

Full Plate PRESS

THE NEWSLETTER OF
**FEEDING
AMERICA**
West Michigan Food Bank

Another Record Year for Hunger Relief in West Michigan

Feeding America West Michigan Food Bank just wrapped up another record year, distributing more than 26 million pounds of food in 2014.

“Some people are surprised when we tell them the demand for food hasn’t decreased in our communities,” said CEO Ken Estelle. “I tell them we’re distributing more food today than at any time in the last three decades.”

Despite the overall improvements in Michigan’s economy, a huge number of our neighbors remain financially strapped. Michigan unemployment is higher than the national average, part-time work has become far more prevalent and the labor force is still smaller than it was before the recession.

Particularly troubling is the high need among two vulnerable populations: children and military veterans. In West Michigan and the Upper Peninsula, 1 in 5 kids struggles with hunger while fully a quarter of the families we serve include a veteran or current service member.

The good news is that Michigan’s farmers, retailers and processors are giving more food than ever before.

“We couldn’t operate without the donations we receive. They make it possible for us to feed half a million people each year,” said food sourcing specialist Katie Auwers, who helped bring 44 new food donors on board in 2014.

One of those new donors, VanSingel Farms, sent nearly 150,000 pounds of vegetables to the Food Bank this year, including some sweet corn they grew specifically for charity. Co-owner Calvin VanSingel challenges his fellow farmers to “be a leader” in the community and do the same.

“Just give back and then trust God because if you give back and trust in him, he’s going to take care of you,” he said.

Just as important as the food coming in is the financial support that enables us to send the food out, Estelle emphasized.

“As a nonprofit, we rely on community support,” he said. “Our goal is to fully meet the need in our communities, and as long as generous people continue to give, I’m confident we can.”



Students from Rockford Christian School volunteer at Rockford’s American Legion Post 102 Mobile Pantry.

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From Ken's Keyboard:

Over the last few years, the nature of hunger in America has changed. While food banks used to talk almost exclusively about emergency hunger relief, we've recognized that for many of our neighbors, hunger is a long-term condition. Due to low wages, disability, old age and the scarcity of fresh food, thousands are now chronically food insecure. In addition, many working poor do not receive any significant public assistance, yet they still struggle to feed their families.

A new reality requires a new approach. That's why Feeding America West Michigan is proud to be one of the founding members of the Community Food Club of Greater Grand Rapids. This new collaboration between Feeding America West Michigan, Home Repair Services, Habitat for Humanity of Kent County, ACCESS of West Michigan, the Downtown Food Pantry at Westminster Presbyterian, Salvation Army and United Church Outreach Ministry is one of the first partnerships in our community created specifically to address chronic food insecurity.

The Food Club is not a pantry. Instead, it provides healthy food and nutrition education to members who pay a low monthly fee. Based at Home Repair Services in downtown Grand Rapids, the Food Club will be open six days a week at hours similar to those of a traditional grocery store. It's a bridge between charity and self-sufficiency.

"I really think this is the answer for a lot of us," said Maria Favela, a food pantry client, volunteer and now a member of the Food Club's consumer advisory board.

Because Maria works third shift at a local bakery, often seven days a week, it can be hard for her to get to a food pantry. The Food Club's flexible hours mean that Maria will be able to shop at a time that's convenient for her. She also takes pride in the fact that rather than being a client, she'll now be a customer.

"You don't have to be embarrassed, take a number, wait, answer all kinds of questions. You come, you pay your membership, you get food."

By supporting new efforts like the Community Food Club of Greater Grand Rapids, we hope to be part of a brighter future for our region, one in which everybody, regardless of where they are in life, can be both nourished and valued.

And stay tuned. We'll keep you updated on how this new model matures over the next year.



Ken Estelle, CEO



Local Companies Drive Out Hunger

Cargill and Gordon Food Service hosted a joint food drive that yielded 11,935 pounds of food and \$3,000, for a total of 21,324 meals.

So many local businesses offer to host food drives at the end of the year that we had to bring on a new intern just to manage the program. While the bulk of our food comes from farmers, retailers and processors, food drives are an easy way for people to get involved in hunger relief for the first time.

October to December alone, 50 food and fund drives were held for the Food Bank. The hosts included Lake Trust Credit Union, Arclight Brewery and KoKo FitClub. We're grateful to all of them.

Lakeshore Health Network Elevates Mobile Pantry Program

Lakeshore Health Network and Mercy Health have hosted a Mobile Pantry at Hackley Hospital in Muskegon since 2007. This year, they outdid themselves by donating \$14,200 to install a new lift gate on one of our Mobile Pantry vehicles. By making it easier to unload food at our distributions this donation will reduce the risk of volunteer injury and increase our efficiency.



Driver Randy Vile and logistics manager Tim Johnson demonstrate our new Lakeshore Health-funded lift gate.

Walmart Foundation Grants \$120,000 Toward Fleet Renewal

As part of their 2014 hunger-relief efforts in West Michigan, the Walmart Foundation granted \$120,000 toward the Food Bank's vehicle replacement campaign this fall. The grant comes at a critical time, as the need to repair and replace aging trucks



has increased as our food distribution has grown. The grant was used to purchase additional refrigerated straight trucks for our fleet.

The Walmart Foundation awarded a total of \$280,000 to Feeding America West Michigan, Kids' Food Basket and Senior Meals Program, Inc. this October.

Army Couple Overcomes Food Insecurity with Help from Food Bank

On a bright September morning, Jon and Elizabeth Alba waited at the VA Medical Center in Iron Mountain, not for medical care but for a few days' supply of groceries from Feeding America West Michigan. Some 2,700 veterans and their family members received food that day.

Jon and Elizabeth met in Texas where they served in the same battalion, Jon as an infantryman and Elizabeth as a combat medic.

They married in 2013 and moved to Escanaba to be near Elizabeth's family. Since then, the couple has managed to scrape together a living, but it hasn't been easy.



Jonathan and Elizabeth Alba are one of an estimated 620,000 military households seeking help from the Feeding America network.

Like many soldiers his age, Jon saw combat. Unlike most, his unit wasn't sent to Iraq or Afghanistan, but into the turmoil of the drug war along the U.S./Mexico border, an experience that left him physically unharmed but emotionally scarred.

Elizabeth developed a stress fracture in her hip during training for which she's still awaiting surgery, and an accident at Fort Jackson left her with a head injury that causes her to black out, putting many of the jobs she's qualified for out of reach.

"No one wants me to work for them with my passing out and my hip, and Jon, no one wants to hire him when there's a loud noise and he's hitting the dirt," Elizabeth said.

So they got creative. Elizabeth taught herself to read Braille and now transposes books for the visually impaired. Jon is teaching mixed martial arts at a gym in Escanaba.

Asked whether they would enlist again if they had the chance, Elizabeth is confident in her answer: "Yes, but only for one reason and that's for my country."

With a hopefulness tempered by realism, the Albas are determined to make things work. Jon says they try to live by the same principle he teaches his fighters: "If it means something to you, you'll make time. If it means nothing, you'll make an excuse."

"We're doing what we can with what we have."

Note: A version of this story was originally published on the Huffington Post.



Volunteers Wrap up Fruitful Year

More food came through our warehouse this year than ever before, and our volunteers proved themselves more than equal to the task.

About 4 million pounds of food were sorted in our reclamation department in 2013. This year our volunteers had already exceeded that amount by mid autumn and kept on going, sorting more than 5.5 million pounds of food in 2014. Excellent work!

We also want to recognize the volunteers and farmers who enabled us to complete our 11th year of gleaning. On eight trips to local farms, they harvested 21,653 pounds of fresh produce.

Thank you to everyone who gave their time and talents to make this possible. You are the heart and soul of the Food Bank.



OUR GLEANING PARTNERS

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Krupp Farms
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Riveridge Produce Marketing
Bridget and Randy Tubbs-Carlson

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West Michigan Food Bank

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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 1,200 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 FeedingAmericaWestMichigan.org.

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



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Jim and Deb joined the Full Plates Forever Society because they wanted to do something that would continue to make an impact after they're gone.



Full Plates Profile: Jim and Deb

Jim and Deb's Food Bank story begins as many others do: with a handshake and a smile from former executive director John Arnold.

"He was very excited about the Food Bank," Jim said, "Charismatic and just very —"

"Passionate," Deb offered.

"— yeah, passionate about doing this for the people."

“ We never went without, but it was close, very close. ”

More than two decades after Jim, a Vietnam veteran like John, first came to the Food Bank's old Front Avenue location to volunteer, he and Deb decided to dedicate a portion of their estate to Feeding America West Michigan. They reserved 80 percent of their gift for general operating expenses and the remainder for the endowment that bears John's name.

"We may be able to help on a temporary basis with a check once a year...", Jim said, "[but] this will feed a lot of people hopefully over a longer term."

The history of the couple's passion for hunger relief goes back to Deb's personal experience with food insecurity as a young woman. Her husband at the time was in the Navy, and they were stationed at a base far from home.

"Our pay scale was very, very low, and there were times when we had to make a little bit of food last for a couple weeks before the next paycheck came. We never went without, but it was close, very close," she said.

"I wouldn't want to not have food, and I don't want anyone else to not have food."

Jim and Deb met at Amway and have been married for 31 years. Now retired, they wanted to do something that would continue to make an impact after they're gone. The process of writing a bequest into their wills was easy, they said, but more importantly, it felt right.

"It's something we have control over within our estate that will go toward continuing helping others as we've done while we're alive," Deb said.

Online Exclusive: Mobile Pantry Honors Mother's Legacy of Compassion

Margaret Johnson passed away in July at age 86. A longtime supporter of the Mobile Food Pantry at Hesperia United Methodist Church, Margaret asked that a collection be taken at her funeral to support the ministry. Margaret's family used the money to host a Mobile Pantry in her honor.

Read the full story online at FeedingAmericaWestMichigan.org/Newsletter.