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August 23, 2020 12:05 AM

## Food banks expect spike in demand as meals for kids shift back to school-delivered models

SHERRI WELCH □ □ □ □

- Shift will create gaps in food assistance for youngest children
- Will add to rising demand spurred by end, reduction of unemployment, SNAP benefits
- USDA-provided food set to drop by year's end to prepandemic levels

Larry Peplin for Crain's Detroit Business

Food pickup at Gleaners' mobile food site in Warren.

When school is back in session, free lunches will stop for some at-risk children.

Children too young to attend school and the newly vulnerable peers of students enrolled in free and reduced-cost breakfast and lunch programs will no longer be eligible to receive food through a federally funded program that has helped keep them fed since March.

A federal waiver that took effect after schools closed to provide free food for all children through food boxes distributed by emergency providers at drive-up sites around the region ends Aug. 31 or the first day of school, whichever is earlier. Schools will shift back to the regular school-year programs that provide food only for enrolled students.

And that will leave outstanding need for emergency food providers to fill without the ability to seek reimbursement.

The gaps left by resuming the regular school meal programs represent the fourth wave of need to come at food providers since the pandemic began. Waves of students and families, senior citizens and contract, service industry and small business employees now facing food insecurity have been coming to food pickup sites since spring, providers said.

Lines at those sites are expected to grow even more with the expiration or reduction of federal assistance that has enabled many food-insecure families and individuals to fill gaps

during the pandemic. That includes expanded unemployment and an additional \$300 million in Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) benefits in Michigan alone.

On the supply side, the amount of food provided by the U.S. Department of Agriculture to states is set to drop back down to prepandemic and pre-trade-mitigation levels by year's end, drastically reducing the amount of free food available for emergency assistance.

Gerry Brisson

"For us, what that adds up to is the potential to be overrun with families that just don't know what to do," said Gleaners President and CEO Gerry Brisson.

He and other emergency food providers are assuming a minimum increase of 15 percent to start in demand for food assistance, something that could add up to over 1 million pounds of food per month just for Gleaners

The increased demand from all fronts is expected to present financial and operational challenges, food providers said.

"We are at a point now where if no action is taken, there is definitely trouble coming by October," Brisson said. "There's going to be too many people showing up at food distributions and not enough food."

## School programs

Once school starts, schools will be able to provide meals only to children enrolled in their district, said Diane Golzynski, director of health and nutrition for the Michigan Department of Education.

Parents won't be able to pick up extra food for younger siblings at home as they have through programs provided by nonprofit food providers during the pandemic. And the school-provided meals won't be available on weekends or days schools are closed for holidays.

Statewide, in-school meal programs provided an average of 1.15 million meals each day in Michigan in fiscal 2019, with about 750,000 students receiving a free or reduced-cost lunch and about 400,000 getting breakfast at school, Golzynski said.

About 300,000 of those students are in the five Southeastern Michigan counties that Gleaners serves, Brisson said.

Kirk Mayes

The emergency food network "is, in many ways, on the outside of the solution set because the responsibility and onus will be put onto the school systems when it

comes to school meal programs," said Kirk Mayes, president and CEO of Oak Park-based food rescue Forgotten Harvest.

The logistics of how to get meals to all students enrolled in the meal plan is happening on a school-by-school basis.

The state's largest district, Detroit Public Schools Community District, plans to provide in-school meals for students on campus and grab and go meals for online students when school resumes Sept. 8, said Chrystal Wilson, assistant superintendent of communications. About 65 percent of students in the district qualify for free or reduced lunch.

During the spring, the district distributed more than 1 million meals, she said, and it provided grab and go meals over the summer.

Warren Consolidated Schools is looking at evening and weekend pickup of meals for families concerned about getting there during the work day, Golzynski said. Other districts are considering sending food home with students or on a bus.

There's no requirement for a daily pickup from the schools, so several days worth of food could be picked up or dropped off at a time. Schools will most likely send home prepared meals or meal kits rather than groceries, but they could opt to send home a gallon of milk rather than individual cartons, she said.

"We have been talking about how to provide food ... the options, since May. I feel like the good majority of food service directors are ready once their schools figure out what they are doing with schooling," Golzynski said.

Diane Golzynski

But both she and emergency food providers expressed concerns that some families will face hurdles in accessing the meals provided by schools, given lack of transportation, work schedules and other factors.

"I am very worried as the state nutrition director about the families who won't have transportation to pick up food from the schools and the kids who aren't yet enrolled in school," Golzynski said.

The return to the school-delivered meal programs will take emergency food providers out of the distribution and federal reimbursement equation. But providers said families will still turn to them to fill the gaps.

Gleaners, Forgotten Harvest and Food Gatherers stepped up distribution in the spring as need rose and created drive-up meal box pickup sites closer to families to help get food to students who counted on the free and reduced-costs meals at school.

On average, Brisson said, Gleaners is providing food for 5,192 kids per day through the current program.

Michigan Superintendent Michael Rice, U.S. Sen. Debbie Stabenow, ranking member of the Senate Committee on Agriculture, Nutrition, and Forestry, and U.S. Sen. Gary Peters and groups like Feeding America, the Food Research Action Council and No Kid Hungry are advocating for the USDA to issue waivers to extend the current program, which would allow younger children to keep receiving food and food providers to continue to play a role, Golzynsky said.

"USDA is telling us they don't have the money to be able to extend the current arrangement," she said.

The question for food banks and rescues is how people who aren't able to take advantage of grab and go meals at school are going to get boxes of food they can go home and prepare, said Phillip Knight, executive director of the Food Bank Council of Michigan.

Phillip Knight

Before COVID, Michigan's seven food banks/rescues distributed an average 2.6 million pounds of food every week, he said. During the pandemic, the network has been providing an average of 4.5 million pounds of food. A projected, 15-percent increase in demand would translate to demand for another 675,000 pounds of food in Michigan every week.

"Where's that food going to come from? We're probably going to have to buy it. That's going to take money."

### **Demand rises as other assistance expires**

The shift in the federally funded food program for students comes as expanded unemployment and SNAP benefits providing food assistance as part of COVID-19 relief expire and turbulent economic conditions continue. The Food Bank Council of Michigan is projecting increased demand for food will rise again over the next few months and last through June 2022.

In 2018, the most recent year available, 13.4 percent of the people living in Wayne, Oakland, Macomb, Livingston and Monroe counties served by Gleaners or [566,270 residents](#),

including 136,340 children, were food insecure, according to Feeding America.

Based on data from the national association, by the end of the year, the number of people needing food assistance in those counties is expected to rise 37 percent, adding another 212,000 adults and children, Gleaners said.

Washtenaw County is looking at a 40 percent increase by year's end, based on Feeding America estimates, said Eileen Spring, president and CEO of Ann Arbor food bank and rescue Food Gatherers.

Families that are food insecure who were not six months ago are making up a significant part of the increase in the region, she said. Food access has also been compromised during the pandemic. For health reasons, some can't access food safely anymore because they can't take public transportation or shop in the grocery store.

Food Gatherers, which was operating on a \$4 million budget at the beginning of the year, has spent more on food procurement during the first four months of the pandemic than it did in all of 2019, Spring said. It ramped up distribution through existing pantry partners employing drive-through models, and it's added new distribution sites in high-need areas.

"For the foreseeable future, there will be climbing demand and less food to meet it unless the feds act," she said.

### **Food supply issues**

COVID-relief food programs have significantly boosted the amount of free food coming to emergency providers from the USDA to address growing food insecurity. But by year's end, those food supplies will drop back to prepandemic levels, just as demand for emergency food assistance is once again rising.

Gleaners is currently getting an average of 3.2 million pounds of food from the USDA per month, Brisson said, or more than triple the amount it was getting before COVID-19 with U.S. Department of Agriculture Farm Service Agency trade mitigation subsidies. That accounts for about half of the 6 million to 7 million pounds of food it distributed each month between April and July.

He expects the amount of food Gleaners is getting from the USDA to drop back to 300,000 pounds per month starting Jan. 1 with the elimination of both the trade mitigation and COVID-19 relief subsidies.

That drop in federally funded food is expected to come, but demand will increase, with minimum projections of a 15 percent increase heading into January. For Gleaners, that increase alone translates to demand for an additional 900,000-1.05 million pounds of food beyond its current distribution levels, Brisson said.

Gleaners is operating on a \$22 million cash budget but is projecting it will spend about \$29 million this year, he said.

"In September I think we'll be OK. We have some excess cash and people are donating," Brisson said. "By October, if nothing changes, I think we start to sweat a little."

Now that some of the temporary resources put in places to help meet rising demand for food assistance are going to be taken away, "our position as a resource for community ... is being weakened," Mayes said.

"But at the end of the day, it's our priority to make sure the kids, the senior and the vulnerable populations in our community have food...we'll do everything we can to figure it out."

### **Addressing the issues**

On the federal level, Feeding America, the national association for food banks/rescues, is calling for a 15 percent increase in the maximum SNAP benefit.

"From food prices skyrocketing to a 50-year high to the loss of an eviction moratorium and additional unemployment insurance benefits to help cover expenses, families are facing mounting hardships that is making putting food on the table harder than ever before," the national association said in a statement on its website.

"By increasing the maximum SNAP benefit by 15 percent for as long as the pandemic and economic fallout continue — which would provide around an additional \$100 a month for a family of four to purchase groceries — our lawmakers can help ensure no one goes hungry amid these tough times while also bringing back our economy from the brink of collapse."

Closer to home, Michigan legislators designated \$9 million to the Food Bank Council of Michigan for emergency food, said Knight, who is chairing the Food Security Council created in early August by Gov. Gretchen Whitmer to look at the causes of food insecurity and solutions for addressing them.

With the new state funding, "we're trying to place the orders for the food ... but have it delivered to us in January," Knight said.

"That might be a Band-Aid on a bullet wound, but we know we have that. It's going to be a huge help."

Inline Play

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