

Full Plate PRESS



Transforming Hunger Relief in the Upper Peninsula

It's 10 minutes till 10 on a frigid February morning in Menominee County when Ken Meshigaud, tribal chairperson of the Hannahville Indian Community, steps outside to greet the truck. Feeding America West Michigan has just arrived with 15,000 pounds of carrots, grapefruit, potatoes, apples and PopTarts for local families in need.

It was just one of 100 Mobile Pantries Feeding America West Michigan will send to the Upper Peninsula this year as part of our new hunger-relief strategy in the region. As of March 31, that new strategy has increased the amount of food reaching the Upper Peninsula by 53 percent.

"There has been unmet need in the Upper Peninsula for years," said CEO Ken Estelle. "We realized that if we were going to change that, it would take a new approach."

In the past, all the food Feeding America West Michigan distributed in the Upper Peninsula passed through branches in Sault Ste. Marie and Ishpeming or through our partner organization in Houghton.* Today, food pantries in the Central and Eastern UP can host Mobile Pantries and order directly from our main warehouse, giving them access to fresh fruits and vegetables, dairy and meat in greater quantity and variety than ever before.

The overall goal: To distribute 2.7 million meals in 2016, a more-than 50 percent increase over 2013, the year before the transition began.

Margo Withey of Good Neighbor Services, a food pantry in Manistique, has seen the impact on Schoolcraft County firsthand. She says hosting Feeding America West Michigan's Mobile Pantries has enabled her agency to reach hundreds of new clients.

"It's a blessing to this community, to the whole Upper Peninsula, that we're able to get food into these areas. There's a whole lot of people who would be going without [otherwise]."

As Feeding America West Michigan expands in the Upper Peninsula, more support — especially financial support — is needed.

"We invite anyone who's interested in working with us to come out and see a Mobile Pantry in action," Estelle said. "See the impact we can have when the community works together."

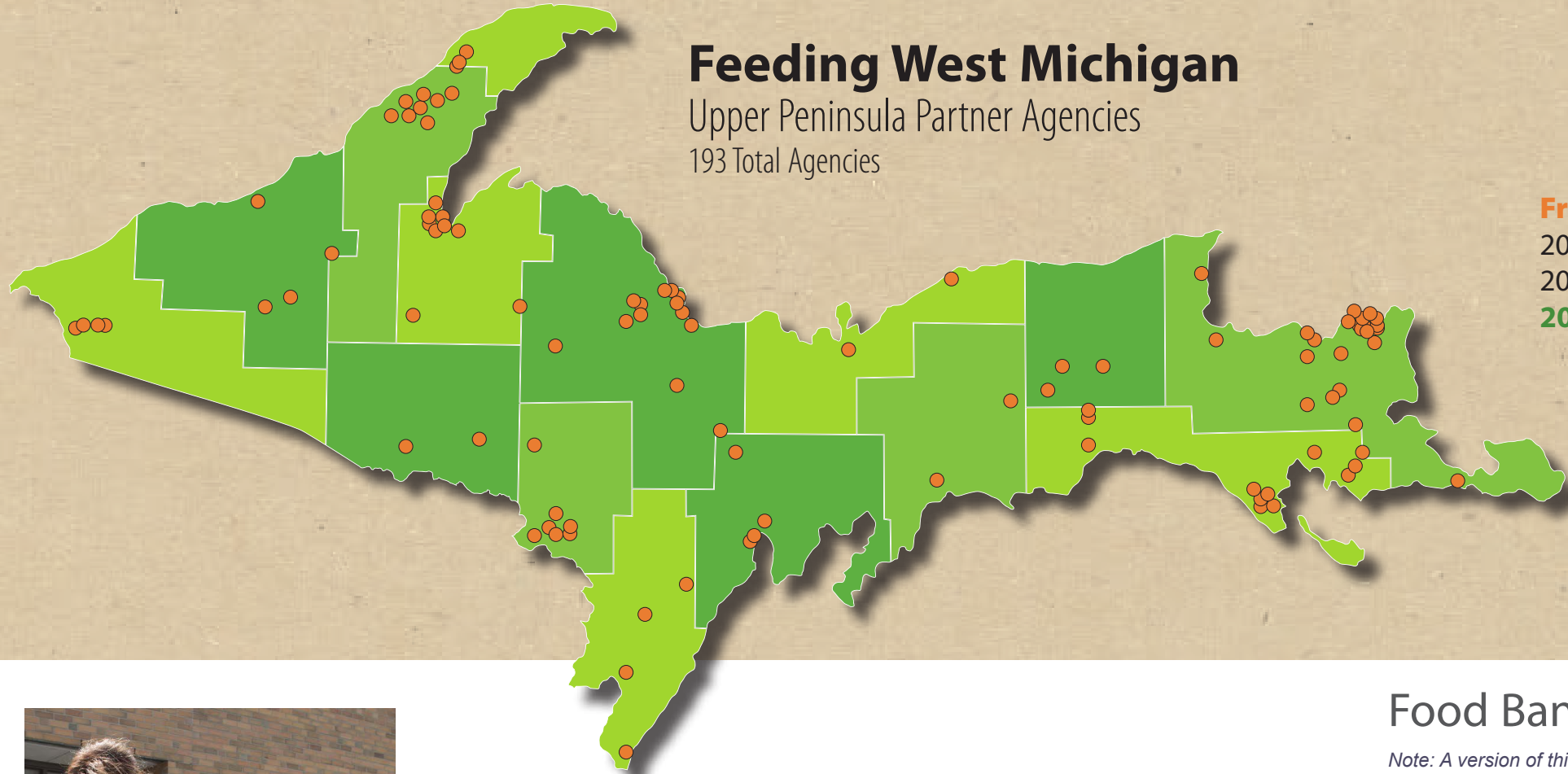


**Note: Service to the Western UP Food Bank will not be affected by this change.*

Solving Hunger in the Upper Peninsula

Feeding West Michigan

Upper Peninsula Partner Agencies
193 Total Agencies



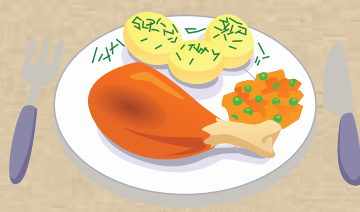
Fresh Produce Distributed

2014: 198,222 pounds
2015: 482,170 pounds
2016 Projection: 815,000 pounds



Mobile Food Pantries

2014: 27
2015: 47
2016 Projection: 100



Total Meals

2014: 1,773,406 meals
2015: 1,872,511 meals
2016 Projection: 2,660,000 meals



First-Time Volunteer: Mobile Pantry Shows Power of Community

"I felt very happy and very sad simultaneously," said Anne Okonek of Cornell, a small town near Escanaba in the Upper Peninsula, "happy that all of this food was being put to good use and sad that people had to rely on [a Mobile Food Pantry] to get enough to eat."

A retired forest service manager, Anne has been donating to Feeding America West Michigan since 2008. She volunteered for the first time this year at a Webster Elementary Mobile Pantry, a distribution that provided more than 5,800 meals to people of all ages.

"There were older people who had their laundry baskets to put food in. There were a couple people in wheelchairs that had boxes in their laps and people were pushing them through," Anne said. "Everyone was so thankful."

Anne was particularly impressed by the volunteer effort coordinated by Principal Craig LeClaire. High school hockey players, members of the National Honors Society and volunteers from a local church all came together to unload the truck and help clients carry food to their cars.

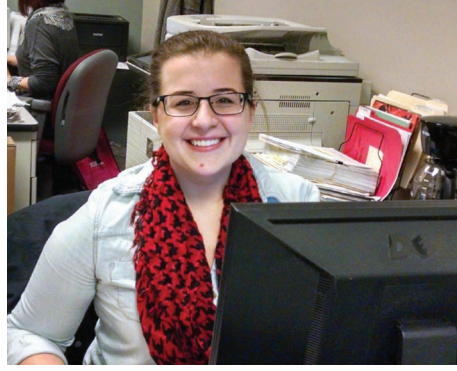
"I can't believe all of that happened in one hour's time. It was amazing."

As moving as the experience was, Anne said she was left with the impression that more needs to be done. While she had originally planned to do nothing but relax in the first few years of her retirement, Anne says she's looking to get more involved in local hunger relief.

She'll have a lot of opportunities: Feeding America West Michigan plans to deliver 100 Mobile Pantries across the Upper Peninsula this year.

Food Banker Profile: Maggie Marcinkus

Note: A version of this story originally appeared on The Rapidian.



Q: Where did you go to college and what did you study?

A: I went to Grand Valley State University and majored in Public and Nonprofit Administration with an emphasis on Community Health. Go Lakers!

Q: Why are you passionate about hunger relief?

A: Hunger inhibits learning as well as significantly affects our emotional state and our behavior. It's a basic need that all too often goes unfulfilled and sets people up for failure. These people in our community are my family. It is ingrained in me and motivates me daily to do what I can to set them up for success.

Q: What are your goals as volunteer coordinator?

A: My main goal is to engage with our community to share more of our amazing and fun volunteering opportunities! It's always a blast working with our volunteers and there are so many different things to do for people of all ages and abilities.

Q: What do you hope people take away from their experience volunteering at the Food Bank?

A: I want our volunteers to really know their impact when they come into the Food Bank. They are so vital to our organization and to our community!

Q: What kind of music do you listen to?

A: Volbeat is my favorite band with Mastodon and Megadeth being second and third. When I'm not feeling the metal vibe, my go-tos are Elton John and Al Green.

Q: Any other hobbies or personal data you'd like to share?

A: I love to bake! My mom taught me when I was young and luckily I was able to snatch some of her secret recipes when I put together my own recipe book. I love being active by dancing, running and playing tennis. I'm very much into crafts of all sorts (I am currently knitting a blanket with broomsticks!).

FEEDING AMERICA®

West Michigan

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Feeding America West Michigan exists to ensure safe food is available to the hungry in our community. By working with over 1,100 hunger-relief agencies, we are able to serve an estimated 492,100 people in West Michigan and the Upper Peninsula each year.

Call us at 616.784.3250 or learn more at FeedWM.org.

Feeding America West Michigan Food Bank is a member of Feeding America, The United Way, and The Food Bank Council of Michigan.



You Can Feed West Michigan

To give online please visit us at FeedWM.org



Family Finds Food and Community at Abundant Life Mission Center

Whether moving furniture, grinding tree stumps or working in a pallet shop, Dennis Wishman was proud to be able to do more than his fair share. A typical scene had Dennis on one side of a grand piano, three guys on the other. But all of that changed when he fell from a semi-trailer while unloading firewood.

"I ruptured every disc in my neck from C3 down to C7," he said.

The injury and ensuing back and hip surgeries took more from Dennis than his ability to earn a steady income. They took away the pride and camaraderie that comes from working.

The effect was obvious to Tammy, his wife of 26 years. "Just the way he would look when he would see other people working, I could see he was upset, but he wouldn't say anything."

They turned to local food pantries to feed themselves and their daughters. The family moved to the Menominee area four years ago and got connected with Abundant Life Mission Center, Feeding America West Michigan's partner food pantry and homeless shelter.

When Dennis found out that Abundant Life needed a volunteer kitchen manager, he stepped up. Today Dennis — with frequent help from Tammy — supervises a team of volunteers who prepare and serve food for the mission's residents.



"I was brought up, you help others before you help yourself," Tammy says. "It makes me feel better that I contribute, I did something to try to change things."

On the day we visited, Dennis and Tammy were serving pork chops, salad and fresh fruit. Their daughters Ashley and Samantha were both there, taking breaks from chopping vegetables to chase down Ashley's three-year-old son Dominick.

"He keeps us on our toes, I'll tell you that," Dennis said, smiling.

Abundant Life is growing. The organization recently acquired an old Catholic school building. When renovations are complete, the facility will be able to house more than 80 people. And Dennis and Tammy will be there to feed them when they arrive.

