

FOODFORTHOUGHT

FALL 2026

MEET WENDY

Wendy occasionally visits KLF for food assistance when she needs a little extra support. "Some months, everything falls apart, and I come up short on funds," Wendy shares. "I don't like to take things I don't need, so I only make an appointment when my cupboards are really empty." But on this day, Wendy stops by KLF for a different reason. "I have a little extra this month, so I wanted to give back." Wendy reaches into her wallet and pulls out three one-dollar bills. She pauses, then takes out one more. "I know it's not much, but it's something — and all I can do right now to help someone else." As Wendy walks out the door, she turns back to the KLF staff. "You know, without this place, I probably wouldn't be alive right now. Thank you!" Wendy's story is a powerful reminder that when people receive support, they often find ways to give back — even when they have very little to spare.



MEET ESAI

While Esai is waiting in line for his pantry appointment, he chats with a KLF team member conducting our annual client survey. He thoughtfully shares that the food provided by KLF helps his family avoid skipping meals and eases some of the stress they face. "I am currently unemployed and have been looking for work — nothing has landed yet, but I am sure it will soon," Esai states hopefully. When asked whether he feels treated with dignity and respect at KLF, Esai strongly agrees. He appreciates that KLF takes his family's food allergies and dietary restrictions into consideration. "I also love that we get food we have never tried or might not be able to afford. We can experiment with new foods." For Esai, KLF provides not only groceries, but also relief, respect, and opportunities.

MEET LADESSA

Ladessa has lived in a housing development near the Douglass Community Association for over a decade. Now in her late 70s, she does not drive and often relies on social service agencies or neighbors for transportation. That is one reason that KLF's pantry inside the Douglass Community Association (DCA) is so important to her. Ladessa can easily walk to the pantry, where in-person shopping allows clients to choose the foods that best meet their needs. But for Ladessa, the Douglass Pantry offers something even more meaningful — familiar faces and friendships she has built with the volunteers. When the Douglass pantry temporarily closed for several weeks in July for repairs and renovations, Ladessa was concerned about how she would get to another pantry location. After connecting with KLF staff, Ladessa arranged for a home delivery until the Douglass Pantry reopened. When the day finally came, Ladessa was the first client through the pantry doors. "The Douglass Pantry is like a second home. I love to pick my food, but I love the volunteers here even more. They are my friends!" More than just food, Ladessa knows the pantry is a place of connection and independence.



While the client stories featured above are true, their names and images have been changed for anonymity.

A NOTE FROM JEN

For this newsletter, we spoke with a key member of our team, **Matthew Miller**. As our Program Operations Manager, Matthew oversees the many moving pieces of our Grocery Pantry Program and Mobile Food Distributions. He navigates the unexpected twists and turns that food banks face each day, helping ensure our programs run smoothly while supporting our community in an accessible and dignified way.

— Jennifer Johnson, Executive Director



Q: You joined the KLF team in early 2025. What surprised you about the organization and food insecurity in our community?

A: Prior to joining KLF, I worked primarily with individuals experiencing homelessness through the Street Outreach Team at ISK. While this was deeply important work, many of the people I encountered were experiencing similar challenges and needs. At KLF, it quickly became apparent that we serve people from all walks of life, creating a need to customize our services to meet individual situations. There is no cookie-cutter response to this work. This variety is both challenging and rewarding. However, one theme is consistent: our clients are deeply grateful for the support they receive.

Q: You were born and raised in Kalamazoo. Were you familiar with KLF before working here?

A: Yes. KLF has always been well known throughout the community and has always stood out to me as the gold standard in a human service organization. I had recently graduated with my MSW when I saw this position open, and

I was drawn to apply. KLF has lived up to its reputation of being strongly aligned with its mission and operating in sync with its values. My personal philosophy is "People First; Mission Always." At KLF, I see this belief in action every day.

Q: Looking ahead, what are some of your dreams for better addressing food insecurity in our area?

A: Hunger is a symptom of many larger societal challenges. I am committed to helping advance the shifts that reduce food insecurity, but I am also realistic in accepting that there will always be gaps in meeting the needs of our community. Internally, I would love to expand our home delivery program and open additional pantries in key areas. Our community is rich with human service organizations; however, navigating these systems can be difficult for many of our clients. Continued alignment between organizations – and perhaps the creation of a community hub for resources – could help streamline support and reduce barriers for those seeking assistance.



BACK TO SCHOOL!

KLF works closely with school districts throughout Kalamazoo County to provide additional access points for families. School-based pantries allow students to visit without an appointment or parental figure present, which is helpful for young people who may be responsible for caring for younger siblings.

HERE'S A SNAPSHOT OF KLF'S SCHOOL-BASED PROGRAMMING:

- Current partnerships support Kalamazoo, Portage, Galesburg-Augusta, Parchment, Comstock, Climax-Scotts, and Vicksburg Public Schools;
- 17 school-based pantries;
- 26 elementary schools receive over 1,600 weekend food packs weekly;
- Monthly mobile food distribution at Comstock Middle School;
- Provide food support to Generous Hands, a non-profit supporting Vicksburg schools;
- Work closely with educators and school personnel to promote other KLF hunger-relief programs for families who need extra assistance.

CREATIVE AND FUN WAYS TO HELP KLF THIS HOLIDAY SEASON *(or anytime!)*

PARTY WITH A PURPOSE

Have fun at your next social event while helping others. Request that guests bring a monetary or food donation.

THEMED FOOD DRIVES

Add a theme to your food drive to make it more fun. Focus on collecting specific items such as cereal, snacks for kids, hearty soups, baking mixes, or a PB & J.

REVERSE ADVENT CALENDAR

For every day that you open a square on your advent calendar, add a food donation to a basket and deliver right before the holidays.

RECIPE KITS

Make a family tradition of assembling complete recipe kits that include all required dry ingredients. Ideas include birthday cake or cookie kits, chili fixings, pasta dinner, or tuna casserole.

SOCIAL MEDIA FUNDRAISERS

Start a social media fundraiser and encourage your circle to contribute to a cause you care about. Most of these fundraisers allow you to set a goal and track progress which is a great visual and incentive.

TRIBUTE GIFTS

Instead of buying gifts for your loved ones, give a donation in their honor and ask them to do the same for you. A great idea for that person who has everything!

VOLUNTEER

KLF always needs help during the holiday season, but volunteer opportunities fill up quickly! Sorting food donations or filling in for regular volunteers who may be taking time off for the holidays is a great help.

GIVING TREE

Instead of just ornaments, decorate a tree with mini-shopping lists for food donations. This works well in an office, school, or place of worship.

DONATE DURING THE HOLIDAY; SUPPORT KLF ALL YEAR

Starting a monthly donation during the holiday season or as a new year resolution will help fight food insecurity all year long!



DISPELLING MYTHS: HOUSING AND FOOD INSECURITY



In cities of all sizes, it is commonplace to encounter individuals requesting assistance through signs stating *Homeless and Hungry* or directly approaching others for help. These experiences often lead to the incorrect assumption that most people facing food insecurity are also unhoused. Throughout the years, we've been asked how someone who can afford a home or car could still struggle to feed their families.

Material possessions are not always an indication that people are financially stable. Someone may have purchased a house or car when they were financially secure, but unexpected events, including job loss or medical issues, can quickly change someone's situation. A family

may have signed a lease on an affordable apartment, only to be faced with significant rent increases when new management is in place. While unhoused individuals most certainly do face food insecurity, the reality is that food insecurity is an invisible problem, impacting people from all walks of life.

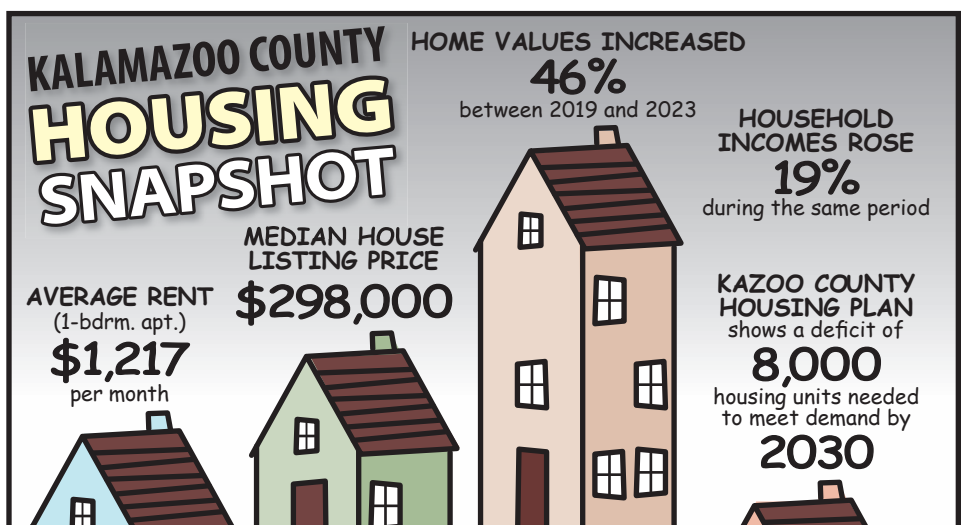
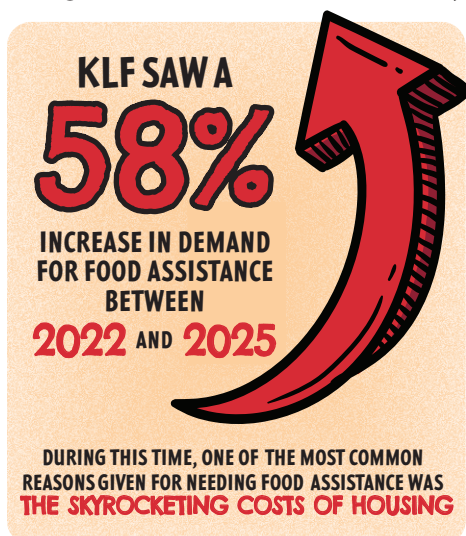
However, there is a connection between food insecurity and homelessness, but it may not be what you think. **Research shows that food insecurity often precedes homelessness.** Families who are struggling to pay rent or mortgages often skip meals or purchase inexpensive, low-nutritional value food to save money. Forty-nine percent (49%) of Americans admit to skipping meals so they can pay

rent. The number of cost-burdened renters – defined as spending more than 30% of income on housing – reached an all-time high of 22.7 million households in 2024. **This “Rent Eats First” strategy results in families depleting their limited budgets on housing, leaving little money for food or medical care.** While this strategy may work for a while, it impacts the overall health of the household and the healthy development of children in that home.

“As you lose your income, the first thing you're going to do is start skipping meals. Because you're going to try to keep that roof over your head, and you're going to pay your utility bills,” says Sherrie Tussler, CEO of Hunger Task Force. “And if you're on medication, you'll try to afford it. And so, as things start to slip away, you pay fewer and fewer bills. You might get into arrears around your utilities. You might have to rely on family or friends or a food pantry for your food just so you can keep that roof over your head.”

Securing food assistance can help individuals and families stay housed by freeing up funds for housing, utilities, medications, and childcare. Frequently, this need is only for a short time when unexpected financial events occur and to avoid slipping further into a financial crisis. **In fact, last year, 60% of the families who visited KLF utilized our services five times or less during the year.**

Sources: Harvard University Joint Center for Housing Studies; University of Connecticut, School for Public Policy; Food Research Action Council; Hunger Task Force; W.E. Upjohn Institute for Employment Research.



TRIBUTES

Generous donations made to KLF in someone's **HONOR** or **MEMORY**. Donations made 7/1/2026 to 8/31/2026.

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