

Fighting hunger with health: How \$1 Mn grant is redesigning rural food access in Michigan

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On July 31, Meridian and its philanthropic parent announced a \$1 million grant to the Food Bank Council of Michigan (FBCM), targeting one of the state's most underserved areas: Prosperity Region 8. This region, encompassing Berrien, Branch, Calhoun, Cass, Kalamazoo, St. Joseph, and Van Buren counties, faces a complex web of challenges—limited grocery access, inadequate public transportation, and a rising burden of diet-related chronic illnesses like diabetes and hypertension. The grant aims to tackle these issues through a pioneering approach that fuses health care delivery with community food systems.

At the heart of this partnership is the concept of "food as medicine," an idea rapidly gaining ground in Medicaid and public health circles. The grant will fund the rollout of Nourish MI Pantries, a model developed by FBCM to transform local food pantries into high-functioning, health-aligned distribution points offering fresh produce, frozen goods, and a client-choice shopping experience. These pantries are not just about feeding people—they're designed to meet nutritional needs, support chronic care plans, and ultimately improve health outcomes in high-risk populations.

Meridian’s President and CEO Patty Graham underscored the urgency of the initiative, noting that food insecurity and poor health are inextricably linked. Individuals who lack reliable access to nutritious food are far more likely to suffer from conditions like high blood pressure and diabetes. By investing in a coordinated, proactive approach, the partnership seeks to remove systemic barriers—such as distance, affordability, and information gaps—that prevent rural residents from living healthier lives.

Phase One of the program will designate and upgrade two existing pantries, equipping them with refrigeration units, shelving, tablets, and digital infrastructure to support In Lieu of Services (ILOS) implementation under Medicaid. This model allows food to be treated as a reimbursable medical service—effectively turning pantries into extensions of the healthcare system. The pantries will also distribute Nourish MI Pantry Packs, curated food kits that align with patient-specific dietary goals.

Importantly, these upgrades aren’t one-off improvements—they’re part of a long-term capacity-building plan. Each pantry will be supported by local food bank teams trained in health-integrated service delivery, with a focus on sustaining year-round access to nutritious food and integrating pantry data into Medicaid care coordination efforts.

In 2026, Phase Two of the initiative will build on this foundation by upgrading five additional pantries and launching a full-scale Fresh Food Pharmacy (FFP) program at Grace Health, a federally qualified health center in Battle Creek. The FFP will allow eligible patients with chronic conditions to shop for fresh, healthy foods onsite, while receiving personalized health coaching. This not only improves disease management but minimizes the need for costly hospital interventions—a win for patients, providers, and payers alike.

The backdrop to this initiative is stark. According to Feeding America's "Map the Meal Gap," more than 1.4 million Michiganders are food insecure, including over 378,000 children. These numbers have worsened in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic, particularly in rural regions where residents often travel long distances for fresh produce, navigating limited grocery store options and inadequate public transit systems. The cumulative effect is a cycle of poor diet, poor health, and deepening economic strain.

Dr. Phil Knight, Executive Director of FBCM, describes the partnership as both practical and transformative. It's not just about distributing food, he said—it's about embedding food security into the broader health equity conversation. By supporting health centers and community pantries alike, the initiative repositions access to nutritious food as a structural pillar of rural healthcare.

This grant also reflects a growing shift in how corporate philanthropy is approached. Rather than writing checks for short-term relief, companies like Centene are investing in systemic, data-driven strategies with measurable outcomes. By aligning Medicaid care delivery with community infrastructure, Meridian and Centene are effectively piloting a public-private model of integrated, preventive health care.

What makes this program especially notable is its replicability. If successful, Michigan's Nourish MI model could serve as a template for other states grappling with similar challenges. As states look to expand ILOS flexibility under Medicaid, food pharmacies and tech-enabled pantries may well become standard components of care for low-income, high-risk populations.

The underlying message is clear: in 2025, healthcare innovation isn't limited to AI diagnostics or remote telehealth—it can also start with a stocked pantry and a bag of produce. As Michigan embarks on this three-year journey, it may well be laying the groundwork for a new standard in rural health delivery—one where food is not a luxury, but a lifeline.