

Winter 2017

THE NEWSLETTER OF  
**FEEDING AMERICA**<sup>®</sup>  
West Michigan

# Full Plate PRESS



## IN THIS ISSUE



NEW MILESTONE IN HEALTHY FOOD ..... 2



JOBSTART ADDRESSES HUNGER, PROMOTES EMPLOYMENT ..... 3



HIGH SCHOOLERS BRAVE WEATHER TO SERVE FAMILIES ..... 5



FOOD INSECURITY INSPIRES STUDENT TO HELP OTHERS ..... 4



## Food Bank Reaches New Milestone in Healthy Food

“Fulfilling our mission means caring for the health of our clients,” said CEO Ken Estelle. “It’s not just about calories anymore. It’s about nutrition.”

For Feeding America West Michigan, 2016 was a banner year. We distributed 28.9 million pounds of food, the equivalent of 24 million meals, making it our fourth record year in a row. But the number we’re really proud of isn’t poundage. It’s a percentage.

Last year fresh fruits and vegetables made up 35 percent of all the food we distributed. Factor in canned and frozen produce, and fruits and vegetables exceeded 40 percent. On top of that, we distributed millions of pounds of dairy, lean protein and whole grains.

“Fulfilling our mission means caring for the health of our clients,” said CEO Ken Estelle. “It’s not just about calories. It’s about nutrition.”

This shift is happening across the hunger-relief community. The national Feeding America network is pushing member food banks to distribute prioritize healthy food. Food bankers and medical professionals are discussing health policy at national conferences. Organizations like Wholesome Wave and Spectrum Health are encouraging doctors to issue fruit and vegetable “prescriptions” to their patients, along with vouchers to purchase them.

It’s happening at the local level too. Our partners at Access of West Michigan are helping Kent County food pantries understand the key role they play in promoting client health. As co-executive director Emma Garcia put it, “Food is medicine.”

Access’s Nutritional Options for Wellness Program, developed by Spectrum, provides clients with nutritious

food, education and social support to manage diet-related illnesses like diabetes and hypertension. The results have been impressive.

A 2016 survey found that an overwhelming number of clients linked participation in the NOW Program to health benefits: 92 percent agreed or strongly agreed that they use more healthy ingredients when cooking for family or friends; 88 percent agreed or strongly agreed that their health had improved; and 68 percent agreed or strongly agreed that they had visited the emergency room less often since entering the program.\*

Connie, a client at The Pantry in southeast Grand Rapids, said that her two years in the program helped her lose over 40 pounds.

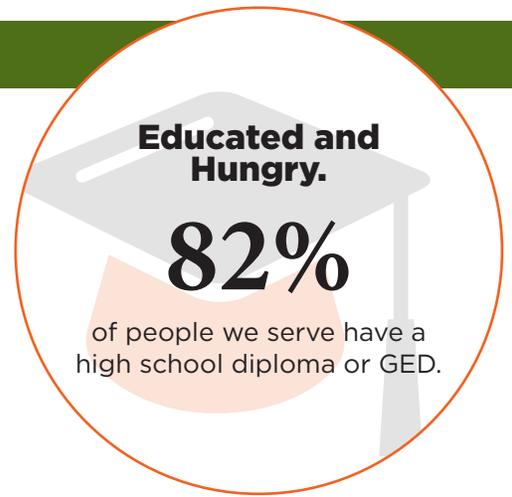
“I’ve been able to get off a lot of my meds,” she said. “It’s big. I’m not sure that would [have] happened without the NOW Program.”

In addition to the NOW Program, Access is creating pop-up farmers markets in high-need neighborhoods, connecting food pantries with local farms and helping clients apply for benefits. It’s all part of an effort to make healthy food more accessible to everyone in our community.

The ultimate goal, Emma said, is not to grow hunger relief charities indefinitely. Rather it’s to create a better food system so that “the healthy choice is the easy choice” for everyone.

Feeding America West Michigan is proud to support Access and all our partner agencies in that effort.

*\*2016 survey of 51 respondents from eight NOW Pantry sites in Kent County, conducted by Access of West Michigan.*



“I know I won’t miss a meal, while I’m here anyway. I feel like that is my security.”

## JobStart Addresses Hunger While Promoting Employment

*Story by Ellie Walburg, communications intern*

The JobStart initiative at Steepletown Neighborhood Services, one of Feeding America West Michigan’s partner agencies in Grand Rapids, is dedicated to helping young men find meaningful employment.

Steepletown understands that in order to meet a person’s long-term needs, you first have to meet their immediate needs.

“We would have people coming to work without eating all day,” says JobStart coordinator Nathan Beals. “And if you don’t have that nourishment for strength and stamina, you’re not going to be able to think clearly.”

That’s why Steepletown provides an in-house food pantry where participants can get a good meal while learning the skills they need to land and keep a job. With food from Feeding America West Michigan and other sources, they’re able to send participants to work with a full stomach and food to help them make it through the weekend.

The JobStart program has made a big difference for Donovan.

Although he has a lot of family in the area, Donovan lives mostly on his own, struggling with stable employment, finances, and housing.

While Donovan’s been working since age 12, he’s struggled to hold onto a job or advance to higher-paying positions. “I’ve had so many jobs. I never can seem to prosper, so I need a little bit of help,” he says.

Food insecurity has been a barrier for Donovan throughout his life. “I’ve dealt with it,” he says. “But I’d rather go without than ask someone for it.”

But he doesn’t feel that same stigma at Steepletown. “I know I won’t miss a meal, while I’m here anyway. I feel like that is my security, it’s always open. I like that.”

Through JobStart, Donovan found a lawn care job with an average of 20 hours a week at \$10 an hour, providing him experience and steady income. He feels like he’s heading in the right direction. “I’m really trying to pick up my pieces, dust off the dirt and go back with a fresh start.”

Instead of living with the constant stress of day-to-day survival, Donovan is able to look ahead. He hopes to pursue an entrepreneurial degree and has recently become interested in real estate, specifically in helping low-income people find good housing.

“I don’t like to see people homeless, so if I can have the power to change that, I will,” he says.

**“I can turn my darkness into light.”**

# Experience of Food Insecurity Inspires Grand Valley Student to Help Others

“...I know there are families struggling out there,” she says. “Who doesn’t want to be part of helping struggling families?”



## It's late September and Gabby Vernon is standing in a field in Allendale, launching a drone.

The drone lifts off and hovers more than a hundred feet above Ham Family Farm where a dozen volunteers are picking kale and loading it onto a van bound for Feeding America West Michigan.

A senior Film and Video Production major at Grand Valley State University, Gabby led a team of students this fall tasked with creating a video about Feeding America West Michigan's Mobile Food Pantry program. Gabby's video, completed in December, will be used to recruit new Mobile Pantry funders and host sites to bring food to more people in need.



Twelve years ago, Gabby was in a very different place. She was one of those people who needed food.

She and her older sister, Brittany, were being raised by their mom in Troy. Her mom was pregnant with her brother, Nico, and her dad wasn't around that often. It was Christmastime and they didn't have money for food, let alone Christmas gifts.

She remembers how helpless she felt. "I was young. I couldn't do anything, just watch my mom cry."

Her mom reached out to their school, and the school connected her with a food pantry and another service that delivered Christmas gifts to their house. Gabby never forgot that experience.

"That's why I jumped on this project. Because I know there are families struggling out there," she says. "Who doesn't want to be part of helping struggling families?"

Gabby and fellow students Casey Perialas, Shawn Wasser and Sarah Ford filmed a Mobile Pantry at Godfrey Lee High School in Wyoming. They captured footage of students setting up tables, unloading pineapples, onions and cases of yogurt and handing out cookies to kids. Gabby and Casey conducted the interviews.

"I can't normally afford to go out and buy a bag of apples," says Angela McDay, one of the women lined up to receive food. The Mobile Pantry allows her to provide fresh fruit to her kids.

"I could see the passion in her eyes when she was talking," Gabby says. "Just to see that, it reminded me of my mom because that's all she wanted to do, make us happy and get us fed."

Passion is a word Feeding America West Michigan programs administrator Shay Krick uses to describe Gabby. "The thing that I noticed about her immediately is not just how passionate she was about the project, but that she really took the lead."

Shay introduced Gabby to clients and volunteers, and Gabby took it from there.

"Seeing someone driven at such a young age, I was impressed by her. But also by the way she was so warm and friendly and inviting."

With this project behind her, Gabby is one step closer to collecting her diploma in April. After that, she plans to move back to the Detroit area and apply for a marketing internship at Quicken Loans, where four family members, including her mom, now work.

But she tries not to think too far ahead. With 15 credit hours, a job at the Grand Valley bookstore and a leadership role in Rev@Campus, a Christian student organization, Gabby's got plenty to keep her busy — and plenty of ways to keep helping others — right now.

*You can watch the video Gabby and her team created at [FeedWM.org/Mobile](http://FeedWM.org/Mobile).*



*From left to right: Gabby Vernon, Shawn Wasser, Sarah Ford, and Casey Perialas.*

# St. Ignace High Schoolers Brave Wicked Weather to Serve Families

When the wind is howling and the snow is flying in Mackinac County, the last place you want to be is outside.

Yet that's exactly where students from St. Ignace Community Foundation's Youth Advisory Council were on Dec. 14.

The council, made up of 40 students from LaSalle High School, had scheduled a Mobile Food Pantry for that day. The problem: classes were canceled.

The students knew that people in their community were counting on being able to get food that day, so, with the administration's support, they decided to go ahead with the distribution.

The students knew that people in their community were counting on being able to get food that day, so, with the administration's support, they decided to go ahead with the distribution.

"It was wicked," said YAC advisor Kathy Schacht, laughing. "It was so cold and so windy. It was really miserable."

Four of Kathy's YAC council members were able to make it and together with 60 volunteers from local businesses and churches, they brought all the food into the school and packed it into boxes. That way, Schacht explained, they could load it into people's cars without forcing them to wait in the elements.

"I had others who said, 'Miss Schacht, I can't come. My mother won't let me!'" Kathy recalled.

Senior Hannah Eby spent an hour and half loading boxes into cars. Fellow YAC members Lydia Brown, Delayne Bassett and Erika Frazier helped too. By the end of the distribution, the students and volunteers had given food to 182 households from the community.

The St. Ignace YAC's involvement doesn't end with volunteering. They also raise money from local businesses, churches and organizations to fund Mobile Pantries. They sponsored two distributions in 2016 with plans for two more this year.

From Benton Harbor to Greenville to Negaunee, Feeding America West Michigan is honored to have the support of high school students who volunteer, raise money and spread the word about hunger in their local communities. If you want to see the next generation of hunger relief, look no further.



# Food Banker Profile:

## JODI ELLENWOOD, TRUCK DRIVER



**Heat or Eat?**

**72%**

of our clients have to choose between paying for food and paying utility bills.

**Q: How did you first find out about Feeding America West Michigan?**

A: I worked at Forest Hills Foods for 17 years. I needed a part-time job during the day, so I went to the staffing agency. Who knew that it would change my whole life?

**Q: You didn't start out as a truck driver, right?**

A: I started as a picker, and then I went to Rec (Reclamation Department), working with volunteers. I loved it.

**Q: You joined our team of drivers a year ago. How did that come about?**

A: I didn't even know how to drive a stick. I asked to go on a Mobile Pantry because I wanted to see what it was all about. I went with Scott Young out to Grand Haven and just fell in love with it, helping people and giving them food, you know. I wanted to do it full time, so I had to go out and get my CDL.

**Q: What experiences stand out to you?**

A: I did a 20,000-pound Mobile in the UP. There were probably 300 families waiting for food and there was one lady in her car and she was crying. She was just absolutely balling because she was so grateful for our help. That stands out to me a lot.

**Q: Why should people support Feeding America West Michigan?**

A: It's amazing how many people we can help. I didn't realize it was such a need until I started working here.



## Grant Funding Sustains **Hunger Relief at Local Schools**

This fall, Feeding America West Michigan received a \$75,000 grant from the **Morgan Stanley Foundation** to fund healthy food distributions at high-need Grand Rapids schools. Each Mobile Food Pantry provides several days' worth of healthy food to families from the school and surrounding neighborhood.

Many of those schools began working with Feeding America West Michigan during our two-year grant partnership with the Michigan Health Endowment Fund. With their support, we brought Mobile Pantries to 28 schools and senior centers in 11 counties, providing food to thousands of people.

With the Health Endowment's two-year grant period coming to an end, funders like Morgan Stanley are stepping up to continue the partnerships it created. Those funders include Amway, the GM Foundation, the Red Nose Day Fund, and the Allegan County Community Foundation.



**FEEDING AMERICA®**  
**West Michigan**

864 West River Center Drive NE  
Comstock Park, MI 49321  
616.784.3250  
FeedWM.org

Feeding America West Michigan exists to ensure safe food is available to the hungry in our community. By working with nearly 1,100 hunger-relief agencies, we are able to serve an estimated 492,100 people in West Michigan and the Upper Peninsula each year.

Call us at 616.784.3250 or learn more at  
**FeedWM.org.**

Feeding America West Michigan is a member of Feeding America, The United Way, and The Food Bank Council of Michigan.



**FEEDING AMERICA**



**You Can Feed West Michigan**  
To give online please visit us at [FeedWM.org](http://FeedWM.org)

