Ottawa Food (formerly known as the Ottawa County Food Policy Council) is a collaboration of over 45 local agencies and individuals that exists to ensure all Ottawa County residents have access to healthy, local, and affordable food choices. Ottawa Food consists of members from a variety of backgrounds; including local public health, food pantries, human service organizations, food security advocates, farmers, community members, MSU Extension, Feeding America West Michigan, and many others.

BACKGROUND

In 2009, Michigan led the nation in unemployment. At the same time, Ottawa County led the state with a 57.7% increase in the number of households receiving SNAP food assistance. County-wide, schools were reporting a 30% increase in the number of students eligible for free and reduced lunch. Requests for food assistance rose to the third most often sought referral on the 211 information line.

Upon reviewing this data, the Ottawa County Department of Public Health (OCDPH) held a meeting with key stakeholders and agencies who had a vested interest in examining needs, gaps, and strategies related to food insecurity in the community. All meeting participants agreed food insecurity was an issue in Ottawa County that needed to be addressed. The OCDPH then applied for and received a Building Healthy Communities grant through the Michigan Department of Community Health (MDCH) to develop a food policy council. The council was responsible for implementing policies and/or environmental changes that increased access to fresh affordable food for low income populations. The first official meeting of the Ottawa County Food Policy Council was held on March 24, 2011.

In 2017, the Ottawa County Food Policy Council rebranded to Ottawa Food- a simplified name and logo that would be easier for community members to identify, approach and remember. The logo is a rounded representation of an apple- a highly identifiable health food, part of a balanced diet, and one of the largest and most valuable fruit crops grown in West Michigan. The seeds symbolize each of Ottawa Food’s three priority areas.

To date, Ottawa Food has successfully met goals identified in its first two strategic plans (2012-2015 and 2016-2018). For more information on these plans, visit http://www.ottawafood.org/about-us/strategic-plan.
In 2018, Ottawa Food members collected and analyzed data from a variety of sources in order to develop the 2019-2021 Ottawa Food Strategic Plan. Over 300 individuals utilizing local food resources participated in Ottawa Food’s 2018 Food Access Survey. Further, data was collected from 570 Ottawa County residents who shared their thoughts about local food-related issues in the 2018 Ottawa Food Community Survey. Focus groups were conducted with local nutrition educators as well as Spanish-speaking residents to obtain their feedback regarding food-related issues and needs in Ottawa County.

Local data from other sources was also analyzed, including the 2017 Ottawa County Behavioral Risk Factor Survey, the 2017 Community Health Needs Assessment, the 2017 Ottawa County Youth Assessment Survey, Feeding America’s Map the Meal Gap, and the 2017 ALICE Report for Michigan. (ALICE stands for Asset Limited, Income Constrained, Employed. The ALICE Report uses a new set of standardized measurements to quantify the cost of a basic household budget in each county, and to show how many households are struggling to afford it.) Regular feedback from Ottawa Food Consumer Advisory Committee members guided the development of the Plan as well.

Consideration in developing this Plan was also given to the priorities identified in the 2017 Ottawa County Community Health Needs Assessment. During the Community Health Improvement Plan (CHIP) planning process, the topic of healthy behaviors with an emphasis on healthy eating and physical activity was identified as one of the three greatest health needs in Ottawa County. Therefore, in an effort to leverage existing efforts; avoid duplication; and obtain better health outcomes, one strategy of the CHIP is to support the efforts of Ottawa Food. The work of this group can help meet the CHIP objective of increasing fruit and vegetable consumption.

After reviewing data, identifying themes, brainstorming and prioritizing strategies, Ottawa Food members established three priority areas to address from 2019-2021 (Figure 1). These priority areas are the basis of this strategic plan.

This Plan outlines a number of goals and specific action steps to be carried out in order to address the first two priority areas. While the third priority area “Increase sourcing of local food” will not have stand-alone goals, Ottawa Food will intentionally build local food into its work of eliminating hunger and encouraging healthy eating by all.

Further, five Ottawa Food core values were identified in 2018. These include:

- Action
- Collaboration
- Integrity
- Inclusion
- Empathy

Eliminate Hunger

Hunger continues to be a concern in Ottawa County (OC). Feeding America reports that 8.3% of OC residents were food insecure in 2016, which translates to approximately 22,900 food insecure individuals. The 2017 Ottawa County Community Health Needs Assessment found similar results; just under 8% of area adults report they sometimes or often don’t have enough food to eat and an equal proportion say they’ve had to cut the size of meals or skip meals due to lack of money.

Ottawa Food dug deeper into this issue by conducting the 2018 Food Access Survey, which collected data from 318 households using food resources (examples include SNAP/Bridge Card, food pantries, WIC, Free & Reduced Lunch, Meals on Wheels, etc.). Within this population, 40.1% indicated that they’ve had to cut the size of meals or skip meals due to lack of money. Further, 40% of households said they run out of money for food occasionally; an additional 19.7% run out of money for food every week; and an additional 17.7% run out of money for food at least once a week.

While the 2015 unemployment rate in OC was only 4.3%, the rate of OC households that earned more than the Federal Poverty Level, but less than the basic cost of living (the ALICE threshold) was 28%. Therefore, food insecurity is a very real problem for many OC residents.

Regarding our youth, 11.2% of OC children were food insecure in 2016 according to Feeding America. This equates to approximately 7,690 children. The 2017 Ottawa County Youth Assessment Survey found that the need is even greater for minority youth, as 1 in 5 minority teens goes hungry.

According to the Michigan Department of Education, 16,611 OC students qualified for free or reduced-price lunches in 2017. It is important to note that some OC schools have a much greater need than others: in a handful of schools, more than 80% of students qualified for free or reduced-price lunches.

While a variety of food resources are available in OC, many people who could benefit are unaware that the resources exist. For example, according to the 2018 Food Access Survey, only 35% of food resource users are aware of Double Up Food Bucks (a program that helps low-income individuals stretch their food dollars when purchasing local fruits and vegetables).

Ottawa Food envisions an available supply of well-balanced meals for all. Therefore, Ottawa Food will work to eliminate hunger, and continue connecting those in need with food resources available to them.
Eliminate Hunger

GOALS & ACTION STEPS:

Goal #1: Support the development of policies that focus on eliminating hunger in Ottawa County.

Key Action Steps:

a. Research policies that focus on eliminating hunger in Ottawa County.
b. Select policy(s) to work toward implementing.
c. Identify decision makers who need to be engaged.
d. Advocate for policy change or development.

Goal #2: Reduce stigma around food insecurity and around asking for help.

Key Action Steps:

a. Research existing programs that have had success in reducing stigma (i.e. WIC).
b. Educate the community around the realities of the ALICE population (find spokesperson, message of not taking away from others by participating).
c. Promote more dignified food access experiences (i.e. food clubs).
d. Promote programs that create social norms around accessing food resources (share tables, Meet Up and Eat Up, etc.).
e. Promote message of “give when you can, take when you need.”
f. Provide opportunities for food resource recipients to also give back (i.e. volunteer).
g. Identify “champions” to promote programming (i.e. school principals for Meet Up & Eat Up).
h. Lift up personal story telling of real people and their experiences.

Goal #3: Create greater awareness of local food resources to those in need.

Key Action Steps:

a. Update and distribute the Ottawa Food Resource Guide twice each year.
b. Maintain the Find Food Database on the Ottawa Food website.
c. Promote local food resources on the Ottawa Food Facebook page.
d. Promote the Ottawa Food website, Double Up Food Bucks, and other food resources to the target population and to those agencies serving the target population.

Goal #4: Support and promote Food Club efforts in Ottawa County.

Key Action Steps:

a. Provide ongoing education about need and the ALICE population.
b. Identify funding sources to support food club startups.
c. As appropriate, write letters of support for food club funding.
d. Identify local food sourcing for food clubs.
e. Develop marketing pieces promoting food clubs.
f. Host event to educate people on food clubs (i.e. open house).
g. Market food clubs in TEFAP distributions.
h. Market food clubs through “informed” groups on Facebook.
i. Market food clubs though school newsletters, Kids’ Food Basket, Hand 2 Hand, and employers.
j. Document and share best practices for food club startup – provide support to others getting started.

Goal #5: Reduce food waste and encourage food re-use in Ottawa County.

Key Action Steps:

a. Partner with Ottawa County Department of Public Health Environmental Health staff to connect with schools and restaurants.
b. Explore current success stories of re-using catered food (i.e. Firekeepers Casino).
c. Explore education at restaurants around composting.
d. Promote the use of share tables in local schools.

Goal #6: Support the efforts of community programs feeding children in need.

Key Action Steps:

a. Support local Meet Up and Eat Up sites by recruiting volunteers and securing funding.
b. Promote the Meet Up and Eat Up program for all kids 18 and under.
c. Assist with parent engagement efforts in order to continually evaluate and improve the Meet Up and Eat Up program.
d. Secure sustainable funding to maintain the Meet Up and Eat Up program.
e. Act as a resource for other local supplemental food programs serving children (Kids’ Food Basket, Hand 2 Hand, WIC, Backpack Blessings, etc.)

Goal #7: Expand the Produce Donation Program.

Key Action Steps:

a. Promote the program to get the word out.
b. Educate the produce vendors at farmers markets about the program and encourage gleaning.
c. Recruit additional agencies to participate and receive food donations.
d. Secure sustainable funding to maintain the program.

Goal #8: Expand the Pick for Pantries Program.

Key Action Steps:

a. Conduct a survey with participating farmers to get feedback on how to improve the program.
b. Develop a training packet for farm staff to understand the program’s process.
c. Develop an inventory of potential farms to partner with in the future.
d. Approach additional farms (two for each fruit) as potential partners.
e. Identify a northwest pantry as partner.
f. Develop a pick for pantry schedule with farmers and pantries in advance (in the spring of each year if possible).
   i. Calendar that could be posted online
   ii. Get farmers to commit earlier on

g. Secure sustainable funding to maintain program.
h. Explore creation of implementation guide for other communities to develop their own pick for pantry programs.

Goal #9: Increase the supply of food from local farmers.

Key Action Steps:

a. Consider local food whenever possible in all aspects of Ottawa Food’s work addressing the priority area of eliminating hunger.
b. Support and promote the Lakeshore Food Rescue Farm Relief Effort.
Healthy Eating By All

According to the 2017 Ottawa County Behavioral Risk Factor Survey and the 2017 Ottawa County Youth Assessment Survey:

- Only 17.6% of adults (down from 29.5% in 2014) consume five or more servings of fruits and vegetables per day
- and 26.5% of teens (down from 32% in 2014) consume five or more servings of fruits and vegetables per day.

Inadequate fruit and vegetable consumption is seen throughout age, gender, and geographical demographics in OC. Adults with college degrees and/or with annual incomes of $75K or more are most likely to consume adequate amounts of fruits and vegetables; still, only one-fourth of individuals in those groups do so. Further, 31.5% of OC adults consume less than 1 serving of fruit per day, and 21.4% consume less than one serving of vegetables per day.

Lack of fruit and vegetable consumption by food resource users is perhaps the most concerning. Ottawa Food’s 2018 Food Access Survey indicated that 98% of respondents consume less than five servings of fruits and vegetables per day. For this specific population, the biggest barrier to eating fruits and vegetables on a regular basis is cost. According to the 2018 Ottawa Food Community Survey, “nutritious/healthy food can be expensive” was identified as the most important food-related issue to be addressed locally.

Ottawa Food will work to create environments where healthy food choices are affordable and accessible to all. In addition, Ottawa Food will educate the community about simple, affordable ways to enjoy healthy food. Fortunately, OC is the most agriculturally diverse county in Michigan with many local farms. Therefore, Ottawa Food will encourage local residents to make healthy food choices that support local growers at the same time.
Healthy Eating By All
GOALS & ACTION STEPS:

Goal #1: Support the development of policies that focus on healthy eating by all in Ottawa County.

Key Action Steps:

- a. Research policies that focus on healthy eating by all.
- b. Select policy(s) to work toward implementing.
- c. Identify decision makers who need to be engaged.
- d. Advocate for policy change or development.

Goal #2: Support the development of policies that increase the sourcing of local food.

Key Action Steps:

- a. Keep up-to-date on policies and legislation related to farm to institution.
- b. Select policy(s) to work toward implementing.
- c. Identify decision makers who need to be engaged.
- d. Advocate for policy change or development.

Goal #3: Develop and Disseminate a Unified Message around Healthy Eating.

Key Action Steps:

- a. Research existing messages that have been used nationally.
- b. Determine how to measure success of messaging.
- c. Agree on “Healthy” message that all can get behind.
  - i. Separate myth from fact.
  - ii. Create “positive” message (not restrictions, health not weight).
- d. Test the message with the OF Consumer Advisory Committee.
- e. Work with existing partners to spread the message.
- f. Connect with efforts of the Community Health Improvement Plan (CHIP) and the “Live Well” concept.

Goal #4: Provide Healthy Eating Education through Schools to Parents, Students, and Staff

Key Action Steps:

- a. Conduct needs assessment with schools to determine what they want.
- b. Conduct community scan to see what work is already happening.
  - i. Look at non-traditional partners (i.e. National Honors Society)
- c. Clarify what education should be provided (what message?).
- d. Determine geographic focus areas.
e. Identify intersection points at schools to provide education (Mobile food trucks, staff training, PTA, Ottawa Community School Network (OCSN), etc.).
f. Explore how to use technology to provide education on healthy eating.
g. Partner with Meet Up and Eat Up to provide education on healthy eating.
h. Develop sustainability plan for implementation.
   i. Build capacity in the schools to continue the work.

Goal #5: Create opportunities for kids to interact with local food through schools and summer programs.

Key Action Steps:

a. Conduct needs assessment with teachers to understand what is already happening, what they would like to do, and what do they have the capacity to do.
b. Explore ways to add programming/education around the 10 Cents a Meal Program (i.e. taste tests).
c. Investigate MSU Extension’s “cooking with local foods” curriculum for school food staff.
d. Connect with Food Service Director at Fennville to learn about what they have done to connect kids with local food.
e. Connect with Muskegon ISD to learn about what they have done to connect kids with local food.
f. Explore partnering with OCSN to provide local food education to parents.
g. Explore a local food pilot with Meet Up and Eat Up.

Goal #6: Sustain and Improve the Senior Project Fresh (SPF) Program.

Key Action Steps:

a. Increase volunteers for SPF voucher distribution.
b. Secure sustainable funding to maintain program.
c. Review evaluation data to continually improve the program.

Goal #7: Increase the supply of food from local farmers.

Key Action Steps:

a. Consider local food whenever possible in all aspects of Ottawa Food’s work addressing healthy eating by all.
b. Support and promote the Lakeshore Food Rescue Farm Relief Effort.
Increase the Sourcing of Local Food

While Ottawa County has a rich agricultural tradition and is one of the top agriculture producing counties in the state, much of that food produced is consumed elsewhere. Although increasing the sourcing of local food remains an identified priority area, Ottawa Food does not have a subcommittee dedicated specifically to this topic. Since this work often overlaps with priority areas 1 and 2, the goals and key action steps for local food have been built into those areas of the plan. Please see:

Priority Area #1, Goal #9

Priority Area #2, Goal #2 and Goal #7
Administrative Functions

The following are carried out by the Ottawa Food Coordinator:

Strategic Planning

- Coordinate data collection and analysis, and lead the strategic planning process (every 3 years)
- Oversee implementation of the OF Strategic Plan (planning, promoting, implementing, and evaluating initiatives)

Operations

- Attend all OF meetings (Quarterly, Subcommittee, Advisory Board, and Consumer Advisory Committee)
- Serve as Chair for both OF subcommittees
- Facilitate quarterly Advisory Board meetings, monthly subcommittee meetings, and quarterly general meetings
- Facilitate quarterly OF Consumer Advisory Committee meetings, and serve as a liaison to the OF membership
- Oversee the OF budget
- Maintain OF email list
- Maintain relationships with current members
- Update, promote and distribute OF Resource Guides
- Provide annual OF update to the Health & Human Services Committee
- Conduct and analyze annual OF Member Survey
- Oversee implementation of grant-related projects

Marketing/Public Relations

- Coordinate all marketing efforts related to OF
- Maintain OF website with WebTecs, including regular updates to Find Food Database, Active Member page, etc.
- Reply to all questions that come through OF website
- Maintain OF Facebook page, including developing weekly content for posts
- Represent OF at Community SPOKE and Great Start Collaborative meetings
- Represent OF on the Michigan Local Food Council Network
- Recruit new OF members
- Provide presentations to community groups
- Serve on boards of various hunger relief agencies

Fundraising

- Coordinate OF fundraising efforts
- Coordinate OF subcommittee mini grants
- Write grants on behalf of OF
Active Members

**Agencies:**
- AgeWell Services of West Michigan
- The Chamber of Commerce, Grand Haven, Spring Lake, Ferrysburg
- Chef Jen LLC
- City on a Hill Health Clinic
- Community Action House
- Community SPOKE
- Eighth Day Farm
- Farm Brigge, LLC
- Feeding America West Michigan
- Four Pointes
- Grand Haven Area Community Foundation
- Great Start Collaborative Ottawa
- Greater Ottawa County United Way
- GreenMichigan.org
- Hand2Hand
- Harvest Stand Ministries
- Holland Bread for the World
- Holland Community Garden
- Holland Farmers Market
- Kids’ Food Basket
- Lakeshore Nonprofit Alliance
- Love in Action of the Tri Cities
- Love in the Name of Christ of SE Ottawa County
- Macatawa Resource Center
- Michigan State University Extension
- North Ottawa Community Health System
- Nourished Beginnings
- Ottawa Community Schools Network
- Ottawa County Community Action Agency
- Ottawa County Department of Public Health
- Ottawa County Michigan Department of Health and Human Services
- Ottawa County Planning and Performance Improvement Department
- The People Center
- Salvation Army, Holland
- Senior Resources of West Michigan
- Shape Corp.
- Spectrum Health Zeeland Community Hospital
- West Michigan Works!

**Community Advocates:**
- Barry Andersen
- Doug Bazuin
- Justen Bowden
- Audrey Byker, Health Coach
- Mary Dagen, MD
- Holly Haas
- Louise Hogan
- Gordie Moeller
- Ruth Pratt
- Deb Ralya
- Sarah Stone