the silos of having those individual programs so that people get full-person support.”

Partners reflected on how HHC’s early BUILD project efforts have evolved in response to community needs. Karina Romero, Health Promotion Program Manager at AppHealthCare, shared, “We’re inspired to see how the [collaborative’s] foundation has grown into something truly transformative with [HHC] fully embracing the ‘health’ in

their name and incorporating the Community Care Clinic. The organization has expanded its impact far beyond food access to address the broader needs that shape community well-being.”

As the collaborative progressed and demonstrated tangible health impacts, HHC also secured an additional \$450,000 in funding from the Blue Cross NC Foundation to continue its Food is Medicine initiative.

Merry Davis, Director of Health through Food at Blue Cross NC Foundation, shared, “The Hunger and Health Coalition had a vision for Food is Medicine grounded in a deep love and commitment to their community, and [BUILD] helped them think big and make that vision a reality. Blue Cross NC Foundation is a proud funding partner.”

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— **MERRY DAVIS**

Blue Cross Blue Shield of North
Carolina Foundation



Comprehensive Health Services Driven by Strong Partnerships

Over the last three years, HHC's capacity and operations have been transformed, as the organization has gone from being almost completely volunteer-run to now being a full-time staff of 30 operating Monday through Friday.



In addition, partners increased their investment in the Food is Medicine concept, which has garnered increasing support and energy in the community. The result of this enhanced capacity and partnership investment has led HHC to reduce the burden on community members — who previously had to fill out multiple applications in multiple places — by streamlining and centralizing resources, which makes them more accessible.

“From where we were to now — after going through the BUILD work — it’s easy for people to come and get help,” McClain said. “It’s easy to see a clinician, get lab work, and access a pharmacy and healthy food. People are not even having to think about the food they’re eating — they’re learning and growing, and it feels caring and loving, and it’s just easy for them.”

Members of the collaborative agreed that the success achieved so far through the Food is Medicine work would not have been possible without one another, and they have paved the path forward for them to continue working together.

“Even as we navigated shifts and delays at the county level, we remained committed to rolling with the changes and focusing on achievable progress,” Romero said. “This work reflects what is possible when strong partnerships stay grounded in practical solutions that meet real community needs.”



The BUILD Health Challenge® (BUILD) invests in multi-sector, community-centered partnerships that transform systems and elevate community power to advance health and racial justice.

Through learning, connecting, and amplifying these local initiatives, BUILD champions the national movement for health equity and moves attention, resources, and action upstream to support vital community conditions for health and well-being across the United States.

The BUILD Model for Transforming Community Health



Bold

Drive fundamental shifts in policy and sustainability, creating systems-level changes through a lens of justice, equity, diversity, and inclusivity.



Upstream

Focus on the social, environmental, and economic factors that have the greatest influence on the health of a community, rather than on access or care delivery.



Integrated

Align the practices and perspectives of cross-sector partners under a shared vision, establishing new roles while continuing to draw upon the strengths of each partner.



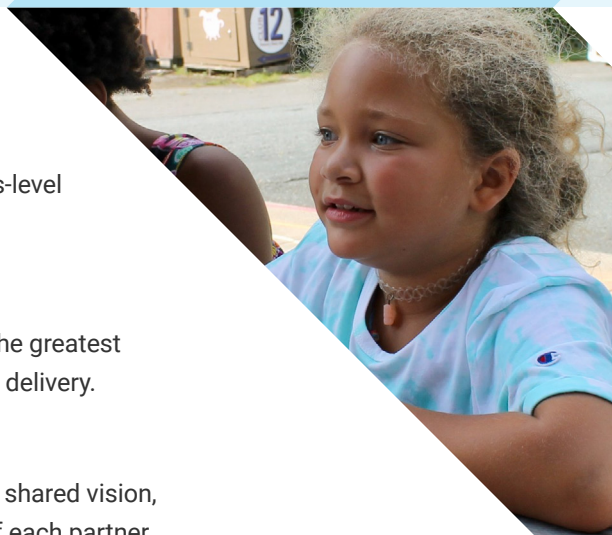
Local

Prioritize the diverse lived experiences, voices, and leadership of neighborhood residents and community members throughout all stages of planning, implementation, and evaluation.



Data-Driven

Use varied forms of data from both clinical and community sources as tools to identify key needs, measure meaningful change, and facilitate transparency amongst stakeholders in order to generate actionable insights.



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