

Outdoors: Hunters play major role in feeding Michigan's hungry



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As I recall from those days as a youth many decades ago, the lessons were frequent while growing up under the guidance of a reserved family matriarch who was the living and breathing definition of true Christian charity. Her examples of kindness and giving needed little reinforcement since they occurred with such seemingly effortless frequency.

But when Mom did add an instructive phrase or put emphasis on a certain moment of altruism, she often used the Corporal Works of Mercy as a simple, straightforward index of guidelines to incorporate into your life. Visiting the sick, providing shelter or clothing to those in need, giving drink to the thirsty, visiting those imprisoned, burying the dead, and feeding the hungry — those are the planks that make up that collection of good deeds.

Feeding the hungry always registered strongest with me as a kid, and it still does today. Without food, and the nutrition to sustain life, the other works would not come into play, it seemed. So when I see individuals or organizations engaging in this most basic and humane act of kindness, and doing so in an often anonymous manner, it warms the heart because that's how Mom did it. She liked to leave baskets of food on people's porches, or have the delivery made by an erstwhile detached party, such as one of my brothers and me.

The Michigan Sportsmen Against Hunger has taken that “feeding the hungry” notion to heart and done so in a massive way. Since 1991, this organization has collaborated with hunters, wild game processors, and food pantries, soup kitchens, food banks, shelters, and other entities in a robust effort to feed the needy of the Great Lakes State.

In 2020 alone, the hunters who support this effort donated just under 100,000 pounds of venison to be distributed to the hungry. The following year, the total donated jumped to 107,000 pounds. Officials with the organization said that during

the pandemic-related lockdowns, more people hunted and those hunters spent more days in the woods, bringing about a surge in donations. Hunters also bought more hunting licenses online where they could take advantage of the option to donate to Michigan Sportsmen Against Hunger and help defray the processing costs for donated deer.

Dean Hall, executive director of the Michigan Sportsmen Against Hunger, has been involved in the good work the organization does for nearly 23 years. He said feeding those in need is a tradition that hunters have been involved with for a very long time.

“Bringing food for others has always been important,” he said. “Look back at the time of the pioneers and every settlement had hunters who would go out and hunt to provide for the community. And they paid particular attention to helping out those who were too old or sick or could not hunt anymore. It is just something hunters have always done.”

Over the course of its existence, Michigan Sportsmen Against Hunger has donated close to one million pounds of processed venison burger to community nonprofit food banks and pantries. It is estimated that this donated venison has been turned into about four million nourishing meals for those in need.

Hall said the demand for this healthy, lean, all-organic source of protein is significant. While food banks and pantries will often get substantial donations of bread, pasta, peanut butter, and sweets, lean protein is much harder to acquire. All of the donated venison is turned into ground meat to stretch its use and make it work with a multitude of dishes — chili, spaghetti, lasagna, casseroles, sloppy joes, tacos, etc.

“The shelters, food banks, and pantries are in dire straits when it comes to protein,” he said. “It is something that is really needed. Some places might be a little skeptical of venison at first, since it is meat from a deer, but after we show them how to prepare it and how to use it, people just love it.”

A study conducted in Michigan in the recent past demonstrated the scope of the need. The study indicated that there were close to 1.8 million people in the state who required or sought food assistance. Nearly 20 percent of that group was composed of folks age 60 or older, while close to 40 percent of the households that were experiencing some level of food shortages included children. Nearly 60 percent of the individuals who expressed a need for food assistance indicated that they sometimes had to choose between buying food or purchasing the medicines they needed. Close to seven in 10 families with persistent hunger issues said there were times when they had to choose between buying food or paying for their utilities.

“We never look at this program as a hand-out, but instead we like to see it as a hand up,” Hall said. “There are those times in life when, through no fault of their own, or

maybe as the result of just a bad decision they made one time, people find themselves in a situation where they don't have enough to eat or they can't provide the food their family needs.”

Hall said the demographics of those in need of food support can change as the country experiences swings in the strength of the economy, but there are always people facing a shortage of proper nutrition. “We've found that these days there are an awful lot of grandparents out there who are taking care of their grandchildren. If these folks are living on a fixed income, they could likely use some help,” Hall said. “We see this work as uplifting, to the heart and the spirit of those providing the food, and those receiving it.”

He added that the work of Michigan Sportsmen Against Hunger is sustained by a number of hunting and conservation groups, including the United Sportsmen of America, the National Deer Association, Michigan United Conservation Clubs, and United Methodist Men, while the overall effort is coordinated through the Michigan Department of Natural Resources.

“There are a lot of good, generous, and caring people that are behind this,” Hall said. “For most hunters, once his freezer has the venison he thinks will feed his family, he is more than willing to share with those in need. It is not a tough sell at all to ask hunters to help out.”

More information on the Michigan Sportsmen Against Hunger program is available at the sportsmenagainsthunger.org website.

Similar charitable work is done in Ohio by the Farmers and Hunters Feeding the Hungry ministry, and information on this program is available at the feedingthehungry.org website.

Donations of venison can also be made through Whitetails Unlimited, a national non-profit organization with over 30 chapters in Ohio. Local WTU chapters use local funds for a variety of programs, including venison donations to the needy. Visit the whitetailsunlimited.com website for more information.

Hunters Sharing the Harvest is Pennsylvania’s venison donation program, and more than two million pounds of meat have been donated through this organization since 1991. More information is available through the sharedeer.org website.

Sportsmen Against Hunger was established by the Safari Club International more than 30 years ago and the program is active in all 50 states, parts of Canada, and in several countries around the world. Information can be found at the safariclubfoundation.org/humanitarian-services website.

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