



# Full Plate PRESS

THE NEWSLETTER OF  
**FEEDING  
AMERICA**  
West Michigan

## Take Action

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



**DONATE:**  
**\$10 = 40 MEALS**



**VOLUNTEER:**  
In one hour, you can help us  
distribute up to 200 meals.



**ADVOCATE:**  
Have a way with words?  
Help spread our mission  
by letting people in your  
community know about  
our services.



**FUNDRAISE:**  
Your creative spirit can put  
meals on neighbors' plates.  
Click on the fundraise button  
at the top of our website to  
get started!

FBI-FWM-20070



## Connect with us



@feedingwestmich

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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.



**FEEDING  
AMERICA**  
West Michigan  
864 West River Center Drive NE  
Comstock Park, MI 49321  
Learn more at [FeedWM.org](http://FeedWM.org)  
Call us at 616.784.3250

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Cover photo by David Chandler





*“My favorite part is just being able to be part of the community and actually having somewhere I can put my talents to use.”*  
— Stacey

## Empowerment Network serves Fremont neighbors facing mental illness

Located in a small storefront in quaint downtown Fremont, the Empowerment Network invites anyone facing mental illness to visit on their journey toward self-acceptance and sufficiency.

Six days a week, you’ll find neighbors (known as members) gathering to socialize with others who face similar challenges. At the Empowerment Network, they can attend nutrition classes, access laundry machines and get connected to housing and financial resources. Additionally, the nonprofit has a few small closets, freezers and refrigerators stocked with food sourced from Feeding America West Michigan and available to members as needed.

“It’s an amazing program,” said Stacey, an Empowerment Network member of 10 years. “We usually have a puzzle or a movie going. We have crafts, a computer. You can sit and do nothing or sit and socialize. It’s a good way to get out of the house.”

Recently, Stacey became the nonprofit’s tech

intern, joining a staff of seven and an intern team of five. She helps with anything that needs a computer, such as posting on social media or writing grants.

“My favorite part is just being able to be part of the community and actually having somewhere I can put my talents to use,” she said. “Part of my mental illness is self-confidence. The Empowerment Network definitely helps.”

### Filling grocery bags with help from the food bank

Although the Empowerment Network stores a variety of food, unlike a traditional pantry, members don’t “shop” through all its shelves — the building is not set up for that. Instead, two shelves located in the nonprofit’s community room are stocked and restocked with the most needed items. Members are encouraged to choose from the shelves at each visit. But if they need additional help with groceries, they are welcome to ask.

“If I needed anything, I would be able to come

here on one of my work days and get a bag of cheese or a brick of butter when I need it,” Stacey explained.

Before the pandemic, the Empowerment Network provided a meal’s worth of food to members five days a week. Prior to their partnership with the food bank, which began around 15 years ago, they provided just one meal each week.

A barrier to food access for many of the Empowerment Network’s members is a lack of transportation to grocery stores. That’s why many who visit live within walking distance or are driven by the nonprofit’s staff.

During the height of the pandemic, when even transportation nonprofits shut down, many members were isolated with no way to access food. In response, the Empowerment Network delivered bags full of two weeks’ worth of food twice a month. They continue to deliver small bags of staples to their members in need each week. “Because we had the food bank, we were able to be helpful,” recalled Gabrielle, the Empowerment Network’s director.

### Members find confidence to be themselves

Called the “Empowerment” Network for a reason, the nonprofit aims to strengthen members’ skill sets and confidence so that they can help themselves. This philosophy informed their decision to allow clients to choose what they need when it comes to food, although the pandemic grocery deliveries had to be standardized.



“We offer them help, but not in a way that feels like a handout,” Gabrielle said. “We have food that’s just available so they don’t have to ask for it.”

The internship program is a big part of the Empowerment Network’s model. Members with internships receive stipends each month, which helps add a little extra on top of the social security or disability income most receive.

Many members say they are different people because of their time spent at the Empowerment Network.

“I’ve become so close to everybody,” Stacey said. “They’re all like family to me. Empowerment has definitely helped me.”

Her proudest accomplishment so far in her internship was writing — and ultimately being awarded — a grant in time to meet a sudden deadline.

### Serving from the heart

Gabrielle has served as the Empowerment Network’s director for 20 years and has done a lot to change the Empowerment Network for the better.

In its early days, they just offered members a cup of coffee and the newspaper. Now, they offer a wide range of resources.

“I think part of it is because we learned what they needed,” she said. “We want to make them feel comfortable in the community.” 🍌





# Stories from across our 40-county service area

## Determined mom ensures kids have full plates

April’s days are filled with tasks any stay-at-home parent with three kids would recognize — driving to school and sports practices, cooking meals and doing all the little things that ensure her whole family has what they need to thrive.

Living in a one-income household (her husband is a mechanic), April is skilled at making the most of what her family has and finding additional ways to make ends meet — like going to discount stores, raising chickens for eggs and taking her family on fishing trips. She also visits a local food pantry and attends monthly Feeding America West Michigan Mobile Food Pantries held at her son’s school.

“I’m thankful for anything we can get,” April said. “You always have some nice stuff.”

## Three generations of hunger warriors serve neighbors

DeeDee was taught by her mom, Estela, to always help her neighbors. She’s passed this message on to her own daughters, including 16-year-old Maria. Today, the three women volunteer together at the food pantry Estela directs and at Mobile Pantries.

For DeeDee, serving is a way to give back. A few years ago, her husband was in a really bad accident that put her own family in need.

“Our community came together, paid our rent, brought us groceries, let us use a car,” she recalled. “I want people to feel the way we felt when our community came together with us. Everyone needs help at some point in their life, and that’s what we’re here for.”

## Out of prison and into a new life

Growing up, Daniel and his siblings often went to bed hungry. He would walk to school searching for half-eaten apples on the ground to eat for breakfast. As he grew older, he turned to crime. He started out stealing food, but he eventually ended up in prison.

When he got out of prison, he didn’t have any job opportunities, he shared.

Today, Daniel does what he can to help others — like shoveling driveways, raking leaves or mowing lawns for elderly neighbors who, like him, live on fixed incomes.

When he was young, he felt “too prideful” to ask for help — one of the reasons he turned to stealing instead. Now, he both gives and receives help. He attends Mobile Pantries when he needs to and loves cooking with the fresh produce, dairy and other food he gets.

“The food you get is very wholesome,” he said.



# A donor for 15 years, Karen’s heart is in the U.P.

**K**aren Kamerschen was born in Laurium, a small town in the Upper Peninsula, but moved south with her family a year later. Her life as a student, psychologist and now a retiree has taken her from Michigan State University to Texas and back to Michigan’s Lower Peninsula, but her love for the U.P. remains. As often as she can, she vacations there.

“When I cross the bridge, my heart rate drops,” she said. “It’s incredibly beautiful. I love it. Nature at its best.”

For the last 15 years, Karen has been one of our most dedicated supporters — giving enough to provide nearly 260,000 meals to neighbors in need across our service area. Over the last few years, she’s designated her donations to the U.P.

“I have strong feelings about people having enough food to eat,” she said. “I’ve been blessed and I really feel a commitment to sharing my blessings with others who have not been as blessed. Food is pretty basic. People need to eat.”

After getting three degrees from MSU, Karen moved to Austin, Texas to pursue her career. Eventually, she set up a private psychology practice in Houston. There, she met her husband, Robert Pearson MD, a psychiatrist who joined her practice. They lived in Houston for many years before moving back to Michigan two decades ago.

“My husband was alive then and we wanted to donate somewhere that was well run. The food bank has an excellent reputation,” she said.

Karen volunteers in the community as well, including at her parish’s school, helping kids with math and reading, but, she shared, “At 77, donating is easier than volunteering!”



Support from donors like Karen is essential to the food bank’s mission. She’s helping ensure we can continue to bring Mobile Food Pantries — stocked with plenty of fresh produce and other food — to high-need communities in the U.P.

“We’re all in this together,” she said. “We’re supposed to treat others as we’d want to be treated. If I was hungry, I’d want them to help me. Whatever your skills and talents and blessings are I think they should be shared.”



Read more stories of hunger heroes on our website.  
Visit [FeedWM.org/40-years](https://FeedWM.org/40-years) and click 40 Years 40 Faces!