



Full Plate PRESS

THE NEWSLETTER OF
FEEDING AMERICA
 West Michigan

Take Action

In West Michigan and the Upper Peninsula, 1 in 8 people faces hunger, including 80,000 children. Help your neighbors in need 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.

FBF-FWM-19567

We help kids access food in many ways.
 See story on page 3



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2020 ISSUE 2

ABOUT US

Feeding America West Michigan gathers and distributes food to relieve hunger and increase food security in West Michigan and the Upper Peninsula. By working with more than 800 local hunger-relief agencies, the food bank is able to distribute an average of 21 million meals worth of food each year.

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

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 Comstock Park, MI 49321

Learn more at FeedWM.org
 Call us at 616.784.3250

IN THIS ISSUE



Helping Kids Thrive
 ▶ Page 3



Meet Up & Eat Up
 ▶ Page 4



Three Families' Stories
 ▶ Page 6



Meet a Food Banker
 ▶ Page 7

Sources From Child Hunger Overview (page 2): <https://www.sciencedirect.com/elsevier/article/pii/S2212267219315473?dgcid=author> <https://www.apa.org/pi/sep/resources/indicator/2012/06/household-food-insecurities> <https://www.ers.usda.gov/amber-waves/2019/december/food-insecurity-among-children-has-declined-overall-but-remains-high-for-some-groups/>

CHILD HUNGER OVERVIEW

There is more to hunger than an empty stomach — especially for children. Hunger impacts every aspect of a child’s life. It affects their physical, mental, and social development — compromising not only their present, but their future.

Many of us are aware of the physical toll that hunger takes on kids’ growing bodies, like higher rates of hospitalization, lower immunity, nutrient deficiencies, and overall poor health. Research also indicates that children who face hunger are more likely to develop chronic health conditions than those who always have access to the food they need.

Studies have shown that hunger also affects a child’s educational success because they struggle to focus in class and as a result, retain less of what they are taught.

Children experiencing hunger may also have trouble socializing and express behavioral problems including aggression, anxiety, and depression.

So, we know hunger affects kids’ development, but new research reveals what it would be like to walk in their shoes.

A recent study conducted by the Academy of Nutrition and Dietetics examined 60 children’s experiences with hunger. They asked a series of questions and examined the kids’ responses in an effort to understand their emotions. The following themes were uncovered in the stories they told:

They worry about their parents’ well-being.

They experience anger, frustration, worry, and sadness about not having enough food.

They feel embarrassed about their family’s food situation.

They perceive strain on the family’s dynamics due to food insecurity.

Fortunately, the 80,000 children facing hunger in our service area have resources to rely on through Feeding America West Michigan and our partners. On the following pages, you’ll meet some of these kids and their heroic parents who will stop at nothing to ensure they have enough to eat. 🍌

Sources listed on page 8



How we’re helping kids thrive all year long

When kids are hungry, they can’t thrive. That’s why we support numerous hunger-relief agencies that work to end childhood hunger throughout our 40-county service area. Whether they directly serve children, or ensure parents have sufficient groceries to cook a healthy dinner, our partners work hard to keep kids’ bellies full.

Summer Programs

Many children rely on their schools to provide breakfast and lunch, either for free or at a reduced cost. When school is not in session, hunger threatens children across the country. Meet Up & Eat Up sites ensure this vulnerable population doesn’t go without. All summer long, anyone 18 and under can eat for free.

Read the story on page 4 to learn about one of the Meet Up & Eat Up programs we support.

We also work with eight summer camps that serve children from low-income families. The camps are able to offset their food costs — and provide families in need with larger discounts — by receiving snacks or food to prepare meals from the food bank.

Backpack Programs

Children who rely on school breakfasts and lunches might come home to empty cupboards on weekends. Backpack programs provide these children with lots of healthy, shelf-stable meals and snacks so they don’t have to wait until Monday morning to nourish themselves.

We currently support 72 backpack programs including the one run by Angels of Action. This

nonprofit utilizes the food bank to fill 800 bags each week for kids at risk of going hungry on the weekend. Every Friday, the nonprofit distributes these bags at 12 schools across Mecosta County. Angels of Action also provides teachers with snacks for their classrooms to help students stay focused during the week.

“We know the stories are all different,” said Joni, Angels of Action’s Executive Director. “All we care is that if a kid is hungry and needs food, that they get a bag.”

Mobile Food Pantries

Mobile Pantries are like farmers markets on wheels, delivering a variety of fresh produce and other nutritious items to neighbors in need, often on the same day the food is donated. Because of COVID-19, Mobile Pantry hosts are seeing many more families seeking help.

We meet families receiving food at many of the 100+ Mobile Pantries hosted across our service area each month. To reach even more children and families, we work with 26 schools to host Mobile Pantries in high-need areas. No matter the location, Mobile Pantries help children and families easily access fresh groceries when they need it most.

Read the stories of some families who have benefitted from this program on page 6.

All of these programs and more help ensure children don’t have to face the detrimental side effects of hunger. 🍌



These librarians serve meals (and books) to kids all summer long with Meet Up & Eat Up

The librarians at the Kent District Library in Comstock Park may appreciate a quiet place to read, but they're anything but quiet when it comes to speaking up against hunger.

In the summer of 2018, they got to know three boys who spent nearly every day reading books and playing video games at the library. None of them brought lunch. So Ashley, Laura, and the other librarians took the boys under their wings, making them PB&J sandwiches with ingredients purchased using their own money.

Last summer, they partnered with Feeding America West Michigan and Meet Up & Eat Up to serve lunch to any child in need — without dipping into their own pockets.

Ashley quickly fell in love with the program and how it aligns with the librarians' values to "give until it hurts." She is eager to run it again this coming summer.

In Kent County, 1 in 7 children faces food insecurity. According to MI School Data, more than 50,000 kids in the county receive free or reduced lunch throughout the school year. As a program of the Michigan Department of Education, Meet Up & Eat Up ensures these children are still provided with a lunch to eat at meal sites like the library when school's not in session.

Last summer, the library served meals to around 20 children each weekday. The librarians included parents by serving lemon water, offering extra fruit, and creating a sociable atmosphere.

Many of these families made a day of their visit to the library. They could bring their little ones to morning "storytime" before lunch, visit the park, and stay through naptime. Spending more time at the library means families are more likely to check out books and, Ashley explained, "more likely to have that positive interaction with their family of reading a book together."



Free books and shelter from the heat are in abundance at the library, so it's often a place of refuge for those who have nowhere else to go. Naturally, many of these same people face hunger, but even though Ashley is used to people seeking refuge at the library, she wasn't aware of just how big the need is. Last summer taught her how, sometimes, a family's need is clear; other times, it isn't.

"I didn't know how many 'storytime' families actually need help," Ashley said. "You can't always tell by what someone's wearing or if a kid has cookies on their face — because all kids have cookies on their face."

"It's not that lunch is expensive per se, but it adds up," she said. The ability to grab and go means even families with lots of kids can provide healthy food without the fuss or cost.

Ashley has even brought her own kids to the program on a day she wasn't working. This enabled her to encourage parents to come.

"If I can come, you can come," she told them.

"I found we were up against these invisible barriers, where families thought it wasn't for them — 'Oh,

I'm not poor enough,'" she explained. "But the truth is, they might be. They can use the support."

One behavioral health technician brings her client, a small boy, to Meet Up & Eat Up, because his parents pack him only ramen for lunch.

"I like this because there's more variety," she said. "I give him the choice between ramen and coming here, and he usually chooses here."

This story came from one of four Kent District Library branches that Feeding America West Michigan partnered with in the summer of 2019. The food bank managed all of the logistics for these sites — including Meet Up & Eat Up applications, reporting, site supervision, and, of course, procuring the prepackaged meals. This year, even more libraries in our service area are planning to participate.

Generous partners and volunteers — like librarians who refuse to be quiet in the face of hungry children — inspire the food bank as we continue to work toward eradicating hunger in our service area.

To find meal sites near you, text "Summer Meals" to 97779. 🍌

Determined, Courageous, Resourceful: Three Families' Stories

We meet many resilient parents fighting hunger in their own homes. Their stories are unique, but one aspect is always the same: They do whatever they can to ensure their children have the food they need.



Monique is determined. She's raising two kids, **Jordan**, 14, and **Sierra**, 10, all on her own, but doesn't let that stop her from ensuring they have what they need.

She is eager to receive fresh fruits and vegetables at the Mobile Pantries she attends near her home in downtown Benton Harbor. The resource helps nourish her growing kids and she's able to bring a box full of food to her aging mother, too. When Monique's kids are at school, she cares for her mother, as well as her two siblings who are disabled. Monique is glad she can support her family without straining her small budget and SNAP benefits further.

"It really helps out," she said.

During the summer, it's even harder for Monique to feed her kids because they don't receive free breakfast and lunch when school is not in session. This year, she plans to keep an eye out for Meet Up & Eat Up sites, where her kids can receive a free meal each day.



Kharey is courageous. Hunger caught her family of five by surprise. She and her husband both had jobs and were able to support their three children — **Ezrah**, 4, **Raven**, 6, and **Karah**, 19.

Then, Raven began needing extra help in school and Ezrah was diagnosed with autism.

Kharey made the difficult choice to quit her job to stay home with her kids. Without Kharey's income, food became harder and harder to buy because they needed to allocate funds toward utilities and their mortgage. Kharey's husband made just a bit too much money for the family to qualify for SNAP and other resources, so they weren't sure what to do.

Things turned around for the family when they learned about Mobile Food Pantries. Kharey says that without this option they "would probably starve."



Julie and Chris are resourceful. They live in Lakeview, a small town in Montcalm County surrounded by countryside. They're a blended family doing their best to raise four kids. 6-year-old **Cameron** came along on the family's recent visit to a Mobile Pantry, and was eager to help his dad load their car with grapefruit, potatoes, milk, and other food they received.

It's tough at times for Cameron's parents to feed their kids. But they know how to make the most of the resources around them. During the warmer months, they plant a garden and purchase low-cost food from local Amish families. Throughout the year, they use food from Mobile Pantries and traditional pantries to ensure there's enough food in their cupboards.

"It helps get us by and make ends meet," Julie said.

Meet a Food Banker: Francesca (AKA Frank)

What is your role at Feeding America West Michigan?

I am the reclamation coordinator. My role is to ensure food safety while monitoring volunteers doing different repacking tasks. I process product and train volunteers while also maintaining a fun, happy, and engaging atmosphere.

What led you to your current role?

When I first started at the food bank three years ago, I was doing janitorial work part-time. I soon found myself assisting in the reclamation department when they were short-handed. I began meeting volunteers and the warehouse staff and I got a feel for what draws them to the mission. The hard work and dedication of the volunteers is so endearing and inspirational to watch. I fell in love with the department and as soon as a position opened up, I immediately applied.

Can you explain what "reclamation" is?

Reclamation is essentially the "Band-Aid department." Volunteers in my department reclaim and repack donated food to be redistributed to the community. We repack everything from dry cereal to fresh produce and even frozen meat and vegetables.

What was your first experience with hunger in our community?

I volunteered at a Mobile Food Pantry — handing out food to families in need. The experience helped me understand who our demographic is and that people of all ages and walks of life need help.

Can you tell us about the most impactful thing you've experienced while on the job?

One afternoon, a mother and her seven children walked in the front door. She had just lost her job and, although she had acquired a new one, she still had to wait two weeks for a paycheck to come in. Her kids were hungry, their cupboards were bare,



and she had spent their last dollar on gas to get there. My volunteers and I immediately sprang into action and made emergency food boxes for the family. I've had so many humbling experiences like that, but this one really hit home. I'm a single mom of a little boy and her courage to ask for help was inspiring.

What's your favorite part of your job?

Getting up every day and doing my part surrounded by my volunteer family. Knowing that people come into the building on their own free will to help keeps me encouraged every day.

What do you like to do in your free time?

I enjoy watching spooky movies with my friends, singing really really loud in the car, and building blanket forts with my five-year-old son. We try to have at least one adventure per day, whether that's getting lost in our favorite book or finding the best stick to turn into a pirate sword right in our backyard. 🍌

We all need help sometimes. Feeding America West Michigan is glad to support resilient families like these. 🍌