

Spring 2017

THE NEWSLETTER OF
FEEDING
AMERICA
West Michigan

Full Plate PRESS



IN THIS ISSUE



FOOD BANK ADVOCATES TAKE
MESSAGE TO WASHINGTON . . . 2



REFUGEE STUDENTS SERVE
THOSE IN NEED 4



MICHIGAN MUSHROOM GROWER
DONATES TO FOOD BANK
..... 6



FOOD BANKER PROFILE:
NATE MAROULIS
..... 7



Food Bank Advocates Take Message to Washington

On March 7, Feeding America West Michigan joined hundreds of hunger-relief advocates on Capitol Hill to share one simple message: Hunger is a big problem. But together we can fix it.

Our Michigan delegation visited a dozen legislators from both houses and parties, including Senators Stabenow and Peters, and Congressmen Huizenga, Amash, Moolenaar, and Upton whose districts cover parts of Feeding America West Michigan's 40-county service area.

In our meetings, we emphasized the importance of strong federal nutrition programs that complement the work of private nonprofit organizations like food banks, especially as Congress sets its budget priorities for the next fiscal year.

Two important federal nutrition programs that support our work at Feeding America West Michigan are the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), which serves people in need directly, and The Emergency Food Assistance Program (TEFAP), which provides food to food banks.

An estimated 60 percent of the people we serve at Feeding America West Michigan receive some help purchasing groceries through SNAP. Without that help, they would require much more assistance from the pantries in our network, who are already stretched thin. TEFAP, meanwhile, provided 3.6 million pounds of food to Feeding America West Michigan in 2016 — 11.9 percent of all the food we received that year.

While our leaders were receptive to our message, we know that effective advocacy isn't over in one day. With so much happening in Washington, we need to make sure hunger relief stays on the agenda. That's where you come in.

Start by following Feeding America West Michigan and our national Feeding America office on social media. We'll keep you updated on food policy developments and give you concrete ways to take action. You can also study up on federal nutrition policy at FRAC.org. With a little knowledge, you'll be prepared to confront challenges as they arise.

Don't Wait. Advocate!

Take action right now. Visit House.gov to find your representative and send them an email expressing your support for hunger relief.

Dear Congressman/woman [Name],

I am writing to you to express my support for strong public-private partnerships to address food insecurity in our district and across the country. Millions of Americans are struggling with hunger, and, in spite of the good work of the national Feeding America network and local food pantries, more needs to be done. I'm asking you to support full funding for federal nutrition programs like SNAP and TEFAP in the coming budget year. These programs are efficient and effective and they go hand-in-hand with the efforts of private nonprofits in the community. If we work together, we can solve hunger.

Sincerely,

[Your Name]

Rotary, NMU Students Bring Mobile Pantry to Marquette

Haley Knight got her start as an advocate for basic needs in the mountains of Honduras.

Still a high school student, Knight traveled there with members of the Muskegon Rotary Club to install water filters in villages plagued by dysentery and parasites. Working with a local sister club, they identified the places where the need was greatest, installed the filters and built real relationships with the communities to ensure the impact would last.

When she came to Northern Michigan University, Knight brought those experiences with her. She started the Marquette Rotaract Club, a Rotary-affiliated student organization, and though she remains invested in the needs of developing countries (she's majoring in political science with an international studies minor), she's turned her

attention to basic needs a little closer to home.

"There are so many food deserts in the UP. It was unique in that way," Knight said. In Marquette County, hunger threatens 1 in 7 people. Many are her fellow college students.

"If you live on campus you generally have a meal plan, so you're getting fed because it's mandatory in your tuition. Once you get out of the dorms, you have the option of not having a meal plan." Burdened by rent and other expenses, Knight said, many students miss meals.

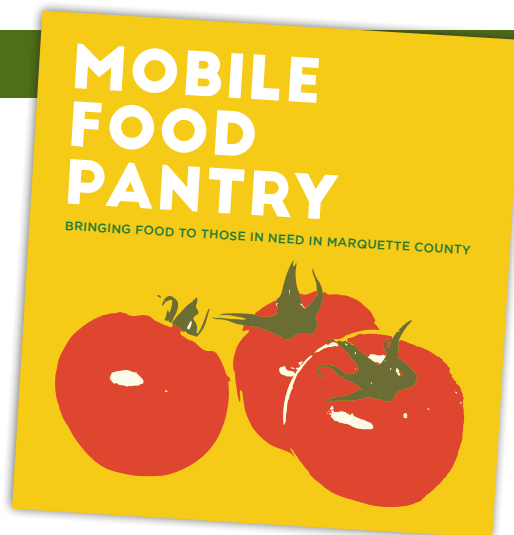
Having grown up in Muskegon, where Feeding America West Michigan has a strong presence, Knight knew who to contact. And we were grateful for the new partner.

Knight made her pitch to fund a Mobile Pantry to the three Rotary clubs in Marquette. Not only did they agree to fund it, they committed to volunteering at the distribution themselves. Gauthier Insurance, which funds a monthly Mobile Pantry in nearby Ishpeming, also chipped in. The first distribution took place on April 18 at the Salvation Army.

In spite of the constant rain, Knight and 40-some volunteers were able to serve more than 200 households in the first hour. Knight was struck by the number of young kids who attended the distribution with their parents. She also saw a number of college students and many people who took the bus or carpooled to get there.

Her fellow volunteers were struck by just how many people turned out to receive food. "They were really moved by the event. You have to be there to appreciate how much you're giving out. It was a huge learning experience."

Finishing up her final semester at NMU, Knight will be off to new adventures by the time Rotaract organizes its next Mobile Pantry. But she's optimistic Marquette's Rotary community will continue what she started. "If they see their money going to something so beneficial for their community, they're going to give money again and again."



Haley Knight, right, with fellow Rotaract member Brittany Munger.

Refugee Students Serve Those in Need at Union High School

If you need food and you visit the Mobile Pantry at Union High School, chances are the person who serves you will be a refugee.

Refugee students, explains school improvement facilitator Halima Ismail, are at the heart of Union's partnership with Feeding America West Michigan.

"They like being part of the community," Ismail says. "They like helping people, and they like knowing that if their parents are coming [to receive food] they're able to help out."

It started when a local benefactor offered free computers to refugee students if they completed a certain number of volunteer hours. With a computer, students can access programs like Imagine Learning, which provides literacy and math tutoring in their own language.

One of those students is Abdelsalam Yaya. Yaya, who goes by his last name, is a 17-year-old from Habila, Sudan. After spending years in a refugee camp, Yaya, his parents and four of his siblings were approved for resettlement in the United States. They arrived last year.

Yaya is finishing his sophomore year at Union. He smiles often, especially when trying to communicate a concept he can't quite put into words. Back home, he says, "We just learned Arabic. We didn't have English books."

That's where the computer comes in handy. Ismail says that in just two months Yaya logged close to 100 hours on Imagine Learning, and he frequently stays after school four or five nights a week to finish his homework.

But even after earning his computer, Yaya has continued volunteering at the Mobile Pantries.

"It's so cool," he says. "Some people, the women and men come to get the food, and we give it to them. They say, 'Thank you,' and we say, 'No problem.' We help."

Senior Amina Abdullahi also volunteers at the Mobile Pantry distributions. Abdullahi recently applied to Grand Valley State University and, like high school seniors across the country, she's anxiously waiting to find out if she's been accepted. While she hasn't settled on a major yet, she hopes to continue studying her favorite subjects, English and physics.

Abdullahi grew up in the Kenyan refugee camp of Dadaab after famine and drought forced her mother



Amina Abdullahi gives a bag of potatoes to a client at Union High School's Feb. 27 Mobile Pantry.

“Some people, the women and men come to get the food, and we give it to them. They say, ‘Thank you,’ and we say, ‘No problem.’ We help.”

to leave her home country of Somalia. The situation wasn't much better in Kenya, it turned out, where getting enough water to drink, let alone bathe, was a challenge. So in 2013 at the age of 14, Abdullahi and her mother moved to the United States.

Needless to say, moving to America was an adjustment. In her long blue dress and head scarf, Abdullahi stands out. But clothing proved to be a cultural barrier in another way. She recalls how, a few days after moving to Grand Rapids, one of her neighbors answered the door wearing a Halloween costume. “For three days, I not come outside,” Abdullahi says.

American slang also threw her off early on. An observant Muslim, Abdullahi remembers how in eighth grade she asked her fellow students if the meat they were serving in the cafeteria was pork. It turned out to be chicken.

“And they said, ‘You’re crazy,’ and I said, ‘I’m not crazy.’” Fortunately, a fellow Somali student was on hand to explain what they meant. “Now I understand it’s not a bad word.”

While Yaya usually brings home a little food from each Mobile Pantry for his family, Abdullahi can't. Hauling 30 pounds of food on the two buses she takes to get home just isn't practical. They manage, though, because her mother works and gets some help from the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program.

Union's refugee population is sizeable, 125 students out of a total student body of roughly 1,200. In fact, Union is currently increasing the staff for its newcomer program, which serves refugee and immigrant students, from two staff members to five.

A recent increase in the resettlement of Congolese refugees to Grand Rapids has contributed to the growth of Union's refugee population, says Nathaniel Harrison of the Refugee Education Center, which coordinates services for refugees with GRPS, Bethany Christian Services, Samaritas and others.

The availability of manufacturing work has long made Grand Rapids attractive to refugees, but social support from the existing refugee population is another powerful draw.

“When families are being resettled, [agencies] always look for a tie, like a family member, so they can receive that extra support,” Harrison says. That was



Amina Abdullahi and Abdelsalam Yaya with their teacher, Erika Curtiss, who works with refugee and immigrant students.

true for Abdullahi, whose older brother settled in Grand Rapids in 2006.

In the last two months, however, the U.S. stance toward refugees has shifted.

“Things are always changing,” Harrison says. “You’re not really sure what’s going to come from one week to another with executive orders and appeals.”

The families he works with feel that shift acutely. “It’s the uncertainty,” he says. “It’s worry about students going to school that they’re going to be harassed or bullied or deported for some reason. It’s difficult for families not to know what’s going on.”

Ismail has heard similar concerns from students at Union, who fear being separated from family members who are still living abroad. Herself a child of immigrants — her mother is from Peru and her father is from Pakistan — Ismail points out that refugees are “the most-vetted group of all the people who come to the United States.”

To those who want to reach out to the refugee community, Harrison recommends contacting an agency like Bethany or Samaritas to support their existing programs. But above all, he says, be open-minded. “When you’re meeting refugee families, treat them like you would anybody else. Ask them about their day. Just be kind to your neighbor.”

For their part, Yaya, Abdullahi and their classmates continue volunteering at Union's Mobile Food Pantries month after month, making sure every neighbor who comes to them for help goes home with a box of food, no matter where they came from.

Michigan Mushroom Grower Donates Exotic Fungi to Food Bank

Imagine a crop that reduces waste as it grows, can be cultivated year-round, and contains a ton of vital nutrients. You might not realize it, but you're thinking of a mushroom. The best part: They're being grown right here in Michigan.

Gourmet Mushrooms Inc., based in California, opened its Scottville, Mich., location in 2013. Earlier this year, they made their first donation to Feeding America West Michigan.

Like all farmers, GMI occasionally finds itself with excess crop. "We do run into times when our harvest is greater than our sales," said production, packing, and harvest manager Jack Smith, Jr. "We'd rather go and see it utilized than go to waste."

The Scottville facility consists of a small office space and two cavernous warehouses. The smaller of the two, North Building, is where workers assemble the "substrate," a blend of soil, sawdust and other elements in which the mushrooms grow.

"How many people actually use sawdust?" Smith asked. "We're taking it and making a sustainable product out of it."

Once the substrate is assembled, it's packed into small containers, sent through a steam sterilizer and "inoculated" with spores. The containers then travel by conveyor belt to South Building, where the mushrooms are grown.

Step into South Building and it hits you immediately — the earthy, peppery smell of exotic mushrooms emanating from 20 "grow rooms," each about 100 feet long, where the inoculated containers rest on long racks. Every aspect of the climate inside the grow rooms is controlled by computer: temperature, humidity, light, even the CO2 levels. Some rooms are dry and brightly lit. Others are so foggy and dark you can't see five feet beyond the glass doors.

When mature, the mushrooms bloom out of the tops of their containers. All are harvested by hand. From inoculation to harvest, the process takes 55 to 110 days, depending on the variety.



Certified organic and cultivating only rare varieties like maitake and nebrodini, GMI stands out among other mushroom growers. According to the USDA, just one kind mushroom — the button mushroom you see in grocery stores — accounted for over 97 percent of the US mushroom crop last year. Shiitake and oyster mushrooms make up the majority of the rest, leaving a mere 0.5 percent for the kinds of exotic mushrooms GMI grows.

With such limited exposure to fungi, it's no wonder many of us are a little hesitant.

Harvesting supervisor Debbie Beaudrie says she only recently developed a taste for mushrooms. "I was picky. I never ate them as a kid." Now she loves them. "You could live on mushrooms. They're heart-healthy and everything."

Mushrooms are indeed healthy: high-protein, low-calorie, cholesterol-free and packed with antioxidants and B vitamins. They even produce Vitamin D when exposed to sunlight.

But a food can only be good for you if you eat it. So how have Feeding America West Michigan's clients responded to seeing this unusual produce on our Mobile Pantries?

Truck driver Ken Cavanary, Jr. said that not a single bag was left over when he brought them to Community CRC in Grand Rapids this winter.

Community CRC's Judy Myszak said her clients are adventurous eaters and she's grateful for the variety of fresh produce available to her clients at Mobile Pantries. "It's very important to promote the healthy foods, and I believe that a lot of our clients, if not most of them, appreciate them."

In 2016, fresh produce accounted for more than one third of all the food Feeding America West Michigan distributed. Now, thanks to GMI, there will be one more Michigan-grown crop in the mix this year.

Food Banker Profile:

NATE MAROULIS, VOLUNTEER COORDINATOR

Q: Can you describe your role at Feeding America West Michigan?

A: As the volunteer coordinator, I schedule groups that are interested in volunteering with us, whether it's a company, a school, another nonprofit organization. Some of the groups are new to us, so it's a good opportunity to teach people about what we do.

Q: What led you to your current role?

A: So before this I was working a job that definitely paid the bills but overall the end result wasn't really gratifying. I'm not a devout believer in karma but overall you kind of become what you do, if it's what you do all the time. When Shay (Krick, programs administrator) told me about this, who I knew from working in Belding, it seemed a little too good to be true. It's such a positive result.



Q: What do you find most fulfilling about your job?

A: I think getting to see volunteers from different walks of life coming together, you know, for the common goal of helping the community. It really is the most gratifying aspect of it. But also, hearing people who, whether it's community service or a school requirement, are trying to better themselves. It's eye-opening really and kind of humbling.

Q: What's the biggest challenge?

A: There just aren't enough hours in the day. (laughs) I try to help out where I can and it doesn't always end up being at my desk. It can kind of pull me in different directions. It makes the day go faster, but sometimes you have to look at the clock and say, it's closing time. We'll pick this up tomorrow and keep on rolling with it.

Q: What's your pitch to people who haven't volunteered with us before?

A: I like to share the metrics that we have. An hour being 200 meals is usually a strong enough image that they feel compelled. When I give an overview of how many counties we distribute to, how many communities that we've helped, how many organizations we've partnered with, they're blown away by the scope of it.

Q: You're a proud new parent. What's that like?

A: It has definitely put a lot of things in perspective. Working here and becoming a parent helped me gain motivation back. For a long time working at a restaurant I was spinning my tires so to speak and working a ridiculous amount and not really getting anywhere. So having a family inspired me to do better not just for myself but for the people around me.

Raise a glass. Give a Meal. HopsAgainstHungerMI.org



Fremont Area Community Foundation Models Philanthropic Leadership

Since 2008, Fremont Area Community Foundation (FACF) has donated more than \$1 million to Feeding America West Michigan. That fact would be noteworthy on its own, but FACF has done much more than simply write checks. They've encouraged local churches and agencies to chip in too, creating a groundswell of support throughout the community.

Their secret is the matching grant. When FACF makes a grant to Feeding America West Michigan to support our partner food pantries and community centers in Newaygo County, they do it on the condition that the agencies must contribute their own money as well. For traditional, fixed-site food pantries, FACF offers a two-to-one match. For agencies who host Mobile Food Pantries, which provide a wide variety of fresh fruits, vegetables, dairy products and other healthy foods, the match is three-to-one.

FACF program officer Nicole D'Arcy calls it a "triple partnership" between Feeding America West Michigan, the foundation and local partner agencies.

The impact is clear. In 2016, Feeding America West Michigan provided 203 meals per person in need in Newaygo County. That's nearly three times the national Feeding America network median.

FACF has three main priorities: education, poverty to prosperity, and community and economic development, D'Arcy said. Addressing food insecurity ties into all three.

"Our fundamental belief is that if people are hungry they can't worry about their other needs or creating a better life for themselves."

TrueNorth Community Services views hunger relief much the same way.

The matching grants they receive from FACF fund their food pantry, monthly Mobile Pantry distributions and a host of other initiatives including afterschool programs, the Center for Nonprofit Housing, the Volunteer Resource Center of Newaygo County, and the Circles program, which helps participants climb out of poverty.

TrueNorth is one of 22 partner agencies receiving funding for food distribution from FACF. TrueNorth's Brad Hastings calls that support "huge."

In our eyes, FACF's most significant contribution has been to view hunger as an issue that affects the entire community — and then mobilizing the entire community to address it. We take their example as a challenge to foster similar collaborations in every county we serve. If we can do that, we'll be well on our way to truly solving hunger.



**FEEDING
AMERICA**
West Michigan

864 West River Center Drive NE
Comstock Park, MI 49321
616.784.3250
FeedWM.org

Feeding America West Michigan exists to ensure safe food is available to the hungry in our community. By working with more than 1,000 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 is a member of Feeding America, The United Way, and The Food Bank Council of Michigan.

**FEEDING
AMERICA**

United
Way

CHARITY
NAVIGATOR
Four Star Charity

You Can Feed West Michigan
To give online please visit us at FeedWM.org

 FACEBOOK

 TWITTER

 INSTAGRAM

 YOUTUBE

 LINKEDIN