

## **Hispanic Center Food Distribution & Senior Box Program**

In the months following Michigan's COVID-19 stay at home order, Alejandra Meza, says dozens of families began stopping by the Hispanic Center of Western Michigan asking for food assistance.

Most of the residents who live along Grandville identify as Latinx and are first- or second-generation immigrants to the United States. Many are undocumented and do not qualify for federal aid in the same way others do.

Alejandra is the Family Supports Services Manager at the Hispanic Center. While the Hispanic Center acts like a connector to community resources and support they are not set up as a food pantry.

"We never anticipated we would become a food pantry, but we knew we had to do something," she says. "Which is why we decided to do our food distributions."

In partnership with Feeding America, Alejandra and her coworker, Olga Martinez began organizing weekly food distributions.

"There was a big need, and this was evident when we would have several hundred residents consistently come to our food distribution days," Alejandra explains.

At the beginning it was all hands-on deck with area volunteers as well as the entire staff at the center.

"We would unload, unbox the food and set up a COVID safe system where people coming could pick up their food without risking exposure," she adds.

At the time, these events were taking place every week. Today the food distribution events occur on a bi-weekly basis.

Alejandra says in the Spring they were taking place every month, but with children home for the summer, they have noticed an increased need among families.

Families with children in the area are not the only ones struggling and according to Alejandra, there are many residents in the area who are seniors living on their own and are experiencing food insecurity as well.

With the help of the Neighborhood Match Fund Grant, Alejandra says they are now able to continue the regular on-site food distribution and the home delivery of food boxes for seniors in need.

"We understand that they have different barriers, and one of those being transportation," Alejandra explains. "We are able to provide them with delivery, so they don't have to worry about coming here to the center. We will deliver it right to their door."

The feedback they have received from the community has been positive. Alejandra says she thinks it's because they have been thoughtful in offering culturally appropriate foods.

“We try to make sure that we provide greens, proteins, dairies, fruits, vegetables, just so they have a variety of food.” “We also try to keep it culturally competent, as to the kinds of foods we would tend to see in a Hispanic kitchen.”

For now, Alejandra and her team hope to continue to build relationships with the community and through the food distribution events address the area’s residents’ food insecurity concerns.

“Our food distribution might change as the community’s needs change, but we are committed to finding ways to connect and meet the residents’ needs.” “They deserve access to affordable and healthy food.”