

Full Plate PRESS

**FEEDING
AMERICA**
West Michigan

**YOUR LOCAL
FOOD BANK**



Many factors create food insecurity among our neighbors.



SUMMER 2026

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THE MANY FACES OF FOOD INSECURITY

At any given time, at least 1 in 7 of our neighbors in West Michigan and the Upper Peninsula encounter tough choices between buying food and paying for other basic necessities.

Food insecurity can vary widely based on several factors that include proximity to economic opportunities, age, ability, and life events.

Source: United States Department of Agriculture Economic Research Service, "Food Insecurity in the U.S. - Frequency of Food Insecurity," updated 1/8/2025

CHRONIC FOOD INSECURITY

5+ YEARS

Roughly 6 percent of food-insecure households are chronically food insecure, meaning the condition persists for five years or more.

COMMON CAUSES

- **Physical limitations** to earning income, most often age or disability.
- **Geographic limitations** to earning income: Non-disabled adults in chronically recessionary communities struggle with the lack of full-time employment opportunities. Many of these communities have areas that are considered “food deserts” because they lack a high-quality grocery store.
- **Victims of physical and psychological violence** often struggle to get on steady financial footing, and **formerly incarcerated individuals** often struggle to find employment.

EPISODIC FOOD INSECURITY

1-4 YEARS

Approximately 94 percent of people who experience food insecurity experience it for a period of a few weeks to up to four years. Episodically food-insecure households typically include non-disabled adults who are employed, but they can also include seniors who live on fixed incomes. Many of these food insecure households include children.

1 YEAR OR LESS: 51%

Common Causes: One serious episode creating a year or less of food insecurity.

Examples: A period of unemployment; an unpaid medical leave; the death or departure of a family breadwinner.

2-3 YEARS: 35%

Common Causes: Multiple smaller events during a period of reduced income.

Examples: People who are employed full-time but don't make enough to meet unplanned expenses; someone whose work is seasonal; a family with children that can meet basic needs but needs extra support during periods of higher expenses.

UP TO 4 YEARS: 8%

Common Causes: A major life event or a major national event.

Examples: A family that can't afford daycare, so a parent stays home until the children are school-aged; a national recession that results in significant job losses or the collapse of entire industries.



READ
MIRANDA'S
STORY!

THE FOOD INSECURITY CONTINUUM

Each year, the staff at Feeding America West Michigan talk to dozens of neighbors who turn to mobile food pantries and agency partners for support. Many of those households include children. Their stories illustrate the various factors that contribute to the duration of a family's food insecurity.

EPISODIC

1 YEAR



The Kent County father experienced an unexpected drop in his income. Suddenly, he and his partner were struggling to keep up with their bills and feed their three children. Alex started attending mobile food distributions in the community to help them get through.

“Being able to depend on this the last six months has been great. The money we save on groceries we use to keep up on our bills, so this definitely helps,” he said. **“Knowing that the kids will be fed has been great.** It’s a relief to have an organization that’s consistent, and it’s not going to randomly stop.”

2-4 YEARS



The Ottawa County mother realized her family needed support after she left the workforce to stay home with her young child. She turns to various agencies near her home when her family needs a little extra help accessing nutritious food.

“My husband works full-time, and we make enough to get by, but **after paying for rent, bills, essentials, we can use some meat and milk and fresh vegetables. I can find that help here.**”

“

There is a misperception that food insecurity goes on for years and years, when in reality it is a set period of years and a short period of time within those years for the vast majority of people.

When we help families with nutritious food we are truly helping them cope and get through a period of time so they can get on with their lives.

Joseph Jones, Chief Impact Officer Feeding America West Michigan

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SCAN THE QR CODE to learn about our hunger-relief programs in the community.

CHRONIC

5+ YEARS



HANNAH & CAYLA

Longtime friends Hannah and Cayla periodically share a ride to a mobile food distribution to get help feeding their families when their budgets are too tight. Hannah has five children and Cayla has four. They said they stretch the food as far as possible, and they find ways to make sure nothing goes to waste, like freezing carrots and dehydrating mushrooms.

“I came the first time when my husband changed jobs and we had a span of about five weeks without a paycheck,” Cayla said. “That was an emergency. Now I come back to fill in the gaps with healthy food when my food budget is stretched thin.”



LYNDA

Lynda heard about Osceola County food distributions in late 2024 when a friend from her church suggested she attend one. Lynda is retired and getting by on Social Security. She relies on the fresh produce and dairy products to help her keep her type 2 diabetes in check.

“This food is an answer to prayers,” she said. “It’s just good stuff — fruit and vegetables and usually a gallon of milk. We get potatoes all the time and cottage cheese. I still have to buy stuff, but this is really a tremendous help.”

Ryan's Food Insecurity Story

Over the next several months, we will periodically share stories from Feeding America West Michigan staff about their personal experiences with food insecurity.

Longtime Logistics Manager Ryan Van Maldegen was a 16-year-old high school sophomore when he and his mother suddenly found themselves scrambling to make ends meet and figure out how to pay tuition so Ryan could remain at West Catholic High School through graduation. Until that time, Van Maldegen's family had enjoyed a stable financial situation, he said.

Did you and your mom turn to food pantries for help?

We never turned to a food pantry, but we had a lot of debt stacking up, so we could have easily used the help.

What do you remember about the physical and mental impact of food insecurity?

I remember a lot of stress. I remember my mom would bring home salads from the Wendy's where she worked and other food they were going to throw out. We found out that you can make a lot of stuff with Wendy's leftovers. One time, she came home with a big bag of chicken nuggets, and that was a big deal.

What helped you and your mom get through the situation?

A friend's dad was the operations manager at Feeding America West Michigan, and he needed summer help and asked me if I'd like to come to work at the food bank picking orders. That's how I got a job the summer after 11th grade. That was a huge help with my living expenses and my mother's. That job was a hand-up to help us get on our feet and navigate a challenging situation.

When I graduated from high school in 2003, John Arnold (former food bank president and CEO) hired me full-time. I have been here ever since, moving through various positions until



Feeding America West Michigan
Logistics Manager Ryan Van Maldegen.

I got to where I am currently. I'm grateful for the ways the food bank shaped my early working career and helped give me leadership training and experience with teamwork and collaboration.

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

I remember that kid who had to hustle and get a job to help my mom and pay my tuition so I could stay at West Catholic. It's part of why I am always hustling now — because I never want to be in that situation again.

How does your experience with food insecurity shape your work at Feeding America West Michigan?

I want to be there to help somebody through challenging times. Saying you understand challenges and living through challenges are two different things. Food insecurity is something you have to experience to understand. Because of my experience, I see what people are going through. We are feeding them today. It's not something down the road. It's today, and it creates a turning point in their lives in the short game. It helps give people peace and can help them get their dignity back. I feel really good knowing I can help.

What do you want people who have never experienced food insecurity to understand?

Treat everyone with kindness. You have no idea what somebody is going through.

Weekly volunteers find friendships and purpose

Feeding America West Michigan relies on an incredible community of volunteers to sort, package, and distribute nutritious food across our service area. Among the hundreds of dedicated volunteers, a small number stand out for their commitment to working at least one weekly shift at our Kentwood warehouse. Their weekly time together has led to friendships and a supportive community.

We recently spent an afternoon with our “Tuesday regulars,” the band of retirees who commit to sorting and packing food every Tuesday. Among them, volunteer Carol recounted volunteering once at our previous location several years ago before she retired.



From left to right, Tuesday regulars Tom, Dave, Carol, Gregg, Bob, Barb, and Gloria gather for their Dec. 9 volunteer shift to assemble emergency food boxes.

“It was really eye-opening to me at the time,” she said. “I was amazed at the amount of food that was being handled. I saw what the volunteers were doing, and I started to donate. Then a good friend of mine retired before me. He said, ‘You should really look into Feeding America. I think they have a really great organization and an organized volunteer program.’ Then I retired, and he said, ‘You should come on Tuesday,’ and that’s how I started.”

Volunteer Barb, who has now been with Feeding



Regulars Barb and Carol converse while sorting food into emergency food boxes in the Feeding America West Michigan warehouse.

America West Michigan for five years, donated her time to several organizations and quickly grew fond of working at the food bank.

“The organization is well run,” she said. “The money goes to food and to helping the community. They are, I feel, a solid organization. My husband and I are donors here. They do amazing work.”

Many volunteers said that in addition to feeling fulfilled by the work, they feel trusted and listened to by the FAWM staff. They feel they can offer their input in processes and know that their thoughts matter.

Tuesday regulars Greg, Bob, Dave, and Tom are drawn by the clear, direct benefit to the community. They clearly see how their work helps people meet basic needs. Greg has volunteered at agencies to get food directly into neighbors’ hands, and he enjoys the chance to see the beginning of the process at the food bank.

Several volunteers also said they take great satisfaction in reducing food waste.

“I hate to see food go to waste. Without [Feeding America West Michigan], the food would be sent to a landfill. We can help make sure it is used,” said Tom, a volunteer since 2021. His statement was met with resounding agreement from fellow Tuesday regulars.

To learn more about volunteer opportunities, visit <https://www.feedwm.org/volunteer>.



We believe that hunger is unacceptable and that our community has the power to change lives.

4 WAYS YOU CAN TAKE ACTION



DONATE:
\$10 = 40 MEALS
Give today at FeedWM.org!



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



ADVOCATE:
Tell people in your community about our mission and let them know why you think it's important.




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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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