

The Next Chapter of Change:

Transforming the Regional Emergency Food System in Northwest Michigan

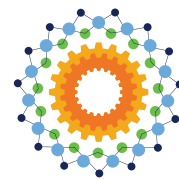
*This story shares an update on how the Northwest Food Coalition, Goodwill Northern Michigan's Food Rescue, and Groundwork Center for Resilient Communities, through a partnership with the Grand Traverse Band of Ottawa and Chippewa Indians, have evolved their work to address regional food insecurity over the two years since the systems change initiative was originally spotlighted in *Stories of Change: How a Systems Approach is Transforming a Region*.*

"When someone walks into a food pantry in our region, it's highly likely that they will have the choice of high-quality fresh fruits and vegetables and lean proteins. Prior to the local food purchasing work, this was not necessarily the case."

— Christina Barkel, Food Equity Specialist,
Groundwork Center for Resilient Communities

"The tribe is now vertically integrated. We're able to start seeds ourselves, grow produce, and be paid by the USDA to make the food available through tribal food pantries to serve our community members. It's a powerful model."

— Will Derouin, Agriculture Manager, Grand
Traverse Band of Ottawa and Chippewa Indians



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Introduction

Between 2018 and 2022, the Northwest Food Coalition, Goodwill Northern Michigan's Food Rescue, and Groundwork Center for Resilient Communities dramatically increased access to nutritious, local food for more than 70,000 community members at risk of food insecurity across Northwest Lower Michigan. Their collaborative efforts included purchasing a staggering 257,089 pounds of produce from 21 local farms, rescuing and distributing food, and operating roughly 70 pantries and meal sites across the five-county service area.

The Healthy Food Access Partnership's efforts to address the issue of food insecurity required the groups to overcome the challenges inherent to collaboration, adapt in mutually beneficial ways to rapidly shifting contexts, and ultimately transform the relationships among them. Their success and evolution as a multi-partner systems change initiative was originally shared in *A Story of Change: Securing Healthy Food Access in Northwest Michigan*.¹

What follows is an update on how the three groups significantly expanded their impact between 2023 and 2025, thanks to the Grand Traverse Band of Ottawa and Chippewa Indians' (GTB) leadership in securing grant funding from the U.S. Department of Agriculture's Local Food Purchase Assistance Cooperative Agreement Program (LFPA)² and decision to extend the resources beyond tribal members to the community at large. The approximately \$800,000 three-year funding opportunity supported the four groups' collaborative efforts and enabled them to transform—not just improve—the regional emergency food system. The story shares the challenges they encountered, while highlighting the tangible outcomes of their work: increased access to healthy, traditional, locally grown food and strengthened support for local producers.

The four partners collaborating to transform the emergency food system in Northwest Lower Michigan play vital and complementary roles:

- **Northwest Food Coalition** – coordinating pantries and community meal sites
- **Goodwill Northern Michigan's Food Rescue** – receiving, repacking, and distributing food
- **Grand Traverse Band of Ottawa and Chippewa Indians** – providing leadership on the U.S. Department of Agriculture's Local Food Purchase Assistance Cooperative Agreement Program, tribal representation in decision-making spaces, and guidance on culturally appropriate foods
- **Groundwork Center for Resilient Communities** – facilitating the purchase of locally grown food

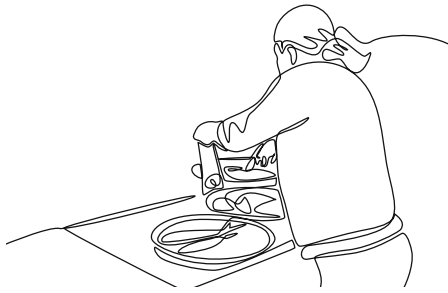


Tribal leadership secures new resources

In late 2021, a significant opportunity changed the trajectory of regional emergency food systems work in Northwest Lower Michigan. The U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) announced the LFPA grant opportunity, and Christina Barkel, food equity specialist with Groundwork Center, immediately recognized its alignment with the Healthy Food Access Partnership's ongoing work. She recalls, "I saw the opportunity and thought, 'Whoa! This is exactly what we do.'"

¹ Available from: https://www.rotarycharities.org/application/files/3316/7457/3337/Story_of_Change_Securing_Healthy_Food_Access_in_Northwest_Michigan.pdf

² Available from: <https://www.ams.usda.gov/selling-food-to-usda/lfpacap>



Barkel reached out to Will Derouin, agriculture manager of the GTB, to explore the possibility of a joint application. Joint applications with non-tribal entities, especially for initiatives that will have a majority impact outside of the tribe, were not typical. Yet strong support from within the tribe, particularly from one tribal member who had served on the Food Coalition Purchasing Committee from its beginnings, helped the governing body overcome any hesitation and support an application. "The justification was that the network of food pantries as a whole services tribal members, not just the three pantries managed by the tribe,"³ Derouin elaborates. What's more, the opportunity to support the broader community connected deeply with the tribal tradition of food sovereignty—the right of all people to have access to local, healthy, unprocessed food—notes GTB Tribal Chairwoman Sandra Witherspoon.

The LFPA grant application was awarded \$800,000 by the USDA for three years of direct food purchasing. Barkel believes that the Purchasing Committee infrastructure established in years prior improved their candidacy: "We were able to say that we had a representative decision-making group in place for food purchasing and to include data showing an increase in the number of farmers we supported and in the pounds of produce we distributed since 2018." Plus, the Healthy Food Access Partnership had previously proved their ability to accommodate additional produce with dedicated resources raised in 2020 through the Local Food Relief Fund.

*The U.S. Department of Agriculture's Local Food Purchase Assistance Cooperative Agreement Program (LFPA) uses non-competitive cooperative agreements to provide funding for state, tribal and territorial governments to purchase foods produced within the state or within 400 miles of the delivery destination to help support local, regional and underserved producers. The purpose of this program is to maintain and improve food and agricultural supply chain resiliency...[and] serve feeding programs, including food banks and organizations that reach underserved communities.*⁴

"When we secured resources through the Local Food Relief Fund in 2020, there was an appetite for the extra healthy food...Our partnership was able to procure it, to deliver it, and clients embraced and used it. The LFPA came at a time when we did not have a plan for being able to sustain the investment."

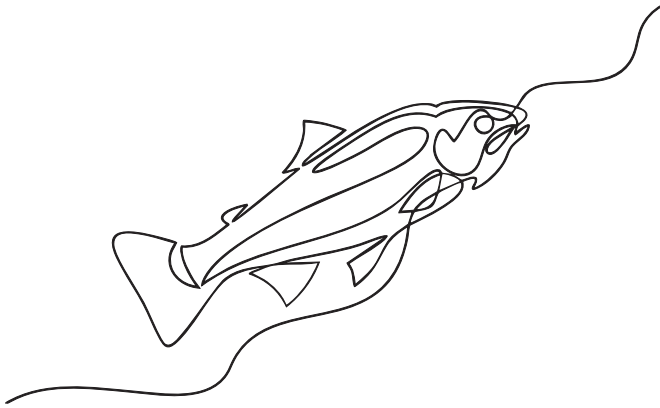
– Mary Clulo, Chairperson, Northwest Food Coalition Operating Committee

Expanded impact and cultural responsiveness

With the GTB's leadership in securing and sharing the LFPA funding, the Healthy Food Access Partnership was positioned to dramatically expand its collective impact across the five-county region, even though their capacity was already on par with many other larger national organizations and regions. "We've had the freedom and ability to support more farms and purchase products that have been needed and desired by food pantries but that the Coalition could never justify purchasing because the relative price per pound was so high," shares Barkel. "Things like ground beef, ground pork, and fish."

³ These three pantries include the Peshawbestown Medicine Lodge Food Pantry, the Traverse City Tribal Office Food Pantry, and the Benzie Tribal Office Food Pantry.

⁴ Available from: <https://www.ams.usda.gov/selling-food-to-usda/lfpacap>



Lake trout and white fish were purchased in the winter and spring of 2025 from Treaty Fish Company, a tribally-owned business in Peshawbestown. "Tribal families often want more animal protein products like this," says Derouin, noting the critical importance of tribal representation on the Purchasing Committee and the special attention given to traditional foods for tribal communities as a result. Barkel agrees, "We prioritize tribal representation on the Purchasing Committee to ensure that we can provide culturally appropriate food for members of our Indigenous community." She confirms that the Purchasing Committee remains representative of all kinds of pantries and meal sites, as it supports the Food Coalition's ability to be responsive to neighbors⁵ needs.

Beyond enhancing the emergency food system's ability to meet the community and individual neighbor's needs, the added LFPA funding has benefitted other local producers like Treaty Fish Company. The GTB now purchases food from the Grand Traverse Band Farm for distribution through tribal pantries. Barkel says the Food Coalition continues to offer local farmers, including those who are historically disadvantaged, a fair price for their products. She shares, "Many have commented on the mental relief that comes with having a steady client in the Food Coalition." In terms of quantity, Taylor Moore, director of Food Rescue, reports that Food Rescue rescued and distributed more fresh, nutritious food in 2024 than in any previous year.

The expanded access to diverse food options brings both opportunities and challenges, particularly when it comes to educating neighbors about some fresh and/or traditional foods that may be unfamiliar. "I struggled with preparing wild-harvested rice up until recently," Derouin laughs humbly. "I was used to cooking wild rice from the store. It's really not the same. Now I'm pre-soaking it, and it's turning out much better."

Even so, the emergency food system's transformation—resulting from the dramatic increase in purchasing power and continued neighbor representation in food purchasing decisions—is evident. "In 2014, 50% of the pantries saw the value in collaborating to purchase food collectively. That number is now 100%," shares Moore. He goes on, "Transformation is an ongoing process. The work of the Purchasing Committee continues to transform mindsets, resource flows, power dynamics. Ultimately, this means more people who might not otherwise have access now receive healthy food. Plus, they're receiving more culturally appropriate foods grown locally."

Through the LFPA, the work of the four groups has garnered national recognition with Barkel invited to speak on a panel about their use of the funding. Thanks to her participation in the national group of grantees, they've learned that they have "a very unique system of collaboration" for delivering high-quality, nutritious food to at-risk people in our community, shares Clulo.

"The work being done is really transformative. We're able to share with our network more unique products like kale and purple cauliflower, in addition to pantry staples like potatoes, onions, and carrots. Access to fresh produce and proteins is valuable to people facing food insecurity, but having the ability to choose from a wide variety of these foods adds a powerful layer of dignity—and redefines what a pantry experience can be."

– Rachael Cougler, Coordinator, Northwest Food Coalition

⁵ Here, neighbor refers to any individual experiencing food insecurity who visits a pantry or meal site.

Challenges result from shifts at the federal level

Despite these significant successes, the four groups face challenges ahead, largely as a result of shifts in the federal landscape. In spring 2025, the USDA canceled the LFPA program, though the federal government is still honoring current awards. "For now, we're moving forward as planned," says Derouin. The GTB believes they will have funding through 2026 to continue the collaborative food purchasing effort, thanks to the additional award of a two-year grant extension called the Local Food Purchase Assistance (LFPA) Plus to advance and expand the work to meet increasing community needs.

These expanded efforts are crucial, as food insecurity continues to rise in the region. From 2021 to 2024, there has been a 70% increase in food pantry usage, according to the Northwest Food Coalition. These increases were brought on by the end of assistance programs initiated during the pandemic.

All four groups agree on the importance of federal policy and grants like the LFPA to support food systems work. "All boats rose with the added investment of the LFPA funding," comments Clulo. "The farmers, the pantries, the clients of the pantries and meal sites who receive the food... We've been able to invest in people's health and future." Barkel adds that the benefits are clear not just for the work of addressing food insecurity but also for the local economy. "We're investing in local farms as the backbone of our regional economy."

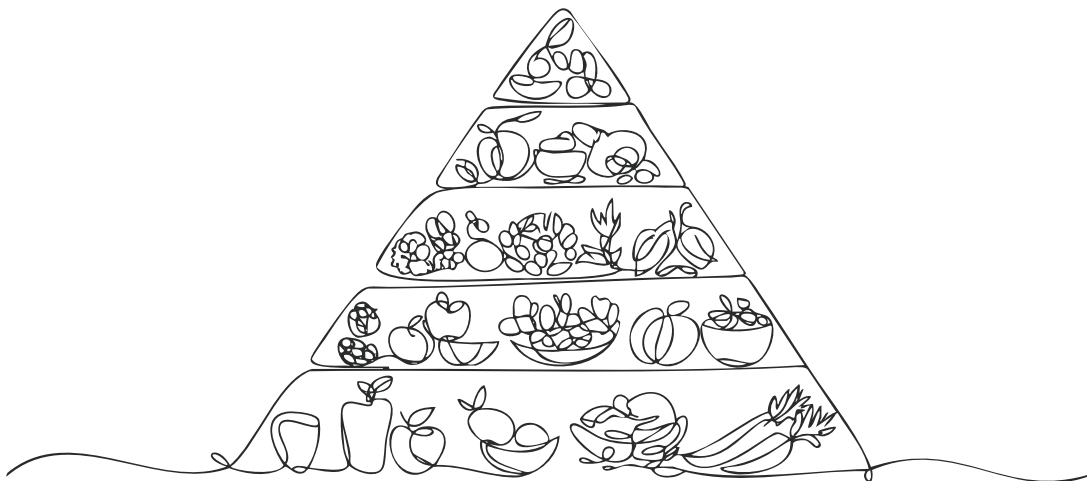
When the funding disappears, the groups will need to allocate resources and capacity to find different fundraising opportunities.

"As a society, we can choose to make investments in uplifting regional food systems and collectively using our resources to support food insecure people—or we can do what we're currently choosing to do, which is to put the burden of systemic food insecurity on communities and groups like the Food Coalition."

– Christina Barkel, Food Equity Specialist,
Groundwork Center for Resilient Communities

Signs of regional food system transformation

Despite these funding uncertainties, the Food Coalition, Food Rescue, Groundwork Center, and the GTB remain steadfast in their commitment to addressing local food insecurity and continue to demonstrate the transformative potential of collaborative, systems-based approaches. By securing significant funding, expanding purchasing capacity, ensuring representative decision-making, strengthening relationships, and maintaining a commitment to locally grown, culturally appropriate food, they have transformed the region's emergency food system while supporting the local food economy. Though challenges remain, particularly in securing sustainable funding, the work of these four groups continues to create a more resilient, equitable emergency food system for all in Northwest Lower Michigan.



The table below illustrates the critical shifts—in how people think, work and learn together, and direct resources—that have resulted in a more equitable and locally rooted emergency food system.

Individual + Collective Transformation
Mindset shifts, skills, culture, alignment, shared purpose & collaboration

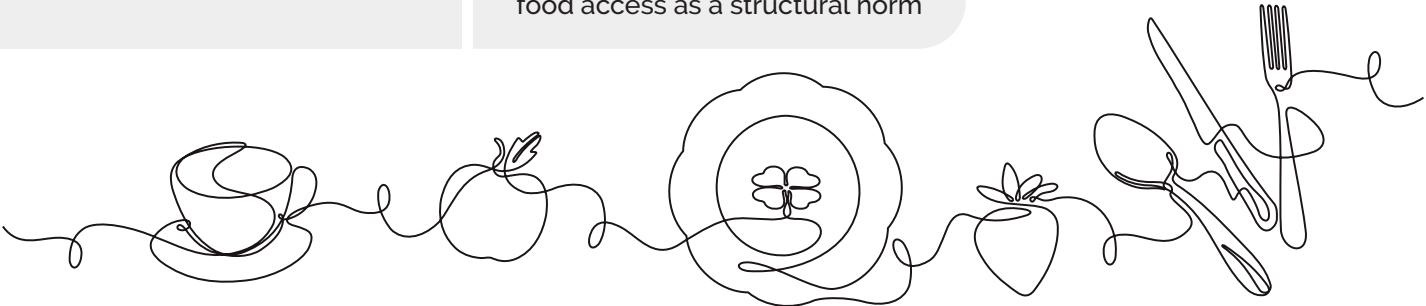
- Built trust and shared purpose among the Northwest Food Coalition, Food Rescue, and Groundwork Center
- Strengthened capacity for systems thinking and co-design
- Shifted from competition to collaboration and distributed leadership
- Recognized healthy food as a lever for community health
- Learned to work adaptively during COVID-19
- Tribal leadership brought new perspective and authority to regional collaboration
- Grew shared understanding of food sovereignty and community wellbeing
- Reinforced commitment to cultural responsiveness and equity-centered decision-making
- Normalized shared leadership and representative participation as essential to transformation
- Continued adaptive learning through Rotary Charities' Systems Change Community of Practice and national USDA LFPA networks

System Transformation
Changes in power, policies, practices, relationships, resource flows

- Improved coordination across 70 pantries and meal sites
- Increased collaborative capacity through partnership agreements and cross-system funding
- Established representative structures (e.g., Purchasing Committee) and shared governance norms
- Created infrastructure for local food purchasing and distribution, strengthening resource flows between local farms and pantries
- 100% of pantries see the value in collaborating to purchase food collectively
- Developed new food purchasing and storage systems
- Introduced equitable distribution metrics and data systems
- Tribal government secured and administered \$800,000 in USDA LFPA funding, expanding food purchasing capacity region-wide
- Extended federal resources beyond tribal members, embodying shared leadership and mutual benefit
- Strengthened local economies by purchasing from 21+ producers, including tribally owned Treaty Fish Company
- Embedded culturally appropriate food access as a structural norm

Community Impact
Observable progress on the issue

- Distributed over 250,000 pounds of locally-sourced produce and protein across five counties
- Increased access to healthy food for 70,000 people at risk of food insecurity
- Raised the percentage of pantries consistently offering fresh produce from 13% (2014) to 80% (2024)
- Rescued and distributed more fresh, nutritious food in 2024 than in any previous year
- Strengthened local farm viability and resilience during COVID-19
- Improved access to nutritious, locally grown, and traditional foods for tribal and non-tribal members
- Supported mental and economic wellbeing of local producers
- Increased dignity, choice, and cultural connection for neighbors
- Positioned the region as a leader in equitable food systems transformation



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