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The Faces of Food Insecurity



Sarah and Aaron



Guadalupe



Russell



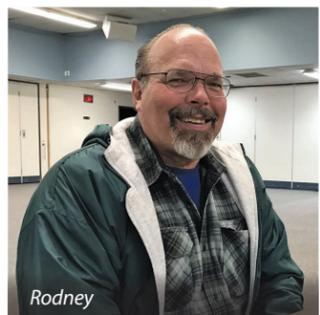
Sarah



Robert and Becky



Sally and Bill



Rodney



Scott



Diana



Thoupo



Don and Rachel's grandkids

Food insecurity is a vicious reality, and no one is immune. This phenomenon is defined as a lack of consistent access to enough food for an active, healthy life. Frequently, society places stereotypes and assumptions on those struggling with food insecurity, but the truth is that this form of hunger is sporadic and anyone can experience an episode of it at some point, or multiple points, in their life.

The root cause of food insecurity is often temporary. One of the reasons that food insecurity is so prevalent in our society is due to the fact that the line item for food in most families' budgets is one of the first things to be sacrificed when financial pressure is applied. Since the majority of living expenses are static, food budgets are one of the most malleable. Few people are food-insecure for the entirety of their lives, but rather fall in and out of it.

According to the United States Department of Agriculture, a total of 11.8 percent of American adults experienced food insecurity at some point in 2017. America's food-insecure population is constantly changing. The faces of food insecurity are very different than the stereotypes that may come to mind. Keep reading to meet some of them, all of whom live in West Michigan or the Upper Peninsula.

FAMILY DYNAMICS

Sarah and Aaron's family belong to the ALICE population, which means that they are "Asset-Limited, Income-Constrained, and Employed." Aaron works hard to support his young daughter and pregnant wife, while Sarah tends to their household. Although they work and earn an income, they need help making ends meet.

Guadalupe has a very large family. Her seven children depend on her to provide for them, but because she fled from domestic abuse, she was forced to do so on her own.

Russell, a father of five, had to find a way to provide for his family after his wife died. His 10-year-old daughter babysits her siblings while he works 40 to 50 hours each week to support them.

After going through a divorce, Sarah's financial situation turned upside down. For the first time, she needed help to fill her four elementary school aged children's bellies. Until coming to a Mobile Food Pantry, Sarah said, "I didn't know how we were going to make it."

DISADVANTAGED COMMUNITY

Robert and Becky's family frequently struggled to put enough food on the table for their five children. With the insufficient infrastructure that frequently exists in rural communities, food is expensive and limited. When Robert faced cancer, the family's already restricted access to food was exacerbated by his reduction in income. Still unable to work due to continuing health complications, Robert and his family's heightened vulnerability to food insecurity persists.

VETERANS

Jon and Elizabeth's story resembles the reality of many veterans. After completing their service, food insecurity entered the couple's life. "No one wants me to work for them with my passing out and my hip. And Jon, no one wants to hire him when there's a loud noise and he's hitting the dirt." According to IMPAQ International, certain subgroups of veteran populations are more susceptible to food insecurity than others. IMPAQ states that 35.2 percent of veterans struggling with a mental illness also struggle with food insecurity. Likewise, those living in poor health were "about three times as likely to be food-insecure."

SENIORS

Sally and Bill's ages make them more vulnerable to food insecurity. Retirement and medical conditions hinder the couple from providing for all of their needs. Like many seniors, Social Security is their sole source of income, and it simply doesn't stretch far enough.

Carol, another Michigan senior, exemplifies how catastrophic events can amplify the already high prevalence of food insecurity in this population. After a life-threatening car crash and the accumulation of insurmountable healthcare expenses, it became difficult for her to make ends meet.

COLLEGE STUDENTS

College is often associated with Ramen, snack machines and junk food. What might not come to mind is that the choice to eat this way is often made out of necessity. Healthy food generally costs more, which is a luxury that many students can't afford. A study conducted by The Hope Center for College found that 36 percent of all college students identify as food-insecure. When community college students were isolated, it rose to 42 percent.

Unfortunately, federal food assistance programs are not designed to serve this demographic — eligibility restrictions frequently hinder students from receiving this form of food support. Many universities are creating on-campus food pantries to offset student hunger.

HEALTH ISSUES

Rodney was born prematurely — at just three pounds — and soon after he was diagnosed with Cerebral Palsy, which affected the mobility in his legs. He worked for many years of his life, but as his disease progressed he became unable to maintain steady employment.

When Scott fell off a ladder, he permanently damaged his spine. Unfortunately he didn't have the financial resources to pay for the surgery necessary to fix it. He has been unable to work since the accident.

FINANCIAL HARDSHIP

Diana packed up everything and drove across the country with her daughters so she could take care of her mother after her father's death. Without a job here in Michigan, she struggled to make ends meet.

Thoupo's workplace initially accommodated her disability — which requires her to sit down intermittently — but after 25 years, their policies changed and Thoupo's chair was taken away. This forced her to leave her position, which took away her income.

Don and Rachel learned unexpectedly that their daughter was going to prison, and her three children had nowhere else to go. The couple had already raised seven children of their own, but amidst their financial concerns, they knew deep down that it was their duty to give the children a fighting chance. With the added expenses, they needed food support to keep their family afloat on a limited income.

In Feeding America West Michigan's service area, an estimated 285,000 people are food-insecure, and they all have different stories. One thing they have in common is that they reached out to Feeding America West Michigan and its 900 partner agencies for help during some of their most challenging moments.

Feeding America West Michigan is proud to serve a diverse and hardworking community; one in which all neighbors deserve to be nourished and empowered — no matter their circumstances.

Did you know?

According to the USDA, over 62 percent of food-insecure households include an adult who is working. The majority of the remaining food-insecure population is either retired, disabled, or looking for work. This means that many people who live above the poverty line still struggle to meet their basic needs. The United Way classifies these individuals as ALICE — Asset-Limited, Income-Constrained, Employed. The 2019 ALICE report states that 29 percent of Michigan's population falls into this category, while 14 percent live below the poverty line. Thus, **43 percent of Michigan's population can't afford their basic needs.**



Beverly, Tyrone, and volunteers



Sarah and John

Community Comes Together to Feed Neighbors in Grand Rapids' Southeast side

Ever since she began attending Pilgrim Rest Missionary Baptist Church at four years old, Beverly has seen her community come together to support neighbors in need, including her own family. Now, as church employees, she and her husband Tyrone manage both the church's fixed food pantry — which offers staples whenever a neighbor needs them — and its monthly Mobile Food Pantry.

Beverly grew up both giving and receiving food. She was influenced by those who helped her, and wanted to do the same. "It was something that was in us, that we learned," she said.

She recalled times when her school's principal would bring her family of nine a Thanksgiving basket, right to their home. And when they could, her family would bring canned goods to the school. "I said, 'I will always do that.' People were always good to me."

As an adult, Beverly began living out her desire to help others. When community members said they were hungry, Pilgrim Rest's pastor would dip into his own pockets to help. In response, Beverly and others at the church decided they needed to come together to support their neighbors.

They began turning their homes into pantries, inviting hungry neighbors to share their food and home-cooked meals. Feeding families from their homes wasn't the easiest set-up, so when Beverly and the church learned about Feeding America West Michigan 30 years ago, they jumped on board and created a fixed food pantry. The church began hosting Mobile Pantries as well, soon after they were introduced to the idea more than twelve years ago.

Each month, Pilgrim Rest's fixed food pantry serves around 70 families facing hunger in their community. At each Mobile Food Pantry, around 125 people go through the distribution line, filling their boxes with fresh produce, shelf-stable dry goods, protein, and other surplus food donated by local farms, grocery stores, and manufacturers.

Beverly encounters many people who want to give back, whether through volunteering or donating. She described a recent story that struck her: "One of the ladies that came, she says, 'I don't have anything. You all do so much for everybody.' She had a dollar and said, 'Can you take this?'"

Beverly accepted the dollar, but told the woman to let the church know if she needed anything.

Having access to the Mobile Food Pantry gives community members — like Deandre, a 46-year-old grandfather of four — wiggle room in their budget to prioritize other necessities. Deandre has been living on disability benefits since he broke both of his ankles and parts of his leg a few years ago. He makes it out to the Mobile Pantries even though it's painful to stand in line. "Every little bit helps," he said.

Like Deandre, Sarah and John see Mobile Food Pantries as a big help. They can pay their bills while still giving their five growing kids healthy options. Before they discovered Mobile Pantries, their grocery bill often exceeded \$500 a month — and that was just for basics from budget grocery stores.

"Having this lowers our bill so we can pay other bills on time," Sarah said. "I usually grab everything that's offered. If there's extra fruits and vegetables we usually grab those because that's most important to us."

Pilgrim Rest's Mobile Pantries are often sponsored by community organizations, like Brown's Funeral Home located down the street from the church. This distribution was sponsored by the Grand Rapids chapter of the fraternity Kappa Alpha Psi.

Like Beverly, fraternity member Lionel grew up experiencing hunger. He received food — called "gleaners' bags" — at his middle school, an experience that inspired him to want to give back. When he was brainstorming ways his fraternity could serve their community, Lionel remembered his experience in middle school and considered passing out groceries and toiletry items directly from his car — just like Beverly and other church members used to cook meals for neighbors in their homes.

Online research led Lionel to Feeding America West Michigan's Mobile Food Pantry program, preventing him from having to stock his own car full of food. To equal the size of a Mobile Pantry, Lionel's car would have had to fit 5,000 pounds of food — which equals more than 4,100 meals for neighbors facing hunger.

Kappa Alpha Psi was eager to help — nearly 30 members volunteered at one of the food distributions they sponsored.

Fraternity president Darius emphasized that volunteering at this Mobile Pantry was particularly significant for their members. Because a lot of them grew up in the 49507 area code, giving back to the community felt especially important. Both Darius and Lionel said they knew people who went through the line that day.

"I think that's what makes it better," Lionel said. **"When you know, 'yes, they will get something to eat today,' I think that's what puts a smile on our face."**

April — a volunteer, church member, and often a client herself — echoed this sentiment. The community's support brings a smile to her face as well. "This right here is an awakening that you ain't by yourself," she said. "You know even when you're hurting and you don't have anything, right here is the help."



Lionel



"I usually grab everything that's offered. If there's extra fruits and vegetables we usually grab those because that's most important to us."
- Sarah

Donor Spotlight: Olivia

Local Girl Transforms Flowers into Meals for Families in Need

For many children, summer vacation is filled with bike rides, beach visits and a whole lot of “nothing.” Helping out in grandma’s garden might be included on this list of to-dos, but for 10-year-old Olivia, her grandma’s flower garden is more than just a fun summer activity; it’s a way to raise money for those in need.

As one of Feeding America West Michigan’s youngest donors, **Olivia proves that anyone can make a difference, no matter their age.** She donated \$100 to help feed families facing hunger in her community.

Each year, with the help of her grandma, Olivia sets up a stand to sell the flowers she nurtured all summer. Olivia’s garden grows a variety of flowers, including her favorite — dahlias — which she makes into beautiful bouquets to sell to her customers. After combining all of her proceeds from the summer of 2018, she chose to donate a portion of the profits to Feeding America West Michigan.

When asked why she chose to use some of her earnings to help feed families in need, Olivia said, “If somebody is in need, it’s kind to help them.”

She first learned that there are people just like her who face hunger when her school participated in a food and water drive during the Flint water crisis. Later, Olivia’s school helped decorate bags of food for Kids’ Food Basket, one of Feeding America West Michigan’s partner agencies which distributes sack lunches and suppers to children during the school day.

Olivia recalled these experiences while brainstorming ways to donate her flower money from the summer. She brought up these ideas to her grandma, who suggested donating to Feeding America West Michigan. At the food bank, Olivia’s \$100 donation stretched far: **Since \$1 provides four meals for those in need, Olivia helped the food bank provide 400 meals to families in its service area.**

“I learned I can be really useful and helpful even if I’m 10-years-old,” Olivia said.

Out of the funds she made with her flower stand, Olivia put some toward next year’s garden, some toward Feeding America West Michigan and also bought Christmas presents for a six-year-old girl in foster care, through an Angel Tree sponsored by her mother’s workplace.

“I kind of felt it was a little selfish to keep it all to myself,” Olivia said. “I wanted to give back to people in need and felt like that was something really nice to do.”

Olivia exemplifies how a little generosity can go a long way. Each of Feeding America West Michigan’s generous supporters reaffirms its mission and fills an important piece in the puzzle of ending hunger in its service area.



I learned I can be really useful and helpful even if I’m 10-years-old.

- Olivia

Meet a Food Banker

SHAY KRICK, Programs Administrator

Q: Why do you feel passionate about hunger relief and the food system?

A: The access to healthy, safe, affordable food is something that shouldn’t be a privilege, but something everyone can get easily. Eating is a human right. I’m passionate about feeding people because food is so much more than a way to nourish our bodies. By providing families in need with food, we are able to provide them so much more than just calories; we can help provide them stability and peace.

Q: What is your role at the food bank, and what led you to that role?

A: My current role as Programs Administrator grew out of necessity. I already had experience working with our Mobile Pantry agencies and I am a highly detail-oriented and organized person. It is a perfect fit for me. I get to help maintain a complicated schedule of Mobile Pantries, summer feeding programs, and commodity deliveries, all while staying in touch with the Mobile Pantry partners I enjoy so much.

Q: What current projects are you most excited about?

A: The project I am most excited about currently is the expansion of our summer feeding program for kids. Being the parent of a small child, feeding kids is near and dear to me.

Q: What issues are you passionate about outside of hunger relief?

A: I am passionate about many things, but the two issues that are most important to me are addiction recovery and environmental protection. I am an advocate for programs that assist individuals who are seeking help with addictions as well as alternative therapy options. I also support clean water and air initiatives both in Michigan and throughout the world.

Q: What’s your favorite part about working for the food bank?

A: My favorite part about working for the food bank is getting to work with all the amazing individuals that try to feed people every day. From my coworkers, to our agency partners and all of our dedicated volunteers, these people make caring for others their priority every day and that is very inspiring. I feel lucky to be part of such a fantastic team.

Q: If you were an animal, what would you be?

A: If I were an animal, I would be a puffin. They are generally happy animals with mischievous energy.

Q: What are you most excited about this summer?

A: I am most excited to go camping with my family this summer and to enjoy all the fresh Michigan produce from the Fulton Street Farmer’s Market.

Q: What do you enjoy doing outside of work?

A: Outside of work I like to spend time with my son. We love to go to the zoo, the museum, and of course camp. I also spend a lot of time reading; I’m addicted to books. I also enjoy painting, hiking, and mountain biking.





Get Involved

Help your neighbors in need by getting involved with Feeding America West Michigan.



\$1 = 4 MEALS

Donations are put directly into the hands of families in West Michigan and the Upper Peninsula!



1 VOLUNTEER HOUR = 200 MEALS

Repack food in our warehouse, glean produce at a local farm, or volunteer to assist setup, distribution, and tear down at a local mobile pantry.



ADVOCATE

Have a way with words? Help spread our mission by letting people in your community know about our services, or contact your local lawmakers to advocate on behalf of life-saving hunger relief legislature!



79,950

Number of hungry children in Feeding America West Michigan's service area.

FEEDING AMERICA
West Michigan

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

We gather and distribute food to relieve hunger and increase food security in West Michigan and the Upper Peninsula. By working with roughly 900 local hunger-relief agencies, we are able to serve half a million people in need 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.



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