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THE NEWSLETTER OF

**FEEDING
AMERICA**
West Michigan

2018 Winter Newsletter

Fighting hunger in the rural Upper Peninsula



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RURAL HUNGER AND ITS EFFECTS



There are similar events in Chippewa and Mackinaw counties each year. Project Homeless Connect is necessary and extends to people much further than the small town of Newberry. The annual event provides resources for anyone in Luce County who might need them, if they can make the trip.

Unfortunately, many people who would benefit from an event like Project Homeless Connect simply don't have the means or resources to attend. Due to the extreme rurality of the region, lack of transportation options, extreme weather conditions, and a myriad of other barriers, it is difficult for an event like this to reach everyone in need. With these barriers in place, many community members in the Upper Peninsula are forced to live with a lack of essential commodities. Many have left the U.P. because of the lack of opportunities, but the people that remain, more often than not, are seriously struggling. We need to find a way to reach those still in need. Feeding America West Michigan is grateful to be able to provide food for our neighbors in the U.P. who really need it in partnership with generous, local community partners.

The Upper Peninsula of Michigan is bursting with natural beauty, but amidst the stunning scenery, a large portion of the U.P.'s population live in extremely rural areas and face high rates of poverty and food insecurity. This is true for most rural areas throughout the U.S. Often, families are cut off from community resources and surviving can be very difficult. According to Feeding America's website, "2.7 million rural households face hunger. Three-quarters of the counties with the highest rates of food insecurity are in rural areas."



To get a better picture of what rural living is like for individuals and families living in the U.P., a couple members of the Feeding America West Michigan staff traveled to the U.P. to see their reality for ourselves. We visited Newberry, which is a tiny town far removed from the hustle and bustle of bigger cities and accessible by winding, 2-lane roads through dense forest. We were shocked to discover how sparse the population density was. Many are so isolated that they need to travel an hour or more just to reach necessary amenities like a grocery store or hospital. Shopping malls are essentially nonexistent in most areas of the U.P. To put this distance into perspective, there is only one high school in all of Luce County, which spans 1,912 square miles. Most kids must travel long distances just to attend school.

To help combat the challenges of rural living, community resources come together every year to host a Project Homeless Connect event in Newberry. The goal of the event is to reach as many local residents as possible in order to ease the hardships of living in the rural U.P.

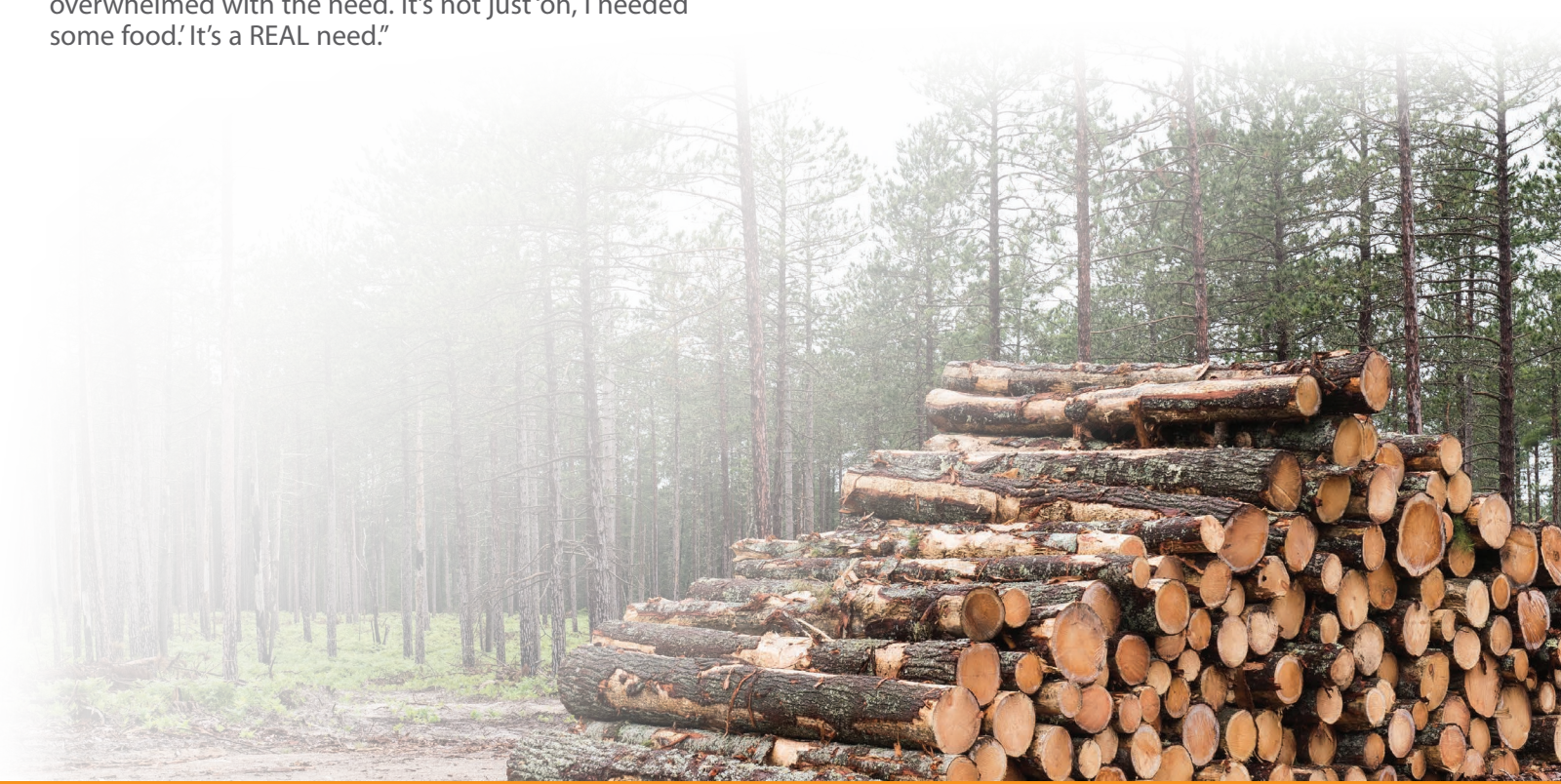
The hosting agency for this event, the Diane Pepler Resource Center (a domestic violence and sexual assault shelter), partners with Feeding America West Michigan and other local service organizations to bring people together to fight homelessness, hunger, and a lack of resources. The combined effort between Feeding America West Michigan and our partners in the U.P. reach numerous rural families each year.



At the event, a meal is provided for anyone who attends. There are also tables of donated clothing and winter attire, piles of school supplies, personal hygiene items, and some home essentials. In addition, with the help of the Luce County LINK (the local youth and community resource center), they are able to provide a Feeding America West Michigan Mobile Pantry. All of these resources are crucial to families who would otherwise struggle to feed, clothe, and provide for themselves.

Not all the resources they provide, however, are material things. Jessica Roberts, Event Coordinator, also brings together local human service organizations in an effort to make the resources more accessible to community members in need. These organizations provide a range of services, from affordable housing, to health and wellness services, to employment resources and more. Susan Prell, Executive Director at the United Way of the eastern U.P., said, "I think it's important to pull together resources and have them in one spot for those who really don't know where to turn. I did registration (at the event) and I was overwhelmed with the need. It's not just 'oh, I needed some food.' It's a REAL need."

Food insecurity is the reality of many; our partnering agencies see that and are making an effort to help. Hunger is a predominant issue in rural areas across the country. According to Feeding America's "Map the Meal Gap" study, "Rural counties make up 63% of all U.S. counties, but account for 76% of counties with food-insecurity rates that rank in the top 10% of all counties." Many go without food simply because they don't have the means to access it. This is a widespread issue that Feeding America West Michigan is working hard to address.





THE GROH FAMILY

Robert and Becky Groh, a determined and hardworking couple with nine children, shared what their reality looks like living in a remote area of the Upper Peninsula. Last year, the Grohs were struggling to make ends meet for a plethora of reasons. Even the most resilient of families need assistance when unavoidable challenges surface, and Feeding America West Michigan is proud to be there when they need help.

Becky had been a stay at home mom for many years. She cared for their five children still living at home while Robert worked various jobs. Often, employment opportunities come and go in a rural location. Through hard work, this large family was surviving; but their lives weren't without challenge. Becky and Robert's lives took a turn for the worst in 2016 and the couple was forced to take on more than they ever could imagine. All at once, and without warning, Robert was facing life threatening blood clots, cancer, and a failing kidney.

With Becky working as a full-time caretaker to her children and husband and Robert unable to work due to complications from his medical conditions, the family was forced to live off of disability and SNAP benefits. This usually wasn't enough, and the family struggles to live off of a fixed income to this day. "Feeding America (West Michigan) really helps us out," Becky said. "When the Feeding America trucks come in, we like to take advantage of it because it's hard to keep up with all these empty stomachs all the time," Becky continued.

As Robert's ailments progressed, his neck and leg swelled tremendously and he could barely get off of the couch. His daily routine became a struggle. "It got to the point where I had to practically carry his weight for him just so he could go to



Client Spotlights

THE WRIGHT FAMILY

the bathroom," Becky said. "The hospital in Newberry kept sending him home, saying it'd get better, but it just kept getting worse." At one point Robert told his wife "I can't take this no more. I was ready to call it, to give up." After four and a half months waiting for symptoms to improve, the Grohs sought a second opinion and discovered that the blood clots in Robert's leg were more dire than they had been led to believe, and that his cancer had continued to progress. After consulting two additional doctors, they finally understood the extent of Robert's diagnosis and what treatment options were

available. If they had been able to visit more than one hospital sooner, his condition likely wouldn't have progressed as far as it did. Unfortunately, Luce County only has one hospital to offer.

After dealing with the heavy news of his worsened condition, Robert faced the harsh reality of his treatment options before moving forward. He had two of the three blood clots removed, a stent put in his kidney, and then hesitantly started chemotherapy and radiation, during which he lost his hair. In an attempt to cheer him up and in an act of solidarity, Becky and some of their kids shaved their heads. After a tremendous struggle, things were finally beginning to look up. Feeding America West Michigan's mobile pantries, with the help of The Luce County LINK, filled the gaps when there wasn't enough food to go around.

Today, Robert is in remission, but not without accumulating his fair share of battle scars along the way. He still has a stent in his kidney, and a small but persistent blood clot in his leg which renders him unable to work. Doctors told him he will be on blood thinners for the rest of his life, but equated to his previous condition, he is feeling restored. Robert is grateful that he is healthy enough to be with his family for the years to come.

Anyone could be faced with a dreadful situation like this family was, but when residing in a very rural town, overcoming these obstacles can be an even more daunting task. Feeding America West Michigan is honored to have been able to assist this family during some of their darkest times. We are thankful that they decided to share their story. It is a perfect example of how rural living can influence people's lives, and shows what we can do to combat these issues by helping those who are struggling. People in rural communities unite and find strength through their communities, and we are glad to be able to join forces with them.



A little over three years ago, Don and Rachel Wright received an unexpected phone call that changed their lives forever. When they picked up the receiver, their daughters voice resonated in their ears. She sounded sullen, and they knew it wasn't good news. She spoke quickly, as if she needed to get the words out. She was going to prison, and her 3 children had nowhere else to go.

The couple didn't know what to think. They had already raised seven children of their own. They never expected to be raising young children again. Their minds

were bombarded with uncertainties. They questioned how they were going to house, feed, clothe, teach, guide, and embrace these children as their own. Amidst their concerns, they knew deep down that it was their duty to give the children a fighting chance. They would spend the next three years fighting to acclimate David, Ariel, and Tianna to their new lives while keeping afloat on a limited income. Feeding America West Michigan is proud to have had a hand in keeping these children fed and healthy during one of the most trying times of their young lives.

When their grandchildren arrived, the Wrights became parents all over again. Early on, while serving as foster parents for the children, it was clear that the kids were not accustomed to structure or rules. Maintaining a routine was abnormal for them. Enforcing good habits was challenging. It was also very apparent that they had been exposed to situations a child should never have to endure. They lacked the opportunity to just be kids; but as

time went on in their new home with Don and Rachel, the kids proved their resilience and were able to acclimate successfully – today, they are healthy, happy and thriving.

After fostering the children for three years and facing hardships through the process, Don and Rachel were finally able to adopt them in the summer of 2017. Don said, "We didn't think we were gonna be here at this point in our life, but they needed somebody and it ain't their fault. They needed a chance."

The Wrights do everything they can to instill proper values and morals in their children. They also think it's important to help them believe in themselves, to show them that they can do anything they want to with their lives, regardless of where they came from. "We got lucky. We got a second chance at raising kids, we're trying to do it right," Don said. They often talk with the kids about their futures and try to improve their self-esteem. Don and Rachel believe in teaching children empathy and the importance of giving to others. It seems their teachings have been well received. Recently, all three children have shown interest in careers aimed at bettering their community.

Not only are Don and Rachel showing them the way, but the spirit of generosity is pervasive throughout the Wright's small community in Newberry as well. The children have noticed it and have begun helping others themselves.

While chatting about utilizing Feeding America West Michigan's mobile pantries and other local community services, Don addressed the necessity succinctly: "Because we are raising three kids," he laughed and finished, "and they eat ALL the time." Due to limited income and medical troubles, Don and Rachel cannot always afford to buy enough food for their family.

Don and Rachel are examples of the good that can shine through in the face of overwhelming adversity. Without a second thought, they took on the incredible task of caring for their three grandchildren as their own – simply because it was the right thing to do. Feeding America West Michigan is honored to be a part of their story and to continue supporting families in times of adversity.



PARTNER AGENCY PROFILE: THE LUCE COUNTY LINK

Mary Archambeau, Director of The Luce County LINK, is fighting the lack of resources that plague her community.

The LINK is located in Newberry, Michigan, which is in the Eastern Upper Peninsula and in the middle of a food desert. While The LINK is a partner agency of Feeding America West Michigan, it is first and foremost a youth enrichment center for the children of Luce County. Mary and other members of the community built the center when they realized that for many local kids who didn't have after school care, there was no safe, reliable place they could go. Mary quickly became the director and has been working to better her community ever since. The LINK has expanded its reach tremendously into the community since its origination 20 years ago, and now provides daily after-school care, free breakfast and

lunch, enriching activities for children to take part in, as well as maintaining an on-site pantry for families in need.

Mary worked for 6 years without pay to ensure that The LINK's doors stayed open. She rarely takes time off and when she does, she still remains available for those who need her. We are continuously inspired by community members like Mary and service organizations like the LINK that help those in their community with no expectation of anything in return, and we are honored to consider ourselves a partner in fulfilling their mission.



VOLUNTEER SPOTLIGHT: Rose Maskart

Rose Maskart is not an average 70-year-old. She lives in Gladstone, Michigan, but travels throughout the Upper Peninsula to volunteer at many different mobile pantries that need additional help. The mobile pantries where she volunteers are spread out, but she doesn't seem to mind. Rose hops in her car and drives long distances just to help others in need. She is one of the kindest people you could ever meet. With a genuinely good heart and a kind soul, Rose deserves to be in the spotlight today.

When we met Rose in Newberry at the **Project Homeless Connect** event, she had driven 100 miles just to be there. Rose said she will often drive 60 miles or more to volunteer and has been doing so for almost three years. After her husband passed away she said that, "For everything we did together, I do something we never did." Volunteering at a mobile pantry with Feeding America West Michigan was one of those things, and when she found out how much of an impact she could make on the lives of others, she continued giving her time.

After attending her first mobile pantry, she said to herself, "I didn't realize there were this many people who needed that kind of help." She later discovered that many in need weren't even coming because they didn't have the means to get there. "These areas need it so bad," she said. To help reach some of the families who can't make the trip for one reason or another, many volunteers in the U.P., including Rose, have taken it upon themselves to deliver to those

still in need. "We just ring the doorbell, zip off and wave as we're leaving," she said.

Many volunteers have taken it upon themselves to help deliver these resources to those who are unable to access them. However, according to Rose, a lot of the volunteers are in need themselves. "It's gotta be a community effort," Rose said. These communities desperately need the help, and without volunteers, Feeding America West Michigan could not make the impact that it does. Rose believes that volunteering is "something that has to be done," and you "go where the need takes you."

When you attend a mobile pantry, you meet a lot of different people in a lot of different situations, and often they need more than food. For example, Rose spoke about a day when she noticed that a child's car seat was broken and one of the volunteers had an extra one that they were willing to part with. That family received a sense of safety alongside the food. Others may simply need emotional support. Rose mentioned a man who had tears rolling down his face while he was receiving food. His pride was broken, he had always cared for his family, but in that moment, he couldn't. Our pantries, mobile or otherwise, are about more than just food. They are a great place to bring together a community. The sense of community that is formed at these mobile pantries make people, particularly those living in rural areas, feel less isolated. No matter how much food we give, our volunteers are making some of the biggest differences in people's lives. We are eternally grateful.



MEET A FOOD BANKER:

Jane McGookey, Director of Network Development

Can you describe your role at Feeding America West Michigan?

My team is responsible for maintaining relationships with our 900+ partner agencies in our 40-county service area. We work with food pantries, meal programs, backpack programs, soup kitchens, and other qualified non-profit organizations whose main purpose is to provide food for free to those in need. Team members assist agencies in a variety of ways including ordering food from the warehouse through our online system, scheduling mobile food distributions, and verifying our agencies are storing and distributing food safely.

What led you to your current role?

The short story is, I was reading the food bank e-newsletter and learned there was a position open that described all the things I had done as a volunteer. I wanted to do something more meaningful in the second half of my life. It seemed like the perfect fit.

Why do you feel passionate about hunger relief and the food system?

I don't know if you want to call it a "calling", but I think it goes back to how I was raised. My family was active in both the church and in the community. Personally, "To help where I am needed" has been a lifelong theme (Girl Scouts Law, circa 1972). John Knox Community Food Pantry in Kentwood, MI, was my first hands-on experience with food insecurity. I had helped with data entry, picked and packed food for seniors and families, and organized a 300 family holiday food basket distribution. Kent County has a pantry network and I became involved at that level too by helping to organize the City-Wide Food Drive in Grand Rapids. These experiences gave me insight that helped greatly when I later served in the City of Kentwood government.

What current projects are you most excited about?

An overarching goal I have is to convene community conversations around food insecurity. This fall we started conversations with a few school districts about publicizing locations of food pantries and mobile distributions so families who need food can more easily find it. We are also encouraging schools in underserved, high need areas to become host sites so the entire community can benefit.



Of course the biggest challenge is funding these programs. Ideally we can find partnerships with congregations, businesses and community organizations. By the way, encourage anyone interested to contact me at JaneM@FeedWM.org.

If you could teach the community one thing about the work we do, what would it be?

Just one? OK, most folks don't know the difference between a food bank and a food pantry. A food bank is basically a logistics company. We transport food we receive as donations from food producers, farms, and retail stores. We warehouse the food so agencies can select the products they can use. Then

agencies either pick up their orders or in most cases, we transport the food to communities where it is needed. Another little known fact is that the food bank prevents a lot of food from going to waste or into the landfill. Last year we were able to distribute over 20 million pounds of food that would have gone to waste. Much of the food the food bank can't distribute goes to local farms for composting or animal feed. So that is an added benefit of the food bank!

What is Feeding America's role when it comes to rural hunger, particularly in the U.P.?

The majority of the square miles in our service area are categorized as rural. It is relatively easy for people in a city to find a pantry or mobile food distribution within a 2 mile area. Folks in the north and the U.P. sometimes have to travel 30+ miles just to reach a grocery store. There are lots of resources (including money) to support the populated areas. The resources in rural areas are significantly less and serving a rural population is expensive. The actual cost to send a mobile food distribution to the U.P. is approximately \$3000. Here in Kent County, it costs \$650.

What are one or two ways people can become involved?

Time, talent, treasures! We always need volunteers, both here at the warehouse and at mobile distributions. I am sure any food pantry would also appreciate anyone who has time. People with particular skills are also needed. People with CDL licenses to drive trucks are always in short supply and our mobile food pantries need people with computer skills to help with data entry. Of course, the biggest impact you can have is by donating money or hosting a fundraiser to support the operation of the food bank. I was amazed when I learned our annual electric bill is over \$70,000! Without financial support we just couldn't operate.

DONOR SPOTLIGHT- Hannah

As winter readies to come to a close and spring is forefront in every Michigander's mind, we are reminded of the warmth and kindness of a young girl's – and proud Feeding America West Michigan donor's – good deed.

Hannah, an inspiring and invaluable donor to Feeding America West Michigan, is a budding entrepreneur and philanthropist. She recently opened a small business out of her home with the sole intention of helping local kids in need, and we are humbled by her tenacity and generosity of spirit. In Hannah's spare time, she enjoys swinging on her jungle gym. Her favorite Disney princess is Cinderella. Did we forget to mention that Hannah is 3 years old?



newest, youngest, and cutest supporters, is a shining example of that principle. When Hannah, 3, asked her mom if she could open a lemonade stand, she didn't think much of it. But when she questioned Hannah as to why, the young girl responded with a simple premise: "I want to sell lemonade and give money to help kids." So, with that simple goal in mind, Hannah set out. She sold lemonade (as well as peppers and tomatoes from the family garden) outside her home. Hannah raised \$80 over the course of a day, all of which will go toward funding Feeding America West Michigan's Backpack Program, which supports hungry kids in our 40-county service area.

Here at Feeding America West Michigan, we believe in caring for your community and doing what you can, where you are, with what you have. Hannah, one of our

We are proud to call Hannah a partner, and we hope our community members will follow her lead: there are no limitations when it comes to serving your community.



MOLLY KOOI, Communications Intern
Find her stories on pages 2, 3, 4, 5 and 6.



LAUREN SPANGLER, Communications Manager
Find her stories on pages 7 and 8.



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FeedWM.org

We gather and distribute food to relieve hunger and improve food security in West Michigan and the Upper Peninsula. By working with more than 900 local hunger-relief agencies, we are able to serve half a million people in need 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.



You Can Feed West Michigan

To give online please visit us at FeedWM.org

