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# The Need for Additional Food Assistance Programs for School Children in Mid Michigan

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HNR 499  
Dr. Gerard

America is often portrayed as the land of milk and honey, a place where the resources and opportunities are endless. Sadly, this myth could not be further from the truth. In this country there are millions of people who are struggling to get their basic needs fulfilled. While helping out at the annual food basket giveaway at the St. Vincent de Paul in Prudenville, Michigan, I was able to meet hundreds of families that desperately need help getting basic food items. As defined by the USDA, food security for a household means that all household members have access at all times to enough food for an active, healthy life. Food insecure households are not necessarily food insecure all the time. Food Insecurity may reflect a need to make tradeoffs between other important basic needs such as housing, medical bills, or buying nutritious foods. (Feeding America 2011) According to the 2010 Almanac of Hunger and Poverty in America, 17% of American children under the age of 18 are food insecure. Although children in need are able to receive free or discounted meals at their schools, many of them suffer periods of hunger or food insecurity while at home.

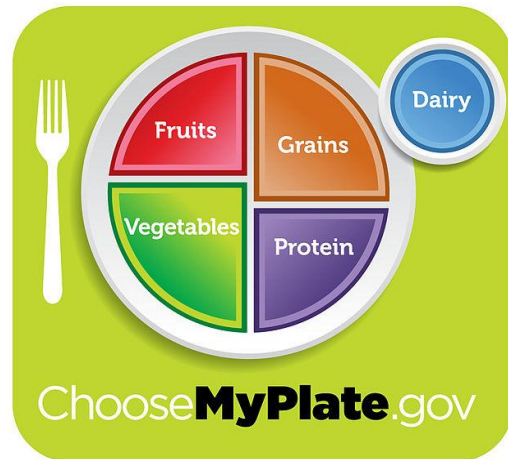
Cursory research indicates the vast need for additional help. According to 2011 Feeding America, 25.4% of Michigan children are considered food insecure. These children live in households in which there is a precarious balancing act between essential needs such as housing, health bills, and a well stocked pantry. Often the adults or older siblings in food insecure households try to protect the younger ones from hunger but many times this isn't possible. These children, although fed at school, go home not knowing if there will be a nutritious meal for them at dinner time. This hunger and even the fear of not having enough quality food to eat can have drastic effects on the health and development of a child. These, in

turn, can have broader detrimental effects on not only the child's future, but the future of our state as well.

Hunger is extremely detrimental to the physical, cognitive, and emotional development of children. Children who do not receive the nutrients they need suffer from stunted growth, low energy, more frequent injury, and a weakened immune system. In the United States, the primary cause of food insecurity is poverty. People most often go without decent, nourishing meals because they either live far away from a well stocked grocery store or lack the money to purchase both quality groceries and other basic necessities such as clothing, housing, or medical care. In order to make the money last, many low income, food insecure families have to purchase inexpensive, processed foods. As a result, a significant portion of food insecure children in the United States consume the enough calories each day, but mainly from cheap low nutrient foods such as white breads, fats, sugary punches and crackers. These children often lack sufficient amounts of vegetables, fruits, dairy products, and other nutritious foods necessary for healthy development and growth. (Sizer and Whitney, p575)

School children need a steady, balanced diet of healthy foods. This way the child meets caloric, content needs, and essential vitamins/minerals such as vitamins A, C, D, E, folate, as well as minerals such as iron, calcium, and potassium. Vitamin A is a fat soluble vitamin found in foods derived from animals and by the processing of beta-carotene found in some vegetables. It is an extremely versatile vitamin and has various roles throughout the body and is an important factor in the regulation of genes. Vitamin A also has an extremely important role in sustaining normal eyesight. In addition to gene regulation and vision, vitamin A has a noticeable role in proper bone growth and immune function. Vitamin C has very important roles in

maintaining body connective tissues and in assisting the immune system. It acts as a coenzyme for the enzymes that create and maintain collagen (the base for many tissues in the body). Vitamin C assists the immune system by acting as an antioxidant. It is present in high concentrations in many cells in the immune system and helps protect immune cells from the destructive free radicals released during



<http://www.choosemyplate.gov/>

**Figure 1: USDA Food Recommendation**

assaults on bacteria and other invasive agents. The deficiency of vitamin C can cause a slow degeneration in connective tissues throughout the body known as scurvy, as well as a weaker immune system.

Vitamin D is a rather unique vitamin because with enough sun exposure, the body can produce all the vitamin D it needs. Vitamin D functions as a hormone in the body and has an integral role in maintaining proper bone integrity and blood calcium levels. Beyond bone regulation, vitamin D influences the proper development and functioning of over 30 body tissues (Sizer and Whitney, p235). Although it can be produced by the body, many Americans need vitamin D supplemented by their diet. In northern regions such as Michigan, many individuals with darker skin have difficulty producing enough vitamin D due to the weaker sunlight. In order to prevent bone abnormalities (such as rickets), many of these individuals need diets complete with vitamin D fortified foods such as milk, margarine, enriched cereal or some types of fish. Vitamin E is an important antioxidant found in many vegetable oils. In the body, it protects tissues against oxidative damage caused by free radicals. These free radicals

have the potential to cause inflammation and may be a factor in the development of some diseases and cancers. Finally, the B vitamin Folate is necessary for the creation of new cells and the growth of tissues. It is a crucial vitamin in the development of the central nervous system and plays critical roles in the body's normal metabolism of several amino acids. Insufficient levels of Folate in a developing child can cause problems with the production of mature red blood cells (causing anemia), immune system deficiencies, and digestive system problems. Proper folate levels can be obtained through the consumption of leafy, green vegetables (foliage). Unfortunately, leafy, green vegetables are often too expensive for lower income families.

In addition to vitamins, a growing child needs an ample supply of trace minerals in their diet. Iron is one of these trace minerals crucial for healthy development. Iron is present in every living cell of our body. It is an important mineral in cellular metabolism and is also needed to make new cells, amino acids, hormones, and neurotransmitters. Probably the most well known role of iron is its crucial part in the hemoglobin of red blood cells and myoglobin of muscle cells. A deficiency in iron may result in anemia, and have noticeably lower energy levels (fatigue), a tendency to feel cold, and a lower drive to complete daily tasks/chores. A lack of iron also affects behavior and an individual may begin to suffer from mental impairments, impaired physical abilities, and lower productivity. (Lozoff et al., 2006) Understandably so, these complications can have very serious effects on the life of a growing school child.

Another important mineral for the healthy development of children is calcium. Calcium is by far the most abundant mineral in the body. The vast majority of body calcium is stored in the bones and the teeth. Calcium forms a crucial part of the skeletal system and along with

phosphorus forms an extremely hard crystal that is deposited on foundation materials (collagens) to form bones. In addition, the calcium stored in the bones serves as a reservoir for calcium that can be released into the body fluids to be used in other physiological processes. Calcium in body fluids is critical to the normal functioning of body cells and is an integral part of normal nervous, muscular, endocrine, digestive, and immune systems. In addition, calcium is important to normal immune system function and to normal blood clot formation. Calcium is extremely important to a growing child. In fact, bones are actively growing in size during the first 20 years of life and don't stop growing stronger until a person reaches their mid 30s. Having a good diet is extremely important for a child because it allows the formation of a healthy skeletal system and helps other parts of a child function properly. Proper amounts of calcium in a child's diet will help form a healthy foundation for the rest of their lives.

A growing child needs several other minerals such as potassium, phosphorus, and magnesium. Potassium is an essential ion for normal nervous system function and also plays various important functions in cells throughout the body. Phosphorus is very important for the proper mineralization of bones and teeth. It also plays an important role in the regulation of cellular activities, blood clotting, and in a healthy immune system. Magnesium is also an important mineral for healthy bone and body protein function. It also plays an important part in the transfer of nerve impulses in many parts of the body. In addition to these minerals, there are also many other minerals that a healthy body needs such as iodine, zinc, fluoride, copper, sodium, and chloride.

A healthy diet will ensure that a growing child gets all the nutrients he needs to grow and be successful. Too many children in Michigan have a very difficult time getting all of the

nutrients they need. Although the vast majority of schools have regulated breakfasts and lunches that provide nutritious dishes, many children go home to pantries that are packed with cheap, processed foods that are high in empty calories and low on vitamins and nutrients. Providing increased food assistance to these children is essential. By offering a more balanced, nutritious diet, our communities will be investing in a brighter future for both the children and the state of Michigan.

In addition to growth and development problems, the lack of a steady, nutritious diet causes many problems in other aspects of a child's life. Not being sure if there will be a nutritious meal at home can have very serious effects on the academic performance of students. Food insecure students find it more difficult to focus at school and complete homework assignments. In their study Alaimo et al., (2001) discovered that food insecure children tended to score lower in arithmetic and were more likely to repeat a grade than non food insecure children. These academic challenges during primary school can in turn create negative associations with school and affect a child's academic performance later on in life. Other studies have further demonstrated the negative effects of food insecurity on learning. A longitudinal study by Jyoti et al., published in the *American Society for Nutrition* showed definite ties between food insecurity and decreased performance at school. In the study a cohort of eligible incoming kindergarteners was surveyed for academic and social performance. After 4 years eligible children of the same group were analyzed again.

In the longitudinal study, Jyoti et al., (2005) found a correlation between food insecurity during kindergarten and later academic (arithmetic) problems. In addition, the study revealed that children, especially girls, who became food insecure after kindergarten showed quick



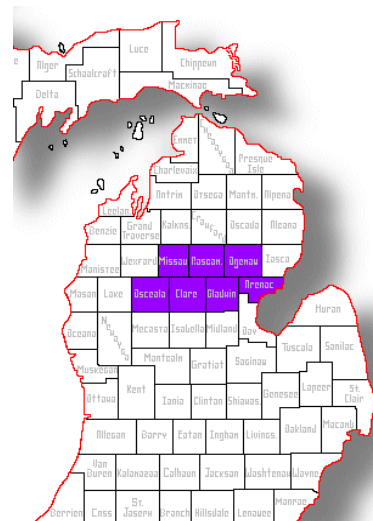
negative effects on their reading level. Finally, the study demonstrated that household food insecurity had noticeable negative effects on the social skills of affected children.

Other studies have indicated that children of lower socio-economic levels present higher than normal levels of the stress hormone cortisol (Lupien et al., 2000). The higher levels of stress in children living through poverty and food insecurity have a strong influence on other aspects other their lives. In addition, Alaimo et al., (2001) also discovered that food insecure children were more likely to see a psychologist than non food insecure children. Finally, hunger can cause serious long term emotional and psychological problems in developing children. In their study on the effects of hunger on school children, R.E. Kleinman et al., (1998) found that hungry school children were 7-12 times more likely to exhibit symptoms of conduct disorder than non hungry children. Conduct problems the subsequent discipline early in school can have a drastic effect on the self confidence of the child and cause the child to form negative associations with the education system. Such negative experiences may have subsequent consequences later on as the child goes through middle school and secondary school. This is because a child's brain is not yet fully developed, they are less well equipped to handle the emotions of getting disciplined and less able to put the incident into perspective and learn from it. (psychologytoday.com) A child who is exhibiting symptoms of conduct disorder and frequently being disciplined in front of the other children will definitely begin to suffer the consequences of constant school discipline. Because of its serious effects on many aspects of a child's life, hunger is a horrible affliction. Unfortunately, food insecurity is a very real part of the life of thousands of children throughout Mid Michigan. More needs to be done to help feed these children; the future of our state and country depends on it.

As stated earlier, poverty and food insecurity have a definite positive correlation. Also, the United Nations World Food Programme has determined that rural areas and the children living there are especially vulnerable to hunger. This is because many rural areas and their economies are more reliant on agriculture and natural resource gathering. In addition, rural areas like Mid Michigan are often overlooked by statewide (and regional) food donation programs. For example, the Food Bank of Eastern Michigan offers a very innovative weekend food backpack program for thousands of elementary school kids in Midland, Saginaw, Genesee, Lapeer, and Sanillac counties. Although this program is instrumental in feeding thousands of kids in the cities, thousands of food insecure students in the more rural counties still lack weekend assistance programs.

**Figure 2: Counties Containing Schools Studied.**

I chose to look at schools in seven counties that are located in the rural middle region of the Lower Peninsula in Michigan (Mid Michigan). In order to assess the need for more programs, public data was gathered on the number of children who were receiving free or reduced lunches at the schools. Every year the Michigan Department of Education releases information on the number of children that are receiving government assistance for school meals (free and reduced breakfast and lunch). The total number of students attending each school is also released in order to see what percentage of students receives government assistance. The data for 14 schools in the greater Mid Michigan area is displayed in Table 1. This data demonstrates the great economic need in the area. 63.8% of the students that attend the schools listed below qualify for government assistance and receive



free or reduced price meals at school. This data supports the World Health Programme's notion that often rural areas and their economies are often affected the most by poverty and food insecurity.

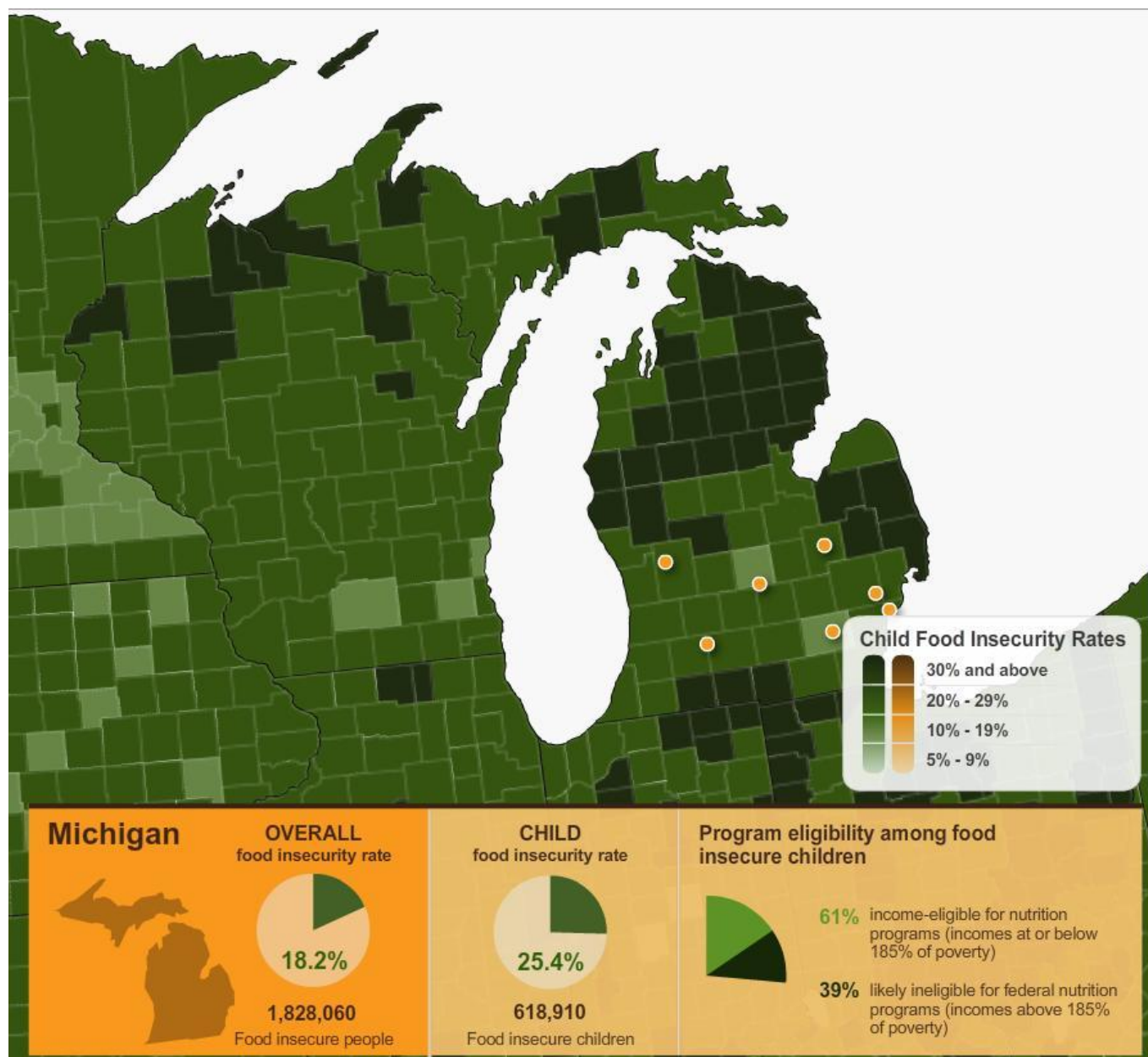
Due to economic troubles and decreasing education budgets, schools in these areas are often poorly equipped to address the increasing need for food assistance. Although, school officials recognize the desperate need for more programs, they simply aren't able to fund and implement them. As a result, most schools in the area lack comprehensive alternate food assistance programs. Many schools have been forced to find creative ways to use their limited resources. (see Table 2) Some schools have afterschool activity and homework programs available to any interested child. Although these programs don't offer a full dinner, they do offer an assortment of snacks and drinks. Other schools offer free breakfast to all students. This program ensures that every child receives a nutritious meal before starting a busy day of learning. Some schools surveyed have programs that offer free school meals to all students, regardless of household income level. Others, although not able to offer a back pack program or afterschool program, offer free lunches throughout the summer to any child interested (regardless if enrolled in summer classes). Finally, one school (Marion Elementary) offers a weekend food backpack program for its students. This program, supported by local churches and community organizations, provides children with a backpack full of nutritious food for the weekend. As a result of decreasing school funds and resources, it falls upon the local community to help feed local children

**Table 1: Free/Reduced Lunch Data**

School	Number of Students	Free and Reduced Lunch	% of total
Gladwin Elementary	343	235	68.51
Beaverton Primary	366	236	64.48
Standish Elementary	477	263	55.14
Sterling Elementary	351	197	56.13
Surline Elementary	650	360	55.38
Rose City Elementary	194	138	71.13
Roscommon Elementary	505	314	62.18
Lake City Lower Elementary	900	561	62.33
Marion Elementary	324	211	65.12
Farwell Elementary	500	328	65.6
Robert M. Larson Ele. (Harrison)	358	262	73.18
Hillside Elementary (Harrison)	314	220	70.06
Clare Primary	580	332	57.24
Collins Elementary (Houghton Lake)	485	327	67.42

**Table 2: The Current Programs offered through the Schools to Elementary School Children.**

School	Weekend Food Assistance Program	After School Weekday Program	Other Program Provided
Gladwin Elementary	NO	NO	n/a
Beaverton Primary	NO	YES	n/a
Standish Elementary	NO	YES	n/a
Sterling Elementary	NO	YES	n/a
Surline Elementary	NO	YES	BOYS AND GIRLS CLUB (SNACKS)
Rose City Elementary	NO	YES	FREE BREAKFAST TO STUDENTS
Roscommon Elementary	NO	NO	n/a
Lake City Lower Elementary	NO	NO	FREE LUNCH THROUGH SUMMER
Marion Elementary	YES	NO (but in development)	FREE LUNCH THROUGH SUMMER
Farwell Elementary	NO	YES	n/a
Robert M. Larson Ele. (Harrison)	NO	YES	FREE SCHOOL MEALS TO ALL STUDENTS
Hillside Elementary (Harrison)	NO	YES	FREE SCHOOL MEALS TO ALL STUDENTS
Clare Primary	NO	NO	FREE BREAKFAST TO STUDENTS
Collins Elementary (HL)	NO (but in development)	YES	FREE LUNCH THROUGH SUMMER



<http://feedingamerica.org/hunger-in-america/hunger-studies/map-the-meal-gap.aspx>

**Figure 3: A map of Michigan produced by Feeding America displaying the levels of food insecurity as of 2009. These numbers are increasing due to the continuing economic difficulties of Michigan. In fact, according to the Blessings in a Backpack Organization, as of the 2011 school year, the numbers of elementary aged school children receiving government paid or discounted meals at school totals around 755,000 children in Michigan alone.**

One of the most exciting ways a community can help out local food insecure school children is through a food backpack program. These programs have slowly been on the rise especially with the recent economic difficulties in many parts of the USA. While every child has access to nutritious meals during school breakfast and lunch, the same cannot be said about weekends or holidays. They were originally implemented by proactive school employees.

“The reason for implementing the Blessings in a Backpack program was because teachers were noticing that children at their schools, who were on free or reduced fee lunch programs, would return to school on Mondays tired, hungry and sluggish because there was little or no food for them to eat at home on the weekends.” (blessingsinabackpackmi.org).

A food backpack program provides nutritious, child friendly meals to children on the weekends or school year holidays. The food packs are given to children on Friday right after school (or before holidays) and are returned by children on the next school day. Each pack contains non perishable, child friendly, single serving food items and provides 3 nutritious meals for every day outside of school. These items include granola bars, cereal, instant oatmeal, microwaveable pasta bowls, pudding cups, crackers, fruit cups, tuna, and snack mixes. They may also include easy-to-eat fruits such as apples or bananas. The goal of the food backpack is to prevent hunger and food insecurity by providing enough food for the child to last the weekend or school break.

Most food backpack programs are open to any child enrolled in government food assistance programs. In addition, some food backpack programs may be open to any child whose caretaker struggles to provide 3 full meals to their children on the days out of school. The actual backpacks are donated by local organizations and distributed by school officials. The actual funding for the program often comes from grants or generous individuals in the

community. Many times, a local blessing program can be affiliated through a regional charity organization such as “Blessings in a Backpack”. Sometimes a larger organization such as “Blessings” can offer good deals on food items through partnerships with food chains (Blessings in a Backpack Michigan receives cheaper food items through a special arrangement with the Meijer grocery chain). Although many opportunities exist to form a backpack program, it takes much hard work from generous community members to actually implement it and start serving the children in need.

Recognizing the need in for further food assistance programs for the children in the Houghton Lake School district, the St. Vincent de Paul Prudenville charity organization decided to take steps toward creating a weekend backpack program. In order to the project, St. Vincent de Paul developed a partnership with another Houghton Lake area charity organization called EG Ministries. EG Ministries is a very active in helping those in the community who are in desperate need of immediate help such as housing or food. In addition, EG Ministries has many connections within the community which increases the likelihood of support and success.

The backpack program being established in the Houghton Lake area is called “Weekend Blessings.” The “Weekend Blessings” program will be open to elementary school aged children whose families qualify for free or reduced priced lunches at school and risk food insecurity on the weekends. This program is meant to assist needy families in preventing the children from being hungry on the weekends. Each Friday a backpack filled with six easy to make weekend meals is given to the children to take home. By teaming up and using partners throughout the community, EG Ministries and St. Vincent de Paul were able to get great deals on the food and backpacks for the program. As a result, providing food for a child for the weekends for the



entire school year costs only \$100. Actual weekly cost of this program, to provide six meals to a child during the weekend, is less than the price of a single burger, fries, and drink from the dollar menu of your local fast food place one day of the week.

The word hunger often conjures images of starving, fly ridden children in the war torn jungles of Central Africa. Unfortunately hunger and food insecurity has a very real presence in the lives of many children right here in Michigan. Many times, this hunger goes on quietly and unnoticed by others in the community. To make matters worse, the recent economic difficulties in the state of Michigan have put even more pressure on existing food assistance organizations. Perhaps more so now than ever, it is extremely important for others in the community to take up the challenge and create new programs to address this always increasing need in the community, the future of our state depends on it.

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