



Full Plate PRESS

THE NEWSLETTER OF
**FEEDING
AMERICA**
West Michigan

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Many more neighbors are facing hunger because of the pandemic. Help fill their plates by getting involved with Feeding America West Michigan.



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ABOUT US

Serving local families in need since 1981, Feeding America West Michigan reclaims millions of meals' worth of safe, surplus food from various sources. With the help of countless volunteers, the food bank sorts, stores and distributes this food through a network of more than 800 partners to fill hundreds of thousands of neighbors' plates instead of landfills. The food bank's service area consists of 40 of Michigan's 83 counties from the Indiana border north through the Upper Peninsula.

Feeding America West Michigan is a member of Feeding America, The United Way and The Food Bank Council of Michigan. The food bank also maintains a 4-star rating from Charity Navigator.



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"My husband was laid off for four months. We're just trying to play catch-up from that."
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*“Some of my favorite things to get here are fruit and vegetables.”
— Maria*

Points become produce at Community Food Club in Grand Rapids

Maria, a high school junior, loves cruising around on her skateboard, tutoring her siblings and studying science and math. She also loves volunteering at the Community Food Club each week, where you’ll find her behind the cash register helping neighbors check out through the Food Club’s points system.

“I really enjoy it. I get to interact with a lot of people,” she said.

Unlike traditional food pantries, customers pay the Food Club a membership fee each month. Ranging between \$11 and \$15, this fee goes toward staffing, classes and other programs run by the Food Club. Through their membership, customers are able to “purchase” foods using points. Points are allotted based on various factors like income and household size.

Maria first learned about the Food Club when her family became members there. Each month, the

family of eight receives 170 points. Neighbors like them can shop as they would at a traditional grocery store up to once per day — another departure from the traditional food pantry model. But unlike at a traditional grocery store, nutritious options are more accessible than less-healthy foods. This is because foods like fresh fruits and vegetables are assigned a lower point value to promote healthy eating.

“I usually come with my mom and dad or my older siblings. It’s really convenient for us,” Maria said. “Some of my favorite things to get here are fruit and vegetables.”

Maria started volunteering to fulfill requirements at school, but she loved it so much she kept coming.

“She is friendly, warm and very respectful of our members,” said AJ, the Food Club’s director. “She provides excellent customer service and treats everyone with respect.”



Six years ago, the Community Food Club formed under the direction of seven Grand Rapids nonprofits, including Feeding America West Michigan. Inspired by Costco’s membership model, the Food Club provides a dignified approach to hunger relief.

Today, Feeding America West Michigan stocks 60 percent of the Food Club’s shelves — 400,000 pounds in 2020 — which helps make their model possible.

“There’s no way we could’ve ever opened our doors without the help of the food bank,” AJ said.

Although the membership fee doesn’t directly go to food, AJ regularly sees the dignity people feel when they’re able to purchase their own groceries. She used to run a traditional pantry, but the way neighbors interact with her at the Food Club feels different.

“They look me in the eye more. They talk more. We share life more,” she said.

Members are just as much a part of making the Food Club possible as donors and staff. Knowing their money is helping the program run, they freely offer input, which AJ believes holds staff to a higher standard.

“Everyone is entitled to a customer experience that is dignified and joyful,” she said.

Providing easy access to fresh produce and other



nutritious foods is an integral part of the Food Club’s mission. Someone who is food insecure is unable to access or afford enough healthy food. As a result, they might need to purchase a highly processed meal instead of a nutritious one for their family. Not eating enough fresh, healthy foods has numerous side effects, including increased risk of disease, poor performance in school and high health care costs for the community.

At the Food Club, fresh foods are the most accessible and are the first thing you see when you walk through the door. This model is helping dispel myths about how low-income families eat.

“A lot of people think, ‘oh, low income people don’t want to eat healthy or they don’t know how,’” said AJ. “That’s not really true. It always comes down to access. A lot of our folks just need a place to get their apples and bananas and oranges.”

After six months of being Food Club members, 94 percent are eating more healthy and fresh food. Another benefit: A third of members no longer need to visit traditional hunger-relief programs after becoming Food Club members.

The Food Club’s model is not the “be all, end all” to food assistance, but it fills a gap for people who simply need a more economical way to access fresh options. Feeding America West Michigan is proud to partner alongside this forward-thinking organization, another piece to the puzzle of hunger relief in our 40-county service area. 🍌

School employees take on child hunger

Public schools offer free or reduced price meals during the school day to kids who qualify, but it's not always enough. Many of these kids come home to empty cupboards in the evenings and on weekends. And, some kids don't qualify but still struggle to get enough to eat.

Hunger warriors like Cheyenne, Sara and Pablo, community school coordinators at Grand Rapids Public Schools, do all they can to ensure their students have access to enough nutritious food to thrive. Each of their schools hosts recurring Mobile Food Pantries, which provide plenty of fresh food like dairy and produce to families in need. The schools also team up with our agency partners that run backpack programs, which provide evening or weekend meals.

We interviewed them about their efforts to fight child hunger. Read their answers to the right.



What ways does your school ensure kids have enough to eat?

Sara: We offer Kids' Food Basket sack suppers at the end of the day to students that opt-in for that service. We offer one Mobile Food Pantry a month for families to receive food if they are in need.

Pablo: Our cafeteria staff works diligently to ensure all students have what they need in food and balance on healthy choices. While showing students that the occasional chicken nuggets are okay, balance is everything with our students.

What has stuck out to you during your time serving at Mobile Food Pantries and in other hunger-relief efforts at your school?

Sara: I sometimes am surprised by who comes from the community to the Mobile Pantries. Sometimes I see families that I would not have guessed would have that need, but regardless they make the time to come.

Cheyenne: Sometimes we see kids come in late that head straight to class. The same kid begins to have behavior issues later in the day. Most times it's because the kid came in hungry and they needed food! It's such a simple thing but it makes such a big difference.

When did you realize hunger was an issue in our community?

Sara: When I was a volunteer coach for an elementary running program, I would run with students and sometimes they would complain about being hungry, or tell me about how they would go home and have nothing to eat after practice.

Cheyenne: When I started working as a MI Bridges Navigator in 2018, I helped many families gain access to food stamps [now called the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program]. I was very surprised to learn how little some families are earning and how that is affecting their food situation.



Emily and her family, including daughters Lili and Lorena, appreciate the groceries they receive at Mobile Pantries.

How one Grand Rapids family puts food on the table during challenging times

On a cold day in February, Sibley Elementary School staff loaded fresh produce, protein and dairy into neighbors' cars. Among those in line was Emily, a mom to five: a 15-year-old, twin 10-year-olds and twin 3-year-olds.

"They eat a lot — especially the older ones!" she said.

Emily doesn't always need food assistance, but since the beginning of the pandemic, she's attended Mobile Pantries more regularly.

"Money has been tight. It had always been tight before, and then my husband was laid off for four months," she said. "We're just trying to play catch-up from that. This is one way we can save money for other things."

Over the past few years, a lot has changed for the family financially. Like many parents, Emily quit her job after her youngest twins were born three years ago. This choice saved on daycare costs, but left the family with just one full-time income. On top of that, the family has been paying off medical bills.

Mobile Pantries provide a quick way for Emily and her family to access supplemental groceries.

"I know I can always depend on it. I don't have to worry about not having something. It's kind of like a sense of security," she said. "I still have to buy groceries, but this helps."

Anyone can find themselves in need of food assistance. Emily's family is not alone. Many more families are facing hunger since the pandemic began, but their neighbors may not notice their need. They like taking walks, going to the park and playing board games, just like any other family with young children.

Lili, 15, likes basketball, music and wants to be a traveling NICU nurse when she grows up. Lorena, 10, loves researching animals and hopes to work with them one day. She really likes her mom's Alfredo.

"There's nothing wrong with accepting help, because someday you might be offering the help," Emily said. "I've been on both sides. There's been times when I've been able to help people in different ways." 🍌



“As a driver, you’re meeting really cool people who need a hand.” — Jerry

Meet a Food Banker: Jerry

What do you do at the food bank?

I’m a truck driver. I drive depot deliveries [which means dropping off food at centralized locations for agency pickup] and Mobile Pantries for the Upper Peninsula. I’m up there usually two or three nights a week.

How did you end up in your current role?

I’ve always been good with vehicles. My dad had all these tractors when I was a kid and I was always tinkering with them. I got my own tractor when I was 12. It needed some engine work and I put her back together. I was a truck driver for a company and I was working nights. It was good pay but long hours. I saw a food bank truck and went in to apply. At the time they were set on drivers but nine months later I got a call and started almost five years ago.

What is a memory that stands out to you?

At these Mobile Pantries I’ve had seniors come up to me and cry and hug me and say if it wasn’t for you, I wouldn’t eat today.

What’s your favorite part of your job?

I’ve been going to the U.P. for three years. I see the same volunteers and coordinators and they’re just great. They’re my friends. There is a lady who runs a pantry in Kincheloe who has five little daughters and a little boy. Now my wife knows them and we’ve stopped to see them in the U.P. We’ve camped with them and they came over. Her kids have to come to the food pantry when I’m there. They bring me homemade cards! I’ve been bringing them some presents, too.

Why do you fight hunger?

I like it here. I help people and meet really good people. I’ve always been a “pull for the underdog” kind of guy. The people at the Mobile Pantries who are regulars, you get to know them. As a driver, you’re meeting really cool people who need a hand.

What do you like doing in your free time?

I work on my own vehicles. I’ve got 10 - 20 old tractors. I’ve got a 1923 steam engine. It has a hole in the boiler and I don’t know how to fix it. I try to do all my own work on the house. I like helping people — I sometimes plow our neighbors’ driveways.

2021 marks the food bank’s 40th year nourishing neighbors in 40 counties

We’re featuring 40 people on our website (FeedWM.org) and on social media (@FeedingWestMich) who have made a difference in the last 40 years. Below, meet John and Lynn, and see how they helped.

For most of their lives, John and Lynn had stable jobs. Then, a battle with cancer put Lynn out of work. Around the same time, the couple’s insurance was cut off.

“Suddenly, there wasn’t enough money,” Lynn recalled.

To help make ends meet, they started visiting The Green Apple Pantry, one of Feeding America West Michigan’s partners that serves their community. There, they filled their carts and cupboards with plenty of canned goods, fresh bread, produce and more.

Even though they received help themselves, John and Lynn often volunteered as well.

“I always believe in giving back,” Lynn said.

Five years after Lynn’s battle with cancer, the couple are both retired and receiving social security income. A few months ago, their mortgage was finally paid off, too, thanks in part to help from another local organization. Soon after, John took another trip to The Green Apple Pantry.

“John came in and said, ‘I have something for you,’ and handed me a \$100 bill,” said Nancy, the



pantry’s director.

Today, the couple often looks after their four grandchildren — a lot of mouths to feed — and may find themselves using the pantry again. But no matter their circumstances, they are always looking for ways to give back.

Caring neighbors like John and Lynn make hunger relief possible in our service area. Their efforts ensure that the food we distribute to our partners each year ends up in the hands of our neighbors who need it most. 🍌

Visit FeedWM.org/40-years to meet more neighbors featured in our 40 Years 40 Faces series and see more historical photos like the ones featured below!

