



## Fighting Hunger in Rural Michigan

In the fall of 2019, two local SNAP-Ed implementing agencies began discussions on how they could work with the local transportation authority to address food insecurity in the rural “thumb area” (a reference to the “thumb” of the hand-shaped state) of Michigan. As a result, the Tuscola Food Access Collaborative was created and leveraged existing structures and projects, including the Thumb Blessing Boxes, which began in 2020, the same year a pandemic was declared, wherein the need for food and household items, was evident.

While partners attempted to be strategic about the placement of the Thumb Blessing Boxes, community members had difficulty locating this resource. After engaging with the local transportation authority, partners concluded that transit buses, which are dispatched to areas with a high density of low-income families and individuals as well as people that have transportation barriers, are a viable solution.

In summer 2021, Thumb Blessing Boxes partners placed a box, also known as a mobile mini pantry, on a transit bus to assist with addressing the transportation barrier and to reach people where they are located.

*“With gas prices continuing to rise, the bus system is expecting their ridership to also increase. County community members in need who may not have personal transportation will now have access to these mobile mini pantries.” - PSE Champion Bus Coordinator*

Today, more people have access to healthy food in the “Thumb” of Michigan as the concept of the mobile mini pantries has grown. Currently, 22 Thumb Blessing Boxes, filled with food, personal hygiene, and paper products, are strategically placed throughout two counties in rural Michigan (Tuscola and Huron) to serve community members in need. The newest box was placed at a local income-based senior housing site, where many residents utilize public transportation, with the support of external funding to sustain it. Nutrition education at the site includes series educational classes focused on cooking for one and the distribution of \$5,000 in fruit and vegetable coupons with educational handouts.

Since the first Blessing Box was placed on a “Thumbbody” transit bus, over 2,490 passengers have ridden the bus in the past year. In total, there are three mini pantry boxes on “Thumbbody” transit buses in Tuscola County and four placed on Thumb Area Transit (TAT) buses in Huron County. SNAP-Ed eligible participants receive healthy recipes and educational handouts that feature several items in the boxes. Project staff and volunteers, including MSU Extension Community Nutrition Instructors, bundle together donated items to combine MyPlate food groups and suggest healthy meal ideas. Nutrition education classes are offered to patrons accessing items from the boxes.

SNAP-Ed evaluation framework indicators met by this intervention are ST5, ST6, ST7, MT5, LT5, and LT6. There is a total of eight PSE champions representing the Farmer's Market, Intermediate School District, Bus coordination, Human Development Commission, Food Policy Council, Blue Cross Blue Shield, and Thumb Blessing Boxes. The champions assessed their readiness to change by completing the organizational readiness to change assessment prior to beginning their efforts and documented they were ready to make changes. There are currently 16 people active from local groups such as 4-H, Rotary Clubs, Great Start Collaborative, library and the Farmer's market serving as "caretakers", who check on the boxes regularly and restock them. Partners held a "collection drive war" to increase awareness of the boxes and donations for them.

Thumb Blessing Boxes recently received the "Community Innovation Award" from the local food policy council for efforts in breaking down barriers to food access and working collaboratively with community partners, including two local SNAP-Ed implementing agencies. The team works side-by-side with several other partners to address food access challenges. During the market season, the local farmers market hosts a "restock" donation box to maintain the mobile mini pantries. The farmers market also welcomes customers to purchase "market money" tokens to offer riders \$5 to purchase locally produced goods. The motto of the Thumb Blessing Boxes is "take what you need, leave what you can." Community members in need can access the boxes whenever it works for them. This reduces the stigma some individuals feel while visiting a traditional pantry and asking for help. SNAP-Ed implementing agency, MSU Extension, provided policy, system, and environmental coaching expertise to get the boxes placed and worked with community organizations and agencies to ensure the box would remain stocked for passengers. The Thumb Blessing Boxes Facebook page has 1,328 people following the page and a recent post reached 3,294 people with 642 people engaged in the posts. Plans to expand the number and locations of boxes are underway.

