



The Need Remains: New Data Shows Food Insecurity Continues to Rise Across Northeast Iowa

WATERLOO, Iowa (August 23, 2026) - The need for hunger relief across northeast Iowa continues to grow. According to Feeding America's *Map the Meal Gap* data, nearly 45,000 people across the Northeast Iowa Food Bank's 16-county service area are now food insecure, an increase of approximately 15,000 people over the past three years. Nearly 14,800 children are experiencing food insecurity, meaning 1 in 8 people and 1 in 6 children across the region do not always know where their next meal will come from.

As demand continues to rise, the Northeast Iowa Food Bank is serving more people and distributing more food than ever before. During Fiscal Year 2026, the Food Bank distributed more than 8.57 million meals through its network of 125 partner agencies and direct service programs. The annual meal gap across northeast Iowa now exceeds 8.5 million meals, highlighting the continued need for community support.

"The numbers reflect what we see every day," said Barbara Prather, Executive Director of the Northeast Iowa Food Bank. "We believe food is a basic human right. Yet families across northeast Iowa are working hard while rising grocery prices, utility bills, housing costs, and transportation expenses continue to make it difficult to put enough food on the table. We are committed to ensuring nutritious food is available whenever and wherever it's needed."

Throughout FY26, the Food Bank expanded its reach across northeast Iowa while continuing to strengthen its operations for the future. The Cedar Valley Food Pantry served more than 4,800 families each month, providing more than 2.8 million meals during the year. The Backpack Program distributed more than 137,100 bags of food to students in 167 schools, helping more than 3,540

children each week during the school year. Mobile Food Pantries delivered nearly 963,000 meals in 13 communities, while the Senior Nutrition Program provided more than 120,900 meals to older adults. During the summer, the Food Bank served an average of 554 children each day through its Summer Feeding Program at 21 sites across six counties.

To better understand where gaps in food access exist, the Food Bank developed the NEIFB Strategic Planning Map. Previously, food insecurity and service data were primarily evaluated at the county level, which can make it difficult to identify communities with greater unmet needs. The new map allows NEIFB to analyze data at the census tract level, providing a more detailed picture of food insecurity across its 16-county service area. This information will help the Food Bank identify underserved areas, evaluate where services are reaching people, and make more informed decisions about where food and other resources are needed most.

The Food Bank also continued investing in its long-term ability to meet growing demand. Construction on its \$14 million Capacity Campaign reached the halfway point during FY26, with the organization moving into its new receiving area and renovated office space while work continues on expanded cooler, freezer, kitchen, and pantry facilities. The campaign is designed to prepare the Food Bank for the future by increasing its capacity to source, store, and distribute more food for people experiencing food insecurity across northeast Iowa. That need for increased capacity is already evident, with agency food orders increasing 28% compared to the previous fiscal year and demand expected to grow even further once the expansion is complete. The Food Bank also saw a 9% increase in rescued food and a 10% increase in locally sourced food compared to FY25, bringing more food into the region for individuals and families who need it.

Client surveys underscore the challenges families continue to face. Across multiple Food Bank programs, the most commonly reported barriers to food security were rising food costs, increasing household expenses, transportation challenges, and utility bills. Even so, 98% of Cedar Valley Food Pantry participants and 97% of Mobile Food Pantry participants said Food Bank services helped them feel more food secure.

Additional statewide survey results from the Iowa Food Bank Association paint a similar picture. Nearly one in three Iowans say they are worse off financially than they were one year ago, more than two-thirds are dissatisfied with the cost of groceries, and 77% report changing the amount or type of food they purchase because of rising prices.

The Northeast Iowa Food Bank's work is made possible by the generosity of the community. During FY26, more than 20,900 volunteers donated their time, community members contributed more than \$4.8 million, and donors invested more than \$2.6 million toward the Capacity Campaign. The organization also successfully completed Feeding America Network Standards, earned a score of 970 out of 1,000 on its AIB food safety inspection, and raised a record-breaking more than \$44,000 during its annual Empty Bowls event.

"While we're proud of everything we've accomplished this past year, our work is far from finished," Prather said. "The need continues to grow, and we're grateful for every volunteer, donor, partner agency, and community member who stands with us. Because we believe food is a basic human right, we will continue working together to ensure individuals and families across northeast Iowa have access to nutritious food when they need it most."

For more information about the Northeast Iowa Food Bank or to support its mission, visit www.neifb.org.

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About NEIFB: The Northeast Iowa Food Bank (NEIFB) is a proud member of Feeding America® and the Iowa Food Bank Association. We believe food is a basic human right and work every day to ensure people have access to the nourishment they need. NEIFB distributes nutritious food and grocery products to more than 125 nonprofit organizations and programs serving individuals and families across northeast Iowa. Last year, the Food Bank distributed more than 8.57 million meals across its 16-county service area: Allamakee, Black Hawk, Bremer, Buchanan, Butler, Chickasaw, Clayton, Delaware, Fayette, Floyd,

Grundy, Howard, Mitchell, Poweshiek, Tama, and Winneshiek counties. For 45 years, the Food Bank has helped alleviate hunger and provide nutrition education through its eight programs: Agency Distribution, Backpack, Cedar Valley Food Pantry, Kids Café, Mobile Food Pantry, School Market, Senior Nutrition, and Summer Feeding. NEIFB is working toward its bold aspiration: **Every Meal. Every Day. Everyone.** Please visit neifb.org and follow us on social media.