



From gardens to pantries: UGA is addressing food insecurity in Clarke County

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AmeriCorps VISTA Katie Stanhope stocks peanut butter at Hilsman Middle School. (Photography by Shannah Montgomery/PSO)

Two Clarke County middle schools have created food pantries to address food insecurity in the Athens community, with assistance from AmeriCorps VISTAs at UGA.

At Hilsman Middle School, where VISTA (Volunteers in Service to America) Katie Stanhope is assigned to work with the campus garden program, the idea for the pantry was suggested by Principal Utevia Tolbert. During the 2018-19 academic year, Hilsman operated out of a temporary facility while its new building was under construction. As a result, the school was limited to just a pair of raised garden beds, not enough to create a full garden of produce to send home with students.

“We wanted to increase access to fresh produce, but also make sure that kids are getting fed, that parents have food in their pantry,” Stanhope said. “Whether that’s lettuce or crackers or a can of soup, we’re able to support our students and our parents so that kids can focus and be fed and learn and be their best selves.”

As in all Clarke County schools, Hilsman students receive free breakfast and lunch at school each day, thanks to a provision from the U.S. Department of Agriculture. But the fight against food insecurity often stretches beyond school-time meals, following the students to their homes.

Forty-nine children at Hilsman were identified as homeless this year, while 21 other students have been receiving weekly food bags through the Food Bank of Northeast Georgia's Food2Kids Program — the maximum number allowed. Additionally, many other Hilsman families do not have the reliable transportation necessary to access the food bank, which is approximately 10 miles from their homes.

Using grants from grocery stores, donations, and cash raised by selling fresh produce provided by UGArden, the student-run garden on South Milledge Avenue, Stanhope spent the beginning of the year slowly stocking the pantry, now housed in a trailer. The pantry is available to students and families in the Hilsman community and is open after school and on some weekends.

At Coile Middle School, VISTA Mackenzie Stewart spent the fall and winter clearing a space and gathering supplies for a similar project.

Coile's food pantry is specifically created for students who are on the waiting list for the Food2Kids Program, which can only serve 15 at that school. The pantry helps students who would otherwise go hungry, a need that Stewart doesn't see going away.

"I would really like for it to be a permanent part of the school," said Stewart. "With the amount of hungry kids that come to school every day, it's necessary."

Mackenzie Stewart helps tend Coile Middle School's garden.

It's the same at Hilsman.

"They've seen it in their day-to-day lives," Stanhope said. "We want to be as open and accessible to people in the Hillsman community as possible. Those are our values with the food pantry."

Hilsman staff and students will move into a new, permanent home in August. The food pantry will go with them, housed in a building with a proposed school health clinic, creating what Tolbert hopes is a space where the entire community feels welcome.

"We can eat together, we can be together, and then maybe we can rise together," Tolbert said.



Americorps VISTAS are hired through the UGA Office of Service-Learning to address issues surrounding poverty in Athens-Clarke County. VISTAS are assigned to each of the four Clarke County School middle schools to engage students in Grow It Know It (GIKI), a student and teacher driven program to address food insecurity and environmental sustainability through experiential education activities, cafeteria food waste reduction programs and school gardens. GIKI was established by the UGA Office of Service-Learning, UGA Cooperative Extension, UGArden and the Clarke County School District. Other VISTAS are assigned to the UGArden, Campus Kitchen, the Athens-Clarke County Library and the Athens Community Council on Aging.

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