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FEEDING AMERICA West Michigan

YOUR LOCAL FOOD BANK

Upper Peninsula partners are a lifeline for neighbors like Sara.



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Thin western UP economy drives need for food support

Kelly, an Ontonagon mother, works with her daughter and other family members at the local Ace Hardware store. From her position at the store, she has witnessed the many ways the local economy has grown weaker over time. With each business closure over the last three decades, there are fewer people to shop at her store and there are fewer reasons for young people to stay.

The loss of the community hospital in 2024 was especially painful. The closure of Aspirus Ontonagon Hospital and emergency services resulted not only in the dissolution of many jobs in the community but also a gap in critical emergency health services. The hospital was converted into a rural health clinic with outpatient services. For hospital and emergency room services, people now travel more than 45 minutes to Baraga County Memorial Hospital or about 75 minutes to Aspirus Keweenaw Hospital.

Kelly and her family members are among the thousands of working people in the Upper Peninsula who turn to Feeding America West Michigan partners for food because their work hours and wages have eroded alongside the reduction in jobs and economic opportunity. On a work day in June, family members covered for her at the store so she could pick up boxes from a Mobile Food Pantry distribution at the nearby Ontonagon Village Fire Hall.



Amanda works with her mother, Kelly, (not shown) at the Ontonagon hardware store. Like her mother, Amanda relies on the Mobile Food Pantry to stretch her food budget.



Volunteers at the Ontonagon Village Fire Hall prepare for the monthly Mobile Food Pantry.

Like the crew at the hardware store, several local businesses sent someone to pick up boxes for staff so they could get food without breaking away from work.

"Our community is hurting, with losing the hospital, as well as our mining, our lumber industry with the paper mill — that's gone," she said. **"I think this mobile pantry really helps a lot of people because there's not a lot of jobs around here anymore."**

Kelly's daughter Amanda, also an Ace Hardware employee, echoes the concern that these losses have contributed to a declining local population.

"More and more people just can't make it," Amanda said. "And the young people can't afford to stay here, so they're all leaving.



St. Vincent De Paul Our Lady of Peace Church District President Brian Panich and volunteer Carol prepare to serve community members. On average, the Ironwood pantry serves 250 households a month.

(continued)

Eventually there won't be any of us left. I'm lucky I own my own home and don't have to worry about it. If I tried to leave, I couldn't do it."

Both Kelly and Amanda turned to a Mobile Food Pantry distribution at Ontonagon Village Fire Hall for food resources that they stretch as far as possible.

"A lot of the fruits and veggies are really nice," said Amanda, who also grows her own produce at home to supplement her family's food needs. "I live paycheck to paycheck. I don't have extra income, and when I can grow a little high-priced fruit, it's fairly supportive. Every little bit helps. I grow my own stuff just trying to make things go further. Adding that with what you guys are able to bring, I can the food and make it go as far as possible. "

Doing "a lot of good" in Ironwood

In Ironwood, St. Vincent De Paul Our Lady of Peace Church provides supplemental food resources for the immediate community through their food pantry. District President Brian Panich has been with the pantry for 10 years and helps provide information on financial assistance for neighbors in addition to assisting in the everyday duties of the pantry.

"There's just an abundance of homelessness and friends in need, and it breaks your heart," he said. "We have people that donate, and we've really been blessed to sustain the funds that we do. Feeding America West Michigan has just been a tremendous gift to the whole UP."

On average, the Ironwood pantry serves about 250 households comprised of more than 500 individuals who seek food assistance. The Ironwood pantry serves the local senior living center, where they deliver boxes monthly. And the pantry supports neighbors like Sara, a mother and Wisconsin Certified Nursing Assistant.

With a family at home, Sara had been out of work for several months when she visited the Ironwood pantry. Her family was struggling to make ends meet on her husband's income.

"It's rough going," she said. "If it wasn't for Feeding America West Michigan and this pantry, we wouldn't make it from month to month ... They do a lot of good around here."



Sara, a mother who lives just over the Michigan border in Wisconsin, found the St. Vincent De Paul Our Lady of Peace pantry in Ironwood after she lost her job in healthcare.

Foundation supports community food security as an ecosystem

The eastern, central and western Upper Peninsula all face unique challenges when it comes to food insecurity. Yet, overall, the work to end hunger in the UP requires addressing individual needs and food-system challenges. Partners like the Copper Shores Community Health Foundation are chipping away at some of the root causes of food insecurity while also supporting individual community members with programming.

Copper Shores Community Health Foundation opened in 2013 to build on the legacy of the former Portage Health Foundation and Portage Health Hospital. When Portage Health Hospital was sold and the assets given back to the community, Copper Shores was created as a health-focused community foundation. Since then, the foundation has been dedicated to providing an abundance of resources to the Copper Country community, which includes Baraga, Houghton, Keweenaw, and Ontonagon counties.

"Each year, we take a percentage of earnings off the investment and invest in programming within the community," said Kevin Store, CEO of Copper Shores Community Health Foundation. "That includes programming to solve mental health, substance use, and health access. The programs are really focusing on social determinants of health. Good nutrition and food insecurity are one of those major areas that we've been focusing on."

When it comes to food insecurity, "Copper Shores Health Foundation works to address it from four angles: awareness, access, education, and affordability.

"We are looking at this as an ecosystem," Kevin said. "We're trying to build capacity on all fronts to better combat the issue of food insecurity in our community. How do we influence the food system locally to make



Kevin Store, CEO of Copper Shores Community Health Foundation, leads the foundation's efforts to address social determinants of good health.

it more affordable for farmers to grow and distribute their product? How do we make it more affordable for people who want to get access to it and buy it? We do everything — funding the local farmers market collective, helping to provide support to our local farm community, helping work on CSA (community-supported agriculture) shares that were being distributed to families in the community."

The foundation also hired a registered dietitian to run workshops and a healthy cooking program. The dietician also supports families with infant feeding programs.

The Copper Shores Community Foundation is one of several valued partners working with us to end hunger in the Upper Peninsula. We thank the foundation for working with us to end hunger in Copper Country.

Volunteers become a part of something bigger in Grand Marais

Along the coast of Lake Superior and across the street from Woodland Park Campground in Grand Marais, First Lutheran Church hosts Helping Hands Food Pantry. This modest pantry and its hardworking volunteers oversee a monumental effort of bringing resources to their community.

The pantry's coordinator, Kay Powers, who has helped there for over 15 years, says that the pantry fills a big need in the tourist town of the central Upper Peninsula.

"When the (summer) tourists leave, everything slows down," Kay said. "Between then and the snowmobile season, things get pretty rough for people. Even in this day and age, when people are working one job, maybe two jobs in the service industry, they're still not getting by because it's very expensive to live here."

To get food to Upper Peninsula pantries, food bank semi-trucks make multiple runs each month to drop-off sites throughout the Upper Peninsula. Our agency partners travel to the drop-off sites to get the food and get it to their pantry. For the volunteers in Grand Marais, this entails a round trip of 70 miles twice a month to pick up food at our Germfask agency, Christ's Fellowship Ministries.



Kay, the Grand Marais pantry coordinator, discusses pantry operations with Bailey Lewis, the food bank's Upper Peninsula Agency Partnerships Coordinator.



Farmer and pantry volunteer Andrea, shown with food bank Content Specialist Ash Randolph, said she volunteers at the Grand Marias pantry because she wants to make sure the resource is available in her community.

Local volunteer Andrea started serving at the pantry in fall of 2025. She gives her time while also working on her family's farm and community-supported agriculture initiative. In addition, she is helping to bring other vital resources to Grand Marais, such as dentistry and veterinary services. Kay and Andrea also regularly discuss ways to raise money to bring more fresh products to the pantry, like eggs and cheese.

"Part of the reason that I decided I wanted to be a part of the pantry is, not because I have time, but because someone needs to keep it open," she said. "It's important to have resources for people. This year, it saved a lot of people in town."

Andrea herself utilizes the pantry's resources from time to time, especially when it's difficult for her to travel several miles from Grand Marais to a larger town with a grocery store. And although her family farm started out as a resource to support her own health, it quickly became something more. In addition to nourishing people through her work at the pantry, Andrea has discovered the profound impact of nourishing community through volunteerism. "Every experience that you have with a person changes their day," Andrea said to describe volunteering as a whole. "I do believe that putting yourself in situations to help people makes a huge difference in our world, in your world. The presence that you bring — just being there to be part of something bigger changes our world."



Volunteer Kristin said the Cedar Post Pantry in Cedarville wouldn't be possible without support from local donors.

Food security efforts in eastern UP are for the community, by the community

Cedar Post Pantry in Cedarville is one of many great examples of the ways hunger-relief efforts support and are supported by small communities through diligence and resourcefulness.

The Cedarville pantry, which serves approximately 120 families a month, functions with the support of revenue from the Cedar Post Thrift Shop, which is in the same building as the pantry. The thrift store runs on trust and donations. When people select items at the thrift store, they can offer a donation for the items, and those funds go directly to the pantry.

Pantry vice president Kristin said the pantry wouldn't be possible without organizations like the Herrick Foundation, Les Cheneaux Community Foundation, and local businesses like Cedarville Foods.

Recently, the Herrick Foundation provided funds for Cedar Post to repaint the building exterior. Les Cheneaux Community Foundation is a reliable source of operating support. Local grocer Cedarville Foods supports the pantry with monetary donations and with $10 vouchers. Cedar Post offers those vouchers to households plus an additional voucher to help pantry visitors get fresh fruits and vegetables. The pantry currently does not have the capacity to store fresh produce.

The significance of the efforts of everyday community members at large cannot be overstated. After all, the funds by which the pantry operates exist because of the products they donate to the thrift store and the money donated when they select items from the store.

Kristin, a Drummond Island resident who has been with Cedar Post for three years, stressed the importance of the thrift store and pantry and its support in their community. She started volunteering in an effort to widen her world and eventually became a trustee and vice president.

"Our regulars really depend on Cedar Post for food and for reasonably priced clothing," she said. "There are people I know who come in and buy clothes just so they don't have to go to the laundromat and pay to wash them. That's just how desperate some people are. I'm just happy that we can be here to help."

Hardy Eastern UP community adapts in the face of challenges

Residents of Newberry and Luce County at large face no end of challenges when it comes to securing food for their families. The closest big-box store, a Meijer, is over an hour away in Sault Ste. Marie. Local grocery stores help, but the convenient location comes at a cost. The same food can cost significantly more at the local store compared to Meijer.

Tradeoffs like this are ever-present in the Upper Peninsula because of the small population and vast distances between cities big enough to host large retail chains. Even those who grow their own food face struggles unique to the Upper Peninsula. A small growing season means most people can't risk planting crops until Memorial Day, and they must harvest by late September to avoid frost. It can also be difficult to grow the variety of fresh produce that is more abundant in Michigan's Lower Peninsula.

Because of these factors, the Mobile Food Pantry program is a lifeline for communities like Newberry. Our partners who coordinate the mobiles understand this more than most. Living in the community and being a part of these distributions, means generous folks like Pastor Kyle Kuehl have direct insight into the community's challenges.

"I see how people struggle," Kyle said. "Newberry is a retirement community, and they struggle to make ends meet. We have families around here, too — a lot of good families who struggle. It's great to supply some of the help that they need."

Kyle is a pastor of three Upper Peninsula churches, a coordinator for mobiles in Luce County, and a board member at Feeding America West Michigan. He said that COVID-19 spurred the highest attendance during the mobiles he has worked at, drawing 600 households. Several years later, that number has dropped, yet it still remains high at nearly 400 households monthly. Neighbors make the journey to Newberry from as far away as Chippewa County, Mackinac County, and Marquette County.

"I love being there with people, connecting with people, and being able to share these resources. Every time a car leaves, they're always thanking us," Kyle said. "To hear that every single time, I know we're doing good and we're helping out people well here."



Pastor Kyle Kuehl of Trinity Lutheran Church in Newberry coordinates mobile food pantries in Luce County and is a Feeding America West Michigan board member.

Help more neighbors access the food they need to thrive.

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







Meet Bailey, Our Upper Peninsula Partnerships Coordinator

Bailey Lewis moved to the Upper Peninsula and began working with Feeding America West Michigan in February 2023. She had previously worked for the United Way and felt that her previous role really prepared her for being the UP Partnerships Coordinator.



Bailey Lewis lives and works in the Upper Peninsula to support our agency partners in the region.

Although working with food security was new to her at the time, she quickly grew to love not just her role, but also the people at the food bank and in the Upper Peninsula. It's those very people, she said, that continue to motivate her to do her best.

"My [food bank] team makes me a better person overall," she said. "I can't say enough positive things about them. We all really try our hardest to serve. I also love the people here. There really is no other place on earth like the Upper Peninsula. People are really nice, and there's a very nice sense of community. There's something so special about serving your community. There's just no other way to put it. It's, I think, the reason I was put on Earth."

We thank our donors for the generous financial support that makes Bailey's work possible. Because of our supporters, we're able to make a deep commitment to nourishing our neighbors in the Upper Peninsula.

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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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