

Full Plate PRESS

**FEEDING
AMERICA**
West Michigan

**YOUR LOCAL
FOOD BANK**

A volunteer at Hartford United Methodist Church and a senior from Hartford High School prepare for a mobile food distribution.



FALL 2026

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HUNGER RELIEF IS LOCAL

In this issue of Full Plate Press, we focus on our neighbors who give support and receive support in the southwest corner of the food bank's 40-county service area. While every county in our network is unique, all share the beliefs that no one should be hungry and that communities have the power to change lives when everyone works together.

It's our pleasure to introduce you to some of the neighbors, agency partners, and financial supporters in Van Buren, Berrien, and Cass counties.

“All the people here are like family now”

Van Buren and Cass county mobiles foster community

The mobile food pantries held at Hartford United Methodist Church are both a cherished resource and a treasured hub of community. While three rows of cars await the arrival of the Feeding America West Michigan food truck in the church's parking lot, volunteers welcome neighbors with warm smiles. One neighbor uses the time to read a book. An elderly couple takes turns cradling their dog in their laps, and volunteers and neighbors alike catch up on news of family and friends. It's a small town, so most of those seeking support and those offering support know one another.

When that truck arrives, a volunteer group of Hartford High School seniors and older adults head up the effort to pack family-sized food boxes, divide 50-pound bags of carrots into family-sized bags, and load food boxes into neighbors' vehicles.

Mobile Food Pantry Coordinator Susie McGowan feels as though the mobile pantries are necessary for her community, and they give volunteers a renewed sense of purpose.

“Everyone needs food sometime or other,” Susie said. “We all need the companionship. Most of the volunteers don't quit. Fred's been

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sick for three weeks, and you saw him out there, and he's working his head off. Dale lost his wife about four months ago, and he didn't have anything. I said, 'You know where the food pantry is? Come help.' He's been here every week since then."

At an April distribution, dedicated volunteers served 258 households made up of 785 people. They supplied neighbors with nutritious foods like carrots, onions, cottage cheese, juice, garbanzo beans, pasta, and oranges.

When neighbor Dawn's husband lost his job and they struggled to stretch their budget, the Hartford United Methodist Church mobile was there for them.

"It helps out with the budget because fresh food is expensive," Dawn said. "When my grandkids come and visit, I can feed them something they like. What they give, it's just a blessing — really, it is."



Susie McGowan, Hartford United Methodist Church Mobile Food Pantry coordinator, looks over the tables of food to be distributed.

Neighbors Bill and Wanda, who have been attending for several years, feel the same.

"All the people here are like family now," Wanda said. "People don't look down on you over here; they treat you like a person. These people here at the church, they put their time in. And if it's raining, snowing, or whatever, they are still there, and I really appreciate that."



When Dawn's husband lost his job and they struggled to stretch their budget, the Hartford United Methodist Church mobile was there for them.

Mobile food pantries in Niles "make people feel like somebody cares"

At First Baptist Church in Niles, Mobile Food Pantry Coordinator Roger Pickell and his team of volunteers foster that same sense of belonging in the work they do for Cass County.

"It just makes people feel like somebody cares," Roger said, explaining that after he retired, he sought out a larger purpose. "I like people, and I like these volunteers. It gives them something, motivates them to get out and do something. The whole thing keeps me young."

Neighbors Leo and Jennifer looked for support when Leo lost his job and Jennifer had to go on disability and couldn't work.

"There are times when this is what gets us by," Jennifer said. "Without this, we'd go hungry. It makes all the difference."

A dedicated Niles grandmother, mother, and wife who asked us not to use her name gave up her job to care for her grandchildren when COVID-19 hit. Now, she continues to care for her grandchildren, a daughter who is handicapped, and her husband, who has dementia.

"This really helps me out a lot," she said. "We just struggle, and the kids would have to do without — and even my daughter and my husband would. What I spend on the kids comes out of our pocket. It really benefits us in so many ways."

One town, three distinct ways

We visited three Benton Harbor agencies to learn how they approach hunger relief and food security efforts in their community.

Mosaic CCDA: A Model for Stability and Community

Through programs like the Career Pathway Institute, Resale Store, Community Assistance Program, and Feel Good Fridge, Mosaic CCDA works to address poverty and food insecurity at their roots.

For Pastor Will Gaddy, Mosaic CCDA life coach and chaplain, the work begins with relationships: “When you serve here long enough, you begin to build real relationships with people,” he said. “It becomes about more than just providing food — we’re a resource center.”

In partnership with Whirlpool and Feeding America West Michigan, Mosaic’s Feel Good Fridge offers a steady response to hunger. Three days a week, neighbors gather for a brief prayer before Coordinator Jimmyella Toney guides them through a line of fresh and frozen meats, produce, deli items, breads, desserts, and more.



Pastor Will Gaddy (left) and Feel Good Fridge Coordinator Jimmyella Toney (right) provide food at Mosaic CCDA as well as programming to address economic barriers to food security.

Use has grown from 35 neighbors to as many as 75, reflecting deepening need. In 2025, the Feel Good Fridge distributed 92,204 pounds of food to 10,476 people, including 3,551 children, 3,364 seniors and veterans, and 4,029 households.

Barbara, who visits every day the Feel Good Fridge is open, said the support helps her stretch her Social Security after losing her husband and son. “I am very grateful for what I get here,” she said. “Mosaic allows me to save a little extra money for anything I need to repair. I would absolutely recommend coming here.”

St Augustine’s Pantry: Trust, Resources, and Belonging

For St. Augustine’s Episcopal Church, contributing to community food access is a natural extension of its faith and commitment to human dignity. Faith fills the soul, and the church’s pantry fills the body.

Coordinated by longtime St. A’s member Les Knickerbocker, the pantry welcomes everyone without exclusion. As Les puts it, “Everyone is welcome — that’s why we have a good reputation in the community, because people know we don’t hold anything against anyone.”

The pantry extends that care through language access, with a greeter fluent in Spanish, French, and English helping visitors move through the space with ease. The same atmosphere of respect and dignity welcomes members of the LGBTQIA community.

That welcome builds trust. As guests experience understanding rather than judgment, many return, seeing the pantry not just as a resource, but as a place where

of approaching hunger relief



St. Augustine's Episcopal Church Pantry Coordinator Les Knickerbocker stands ready for neighbors to arrive for a food distribution.

they are seen and respected.

In 2025, St. Augustine's became the food bank's top Berrien County partner, with Les and his volunteers distributing more than 90,000 meals worth of food to more than 4,500 households.

A pantry visitor who chose not to share his name said, "My hours were cut, but the bills didn't change. This pantry helps a lot. They welcome everyone, not just church members — it really feels like a place that cares. This place makes you feel good."

New Heights CCDA: Moving neighbors from scarcity to stability

New Heights CCDA works to move community members from scarcity to stability through wrap-around services, job training programs, and the Community Food Network.

Serving Benton Heights, New Heights staff recognized that neighbors needed more than immediate food assistance, said Executive Director Chris Britton. They needed a model that addressed interconnected challenges while building community.

Through food security groups that meet twice a month, neighbors receive a dignified shopping experience where they can choose fresh produce, meats, dairy, canned goods, bread, and more.

Much of the food comes from partners including Feeding America West Michigan, Meijer, Walmart, Dollar General, and Abundant Acres, with additional support from a ValleyHUB grant in Kalamazoo.

According to Britton, each group includes 30 households, averaging three people each, meaning New Heights feeds about 360 people twice a month.

There are no special eligibility requirements — members simply share that they do not have enough food to support themselves or their family. Members may participate for two years, with New Heights walking alongside them while easing food needs so they can invest time and resources elsewhere.

Participants often call the pantry a source of relief. Brian, a food security group member, said the Community Food Network has "helped me and my family tremendously." He adds, "Ever since I've been coming here, they've been good to me."



A volunteer helps Brian, a neighbor, pick out dressings and canned items during New Heights CCDA's Community Food Network program earlier this year.



Anna Murphy, president and CEO of the United Way of Southwest Michigan, said the organization focuses on helping people stay out of poverty. In addition to efforts to reduce food insecurity, they also focus on education, financial stability, and health initiatives.

Foundations play central role in food relief efforts

Working together to end hunger in Southwest Michigan is only possible with the generosity of local organizations and their devotion to helping their community. Among our many partnerships, the Pokagon Fund in New Buffalo and the United Way of Southwest Michigan in St. Joseph stand out for their long-term commitment to reducing food insecurity.

United Way of Southwest Michigan

For over 80 years, the United Way of Southwest Michigan has drawn people together to help their community. In addition to supporting efforts against food insecurity, they focus on education, financial stability, and health, centering on Asset-Limited, Income-Constrained and Employed (ALICE) residents. ALICE is the term used to refer to people who work full-time but struggle to cover their living expenses. Approximately one in five Berrien County residents fit this description.

“Everything that we do has to help ALICE stay out of poverty or lift ALICE into a higher threshold,” said Anna Murphy, president and CEO of United Way of Southwest Michigan. **“When people have access to food, they can use their financial resources for something else. Housing, transportation, all of these things continue to be a challenge in any community.** When you’re looking for food,

these other things become so big. I always want to solve all of those issues and put myself out of a job.”

In addition to funding mobile food pantries in the area, United Way of Southwest Michigan partners with businesses to offer the School Supply Spectacular in Cass County, supports the OutCenter of Southwest Michigan, the Samaritan Counseling Center mental health service programs, the Boys & Girls Clubs of Greater Southwest Michigan, and so much more.

The Pokagon Fund

The Pokagon Fund is a private organization supported by revenue from The Four Winds Casinos, which is owned by The Pokagon Band of Potawatomi. Since 2007, the Pokagon Fund has worked hard to serve the needs and enhance the lives of residents in Southwestern Berrien County as well as Hartford, Dowagiac, and South Bend, Indiana.

The Pokagon Fund supports a wide range of services and nonprofits, municipalities, and school districts. They support Neighbor by Neighbor, a basic needs and utility assistance and self-sufficiency organization, as well as the 60-mile Marquette Greenway, the Red Arrow

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Linear Parkway, backpack supply giveaways, arts and cultural programming, and more.

Dan Petersen, The Pokagon Fund's executive director, emphasized the importance of helping to eliminate food insecurity in the community.

"Food insecurity is everywhere," he said. "A lot of people think of New Buffalo and Three Oaks as a more affluent community, but there is still a lot of need, especially as costs rise for food and other basic needs. **I think food and housing are the foundation for success. We want to make sure that folks have those basic needs met. Just having that consistent food source for people is extremely beneficial.**"

He also credits the success of the efforts against food insecurity to meaningful local partnerships.



Pokagon Fund Executive Director Dan Petersen credits strong community partnerships and volunteerism for the success of food insecurity efforts.

"One of the success stories is the volunteerism that we've seen in order to pull this off," he said. "We have great partners in the Harbor Country Rotary Club, the Episcopal Church of the Mediator, Harbor Community Church, and the New Buffalo American Legion. They're really the superstars of our programming."

Meet Our Southwest Michigan Food Bankers

Rick Murphy: Benton Harbor Mobile Pantry Coordinator and Truck Driver

Rick Murphy has been with Feeding America West Michigan for the past 11 years. Rick works with agency partners to ensure that our mobile food distributions run smoothly in Berrien, Cass and Van Buren counties.

He was drawn to the truck driver position initially because he had a commercial driver's license and needed flexibility to take care of his parents. Now, he says his favorite part of his job is working with the volunteers at our numerous agencies.

"I don't think I've met as many decent people as I have working with Feeding America West Michigan," he said. "A lot of those folks are at the agencies, and they're just real, giving people; they're selfless. They really go above and beyond the call of that duty."

Kristy Tunstill: Southwest Agency Partnerships Specialist

Kristy Tunstill was born in Southwest Michigan and has lived there her whole life.

She's been a part of the Feeding America West Michigan team for five years. As an agency partners specialist, Kristy works directly with our agency partners to help them effectively serve

our neighbors. This includes trainings and support for meeting national food bank standards as well as state and federal law.



Rick (left), Kristy (right).

The opportunity to give back to her community, the people that she works with, and her family are a big source of motivation for the work she does.

"I always try to teach my kids to give back to others and just do their best in what they're doing every day," she said. "I love helping others, and I love all of my co-workers. I think we have a good group of people."

Our new President and CEO

Dear friend,

It is my great honor to write to you as the new president and CEO of Feeding America West Michigan. Many of you already know me from my work with the food bank over the last 11 years. My time on the executive leadership team during those years prepared me to lead this organization.

For me, hunger relief is deeply personal. During the Great Recession, I experienced job loss, foreclosure, bankruptcy, and food insecurity while raising my teenage son as a single parent. I relied on SNAP and visited food pantries. That experience shaped my belief that access to nutritious food is not merely about hunger relief — it is about dignity, stability, and opportunity — and it informs how I lead today with urgency, empathy, and respect for neighbors' lived experience.

I am committed to ensuring Feeding America West Michigan remains a trusted, unifying presence in every community it serves. Advancing the work of hunger relief requires listening to neighbors' experiences with food insecurity, using data to guide decisions,



and allocating resources that reflect the realities of a service area spanning both urban centers and deeply rural communities. This approach emphasizes partnership, accountability, and continuous learning.

Thank you for sharing our belief that hunger is unacceptable. Thank you for believing that our community has the power to change lives. I look forward to working with you to nourish our neighbors.

Working with you to end hunger,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Pattijean McCahill".

Pattijean McCahill

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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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 [FeedWM.org](https://www.FeedWM.org)

 616.784.3250


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