

Full Plate PRESS

**FEEDING[®]
AMERICA**
West Michigan

**YOUR LOCAL
FOOD BANK**

Nutritious food fuels the well-being for thousands of senior citizens.



SPRING 2026

IN THIS ISSUE

Senior nutrition programs play a vital role

▶ Page 2–3

CEO Ken Estelle's history of servant leadership

▶ Page 4–5

Food banker shares story of food insecurity

▶ Page 6



Senior programs meet nutritional, social needs

While the majority of households seeking food assistance contain young children, more than a third of the Michigan households that receive Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) benefits include adults over 60.

“Seniors are often overlooked, and that leads to a lot of challenges and negative consequences,” said Brigit Hassig, executive director of Benzie Senior Resources. Food insecurity among older adults has been linked to cardiovascular disease, diabetes, anemia, obesity, anxiety and depression, and impaired cognitive function.

Many seniors won’t tell their families that they are struggling financially, yet they confide in people like Sarah Howard, executive director of the Manistee County Council on Aging and Senior Center. She has heard more concerns in the last few months, and she is seeing higher attendance at senior center lunches.

“We are seeing more new faces,” Howard said late last year. “With uncertainty about SNAP benefits and costs going too high for food, we are seeing more people [for lunch] and more of them are younger than I have ever seen. Our programs used to see older adults, and now we are seeing seniors in their 60s.”

Howard said she doesn’t have to look further than her own family to understand why.

“These are people who worked their whole lives who are struggling,” Howard said. “My mom is an example. She is 90 and lives at home. She was a teacher in a parochial school for 35 years. Her pension is very small. She doesn’t qualify for SNAP, but she is struggling. She has three kids who can help her, and I worry about the people who don’t have family members who can help.”



Feeding America West Michigan provides food for several senior center meal sites. Senior agencies like the Manistee County Council on Aging also often address food insecurity indirectly with fun games that involve nutritious food for seniors to take home.

Seniors regularly tell Hassig and Howard that they feel better when they can get fresh, nutritious foods.

Osceola County senior Lynda credits fresh produce and dairy products from Feeding America West Michigan with keeping her Type-2 diabetes under control. She calls the help an “answer to prayers.”

In addition to improved health, nutrition for seniors empowers them to contribute to their communities and families. A senior citizen in Ottawa County who declined to share her first name turned to a mobile food pantry late last year. She said that the food assistance helped her afford gas to drive to her son’s home to babysit her grandchildren every week. Other seniors have said food assistance helps them have food on hand when their grandchildren visit.

Senior nutrition programs

Feeding America West Michigan distributes food to several senior nutrition programs.

Senior Meal sites: Senior citizens gather for meals and valuable social interaction. Programs at community senior centers are funded in part by local millages.

Home delivery: Programs like Meals on Wheels and Benzie Area Christian Neighbors' Red Bag deliver to homebound seniors.

Food pantries: Several senior centers host pantries.

Commodity Supplemental Food Program: The federal food program provides monthly food boxes to low-income seniors.



Food insecurity and older adults

An estimated **1 in 8 older adults** in Michigan are considered food insecure.

Approximately **250,000 older adults** receive SNAP benefits in Michigan each year.

Seniors made more than **200,000 trips** to mobile pantries last year.

Sources: Michigan Department of Health and Human Services and Feeding America West Michigan.

If you are in the Grand Rapids area,
learn more about volunteering by visiting:

www.feedwm.org/volunteer.

Service is in Ken's DNA

CEO oversaw massive growth with calm, principled leadership



Estelle often sought out opportunities to get out of his office and work alongside staff, like the 2025 staff-led holiday food distribution.

Ken Estelle's journey to Feeding America West Michigan began many years ago when he volunteered at a mobile food distribution and helped a man who was about Estelle's age at that time. The man had lost his job and home. He had no way to provide for his family.

"It hit me that I could just as easily be in that situation, and it stuck with me," Estelle said.

The memory gradually grew into a calling to do more.

The calling spurred Estelle to leave his executive leadership role in the aerospace industry to become Feeding America West Michigan's President and CEO in April 2011. Now 15 years later, Estelle is retiring, leaving a legacy of calm, collaborative leadership that steered the food bank through rapid expansion and innovation.

Several people who have worked with



Estelle in 2011, shortly after he became president and CEO

Estelle over the years describe him as kind and humble, a leader who can exert influence because of his integrity and consistency.

"Ken can't help but serve. Service is in Ken's DNA," said Dr. Phil Knight, Executive Director of the Food Bank Council of Michigan.

Knight describes Estelle as the lodestone of the Food Bank Council of Michigan board of directors, meaning Estelle's clear moral compass kept the organization pointed to its "true north," the mission of feeding people and treating them with dignity.

Knight added that Estelle was frequently recruited to serve on Feeding America's national network task forces and committees. "The national organization does not take appointments to task forces lightly. They seek out those who they believe are the right people with the right balance of expertise to serve," he said. The most significant appointment was to the committee that drafted the Feeding America charter and operating agreements, which guide the work of every food bank and affiliate food bank in the United States.



Feeding America West Michigan President & CEO Ken Estelle has led through 15 years of growth and innovation. Estelle announced in October that he plans to retire this year.

Knight credits Estelle with ensuring that the needs of smaller food banks were fairly represented in the agreements.

Back in West Michigan, Estelle led the food bank through massive growth and ambitious initiatives that included the COVID-19 response and the move to a new warehouse that more than doubled warehouse capacity and significantly improved operational efficiency.

Others who worked with Estelle describe him as both practical and creative in his problem-solving. He sees solutions that evade others because he listens carefully. At the beginning of his tenure, Estelle joined a group of community leaders who wanted a client-centered food pantry model to resemble a grocery store experience. Estelle said the work group found no similar model in the United States, so they developed what is now known as the “food club model.” The model continues to be replicated in communities throughout the United States.

“When Ken joined that (food club planning) group, it changed everything,” said Dave Jacobs, who is also a founding member. “If he hadn’t joined, I believe the project would have stalled. With his connections through Feeding America and his business background, he could help us think logistically, operationally, and financially — this is absolutely part of Ken’s legacy.”

As Estelle leaves, the demand for charitable food remains stubbornly high, and the

causes of food insecurity seem even more complex than they were 15 years ago. Yet he said the core commitment to nourish people never changes, and he is inspired by the staff, board, volunteers, and donors who are committed to this work.

“The causes of food insecurity are complex and variable depending on the household,” Estelle said. “We don’t control factors like transportation, childcare costs, employment or the lack of it. Our role is to understand the needs no matter where they are in our service area and understand the best way we can help.”



Estelle periodically drove semi loads of food to the Upper Peninsula because it helped him understand the communities served.

Enduring impact

- Optimized the mobile food distribution model to prioritize fresh produce and dairy.
- Helped to pilot the food club model, which offers clients ownership in their charitable food choices.
- Led massive changes in distribution and safety protocols as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic.
- More than doubled warehouse space with the move to Kentwood in 2024.
- Served on the national committee that drafted the Feeding America charter and updated member agreements.

Pattijean's Food Insecurity Story



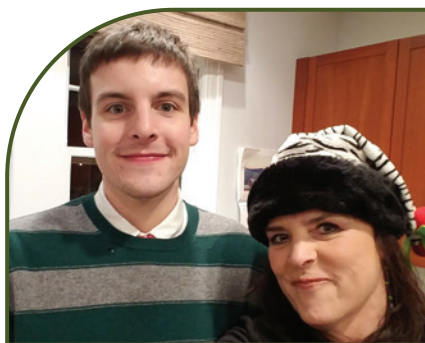
Feeding America West Michigan Chief Philanthropy Officer Pattijean McCahill turned to food assistance programs to help her and her son nearly 16 years ago.

Over the next several months, we will periodically share stories from Feeding America West Michigan staff who have turned to the charitable food system for support during difficult periods of their lives.

We kick off the series with Chief Philanthropy Officer Pattijean McCahill, who lost her job and home through a series of events beginning in 2009, the height of the Great Recession. Despite possessing an MBA from a prestigious university and 20 years of corporate experience, she could not find a job to provide for herself and her son.

Did you struggle with the decision to ask for help?

I struggled deeply with the decision to ask for help. ... The shame was overwhelming, but the fear of not meeting my son's needs was greater. The emotions were layered: humiliation, fear, grief, and eventually surrender — an acceptance that I needed help to survive that chapter of my life.



McCahill and her son in 2013 near the end of their years of food insecurity.

Who did you turn to for help?

I leaned heavily on my family. I also applied for SNAP benefits and met a caseworker who treated me with kindness and dignity. Her reassurance that my situation was temporary meant more than she could have imagined.

Describe your experience of getting charitable food.

The (pantry) volunteers were warm

and welcoming, but I felt nothing but shame. I could hardly look anyone in the eye — I was terrified someone would recognize me. ... When I used my Bridge Card at a grocery store, I would wait until the last second to take it out. A cashier once shamed me for buying “nice cheeses,” and that moment devastated me.

Did your situation change after you received assistance?

SNAP was a lifeline. We received about \$350 a month, which didn't eliminate our struggles, but it kept us from falling off a cliff. Assistance allowed me to regain just enough stability to breathe and begin rebuilding my life.

Did the experience change you in ways that remain with you today?

It changed everything about me. I learned resilience, empathy, and the importance of treating every person with dignity — because I know exactly what it feels like to be on the other side of the table. The experience continues to shape my leadership and my commitment to ensuring that no one feels shame when they seek help.

Financial food assistance at a glance

Feeding America West Michigan provides food to anyone who turns to us for help. Some of the neighbors who rely on us also receive help from the federal Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP). SNAP provides people with funds every month to purchase food. The following information from the Michigan Department of Health and Human Services answers common questions.

How much is the typical SNAP benefit?

In FY 2024, the average SNAP benefit was about \$173 per person per month or \$5.68 per person per day.

Who receives SNAP?

Households with low incomes receive SNAP benefits.

In Michigan:

- **492,225 children** benefit from SNAP.
- **38,513 veterans** participating in SNAP.
- **36%** SNAP households have older adults.
- **43%** SNAP households have children.
- **51%** of SNAP households have a person with a disability.

What are the eligibility requirements?

- All applicants must be U.S. citizens or lawfully present non-citizens.
- All able-bodied adults, with certain exceptions, must register for work and accept suitable employment.
- The household must meet certain income limits.
- All applicants must have a Social Security number.

Who can't receive SNAP?

- Unlawfully present non-citizens
- Able-bodied adults who choose not to work

If you or someone you know is struggling to afford nutritious food, call 1-888-544-8773 for assistance.

**Help more neighbors
access the food they
need to thrive.**

Donate today
at FeedWM.org
or scan here
to give now! ▶▶





JOIN US

Your support today helps us meet the high demand for food now and in the months ahead.



YOUR GIFT HELPS OUR NEIGHBORS THRIVE

Every \$1 donated provides up to 4 meals for our neighbors. Your gift helps us purchase food at wholesale prices to supplement the food donations we receive. Please give today.




YOUR TIME HELPS US SERVE OUR NEIGHBORS

It takes thousands of volunteers to support our 40-county charitable food network. At our warehouse, volunteers repackage more than 6 million pounds of food for distribution. In addition, thousands of volunteers at local pantries distribute food directly to our neighbors. Please give your time at our warehouse or a food pantry in your neighborhood.



YOUR VOICE HELPS US ADVOCATE

We believe that no one should go hungry. Adequate nutrition is essential for everyone to lead a healthy life. It is especially important for children so they can reach their full potential. Join us in sharing this message with your friends, community members, and elected officials.


 **CONNECT:** Find us on Facebook and Instagram at @feedingwestmich. You can also find us on LinkedIn.

FY26-MNL-FA-NL

LEARN MORE 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 hundreds of hunger-relief partners to fill 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, United Way, and The Food Bank Council of Michigan. The food bank also maintains a four-star rating from Charity Navigator.

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