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Forgotten Harvest makes \$5M MacKenzie Scott gift go a long way to strengthen emergency food system

By Sherri Welch



Credit: Forgotten Harvest

A grant from Forgotten Harvest to Highland Park-based God's Storehouse enabled it to purchase a new customized emergency food delivery van.

March 13, 2024 03:27 PM

A \$5 million microgrant program created by Forgotten Harvest to strengthen food distribution in metro Detroit with grants to grassroots groups is seeing early success.

The support is already boosting volunteer engagement for groups that rely on them to operate, producing operating efficiencies and increasing food distribution, leaders say.

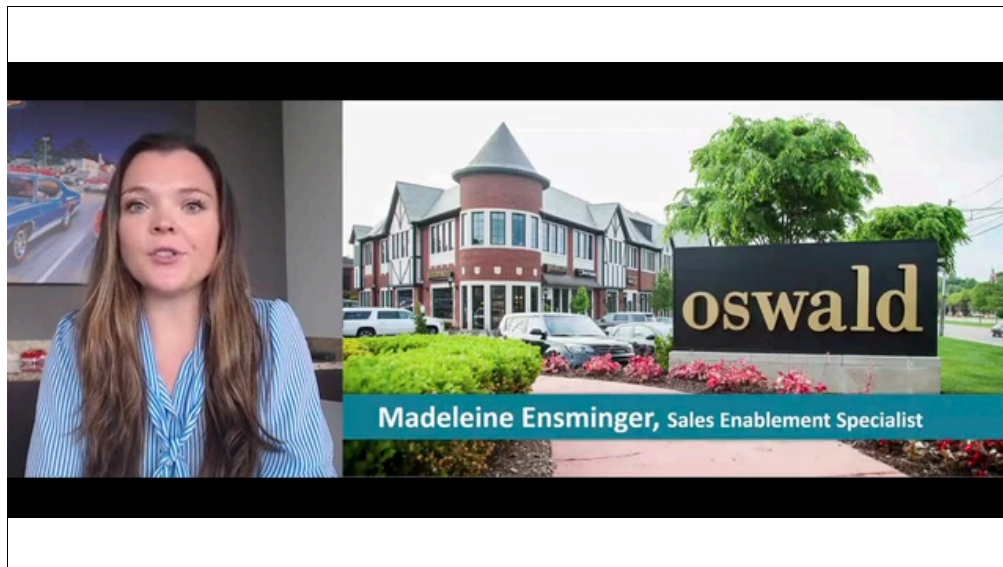
Forgotten Harvest makes first grants from \$5 million MacKenzie Scott gift it's giving away

Forgotten Harvest to use millions of MacKenzie Scott gift to strengthen emergency food system

Lighthouse moving food distribution into Gleaners' Pontiac warehouse

In ensuring a sustainable food distribution network, "minor infrastructure improvements really (make) a huge difference in these matters," he said.

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The Oak Park-based food rescue organization created the fund with part of the [\\$25 million gift it received from philanthropist MacKenzie Scott](#) to launch the microgrants program in December 2022.

So far, Forgotten Harvest has provided \$2.3 million through three rounds of \$10,000-\$150,000 grants to 55 pantries, churches, soup kitchens and other community-based groups distributing emergency food in Oakland, Macomb and Wayne counties. For many, the funds are the first or biggest grant they have received, said Maud Lyon, administrator of the capacity grant program for Forgotten Harvest.



Credit: Forgotten Harvest

Covenant House Michigan cook Lashawn Lee shows off the much-needed kitchen equipment the nonprofit purchased with a Forgotten Harvest grant for use in its emergency food program.

Just a little more than a year into the program, firm numbers on overall percentage increases in the number of people served and amount and types of food distributed aren't yet available, but grantees are reporting early success, Lyon said.

Among the two dozen grantees in the first two rounds of the grant program:

- 71% reported increased volunteer commitment with more volunteers showing up and current volunteers giving more hours.
- 63% reported more efficient logistics with the grants, helping them serve more people in less time.
- 42% said they have increased the amounts and types of food distributed.

“Clear and away, the biggest impact is improving the volunteer experience and improving their morale, and this is hugely important to these pantries because they depend on volunteer

to reduce food waste; and facility renovations from painting and shelving and sheds for storage to electrical upgrades, bathrooms, kitchen upgrades and roof repairs, Lyon said.

“A lot of these agencies are working in church basements or ... other facilities that weren't built for those purposes. They're all in aging facilities,” she said.

Staffing needs are also a common request. Forgotten Harvest has funded some staff aid but also helped leverage increased volunteerism for the groups through things like adding a bathroom or providing chairs and tents to help shelter those at outdoor food drives from the elements and making parking lot updates that improve safety for volunteers, prevent them from having to help push cars out of potholes and enable two lines of cars to go through at once to pick up food for increased efficiencies.

Grants to fund forklifts and pallet jacks are taking the pressure off volunteers. And physical improvements to building exteriors and parking lots are helping attract new volunteers to the small groups, Lyon said.

“Suddenly people see this place and it looks, you know, more like a place you'd want to volunteer,” she said.

Other grants have gone to local client choice pantries, which provide emergency food and other supportive services for those in need through a grocery store format where they can shop for the things they need and want.

Redford Interfaith Relief, for example, was able to gain efficiencies and improve service to the people coming for help by using its grant to secure better client scheduling software, reusable grocery bags, shopping carts, freezer and refrigerator upgrades and parking lot improvements, Lyon said.

Those types of things, which help clients feel respected and valued are huge things “for somebody who is on the edge and struggling just to have enough food to put on the table for their kids,” she said.

Detroit-based God's Storehouse purchased a new customized van for food deliveries to seniors, people with disabilities and homeless with a \$126,000 grant from Forgotten Harvest. It includes not only hot and cold storage but higher ceilings so volunteers can stand upright while handing out food, a side window for confidential consultations with clients in need of other referrals, a loudspeaker for addressing people

and faith, helping to increase morale, the number of volunteers and the number of people served, Pastor Toni-Brooke Brown said in a grant report to Forgotten Harvest.

"We are now looking at more ways to help people to get out of their situation," Brooke said. "We have been distributing food and other items from our facility for nearly 30 years. But this last year has made us most efficient in our distribution outside of the walls."

City Covenant Church in Brightmoor used its grant to buy much-needed kitchen equipment.

"When an organization of the magnitude of Forgotten Harvest acknowledges and partners with us, we can't help but feel a sense of validation. It tells the poor and disenfranchised that someone does care and renewed our confidence that this is what God has called us to do," said the church's pastor, Semmeal Thomas.

Small grants are adding up and having a cumulative impact, Lyon said.

"As more and more projects come to their full fruition, we expect that we will see even greater increases in the amount of food distributed," she said.

Editor's note: The original version of this report misidentified the nonprofit and person in the Covenant House Michigan photo. This version is correct.

By Sherri Welch

Sherri Welch is a senior reporter for Crain's Detroit Business covering nonprofits, philanthropy, higher education and arts and culture. Before joining Crain's in 2003, she covered automotive suppliers and tire makers for Crain's Rubber & Plastics News.