

Service groups from MOKA, Hope Network, and Community Campus Mayfield help tend the fruits and vegetables in our onsite hoop house including this beautiful personal watermelon



Resources for living. Hope for life.

Fall 2017

United Church Outreach Ministry

1311 Chicago Dr. SW, Wyoming, MI 49509

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www.UCOMgr.org

## Farm Fresh Comes to UCOM

**Erik Keener –  
Associate Executive Director**

Bright red and orange tomatoes. Crisp buttery leaf lettuce. Vibrant and fragrant peaches. These are just a few of the images that spring to mind when the topic of farmer's markets comes up-- hyper local, extra fresh foods sold directly from the farmer to the consumer. A few other things also come to mind: higher prices, longer drives, and fewer open hours. For many households-- families without reliable transportation, seniors living on a fixed income, or working families struggling to get by-- these barriers to eating healthy and enjoying farm fresh fruits and vegetables can often be too much to overcome.

To help alleviate some of these concerns UCOM joined with Access of West Michigan and four other local pantries to collaborate on a proposal to Heart of West Michigan United Way. The proposal, approved last spring, helped fund the construction, operation, and stocking of small farm market stands at each collaborating pantry. UCOM's stand opened in August.

As more and more families learn about the new farm stand, the good stories keep rolling in—like this one from one of our younger neighbors.

*"Mama," Sarah\* said, "look at all the beautiful food. Can I have money to buy some?" Sarah's mother fished in her bag and came up with two dollars and some change for Sarah's shopping spree. Sarah was very excited about buying some cherry tomatoes. She carefully chose five which we weighed for her. Sarah's cost was 10 cents. She was elated that she had plenty of money left so she also chose three pears and a personal watermelon. She was beaming as she showed her mom her purchases. All told she spent 80 cents."*

*\*not her actual name*



*A little girl eats a peach she purchased from the farm market stand*

The UCOM farm market stand provides our neighbors like Sarah with fresh, local, and mostly organic Michigan produce at affordable prices. Low to moderate income households and ALICE (Asset Limited Income Constrained, Employed) designated households are eligible to shop **at the farm market stand where fruits and vegetables are sold at half the cost of purchase thanks to our United Way funding and gifts from our generous supporters.** The Farm Stand also accepts SNAP benefits (food stamps) and Senior Project Fresh coupons to help stretch the food budget while making the best locally grown produce accessible to people with limited income.

***UCOM receives no government funding. Everything we provide grows out of the generous donations of people who genuinely care about their neighbors' well-being.***



## ***A Healthier Food Pantry***

“I am treated with dignity and respect at UCOM,” says Cecilia who as a senior with a disability relies on UCOM’s food pantry to round out her tight budget. In turn Cecilia utilizes donated magazines to fill notebooks with articles ranging from home repairs to nutritious recipes and health advice. She freely shares this information with staff, volunteers and other neighbors at UCOM.

The food pantry at UCOM has come a long way from the days when volunteers would pack a box of groceries for clients in the basement of Smith Memorial Church. In the early days of UCOM’s food pantry each family received very similar containers of shelf-stable canned goods and boxed items. There was not a lot of variety. About the only choice our neighbors had was whether they wanted it or not. Even then the community was tremendously grateful for the support, and UCOM was one of the leaders in customer satisfaction among similar pantries in the county. As the pantry grew to serve more and more people, we were continually thoughtful about providing emergency food in better ways.

Finally, fourteen years ago the paradigm shifted and UCOM adopted the client-choice model for the food pantry. No longer were our neighbors given a pre-packed container of food, but instead they were empowered to make their own food choices, selecting items from a grocery shelf according to a points system that was based on new USDA-designed nutrition guidelines.

Another shift in the pantry happened only a year later with the move from the basement at Smith Memorial Congregational United Church of Christ at Hall Street and Grandville Avenue to our current location on Chicago Drive. No longer constrained by the miniscule basement space, the pantry was able to add more coolers and start stocking more fresh and perishable items like produce and dairy.



*One of UCOM’s neighbors purchases some beautiful fresh produce from the new farm stand*

And then, for thirteen years things stayed mostly the same. Small tweaks were made here and there: a better freezer for displaying frozen foods, better organization and bilingual and color-coded signage, nicer shelving to display the available product. 2017, however, marks a new shift in the philosophy that underlies UCOM’s pantry. **As of this spring UCOM has instituted a healthy foods policy that governs all aspects of the pantry.**

**The main tenet of our new healthy food policy is “eat healthy, live healthy”.** Living into this main food goal includes stocking even more fresh fruits and vegetables in the pantry, purchasing and encouraging donations of low-sodium and low-sugar foods, purchasing locally grown produce when at all possible, committing to educating our neighbors and our donors on healthy food habits, providing low-cost farm fresh fruits and veggies at our new farm market stand, and keeping unhealthy food off our pantry shelves.

Many of these goals will be tough. It will take some time to adjust to the changes, but it will be worth it, because we know that **a healthier community is a stronger community.**



# #GivingHealthyTuesday

Last year, givers donated \$117 million dollars to Non-Profits in a single day! *November 28, 2017 is the sixth annual #GivingTuesday and will be one of the most impactful days for non-profits raising funds across the country.*

**This year, donations to UCOM from NEW givers will go even farther. With a dollar to dollar match up to \$10,000, The Peter C. and Emajean Cook Foundation is committed to investing in UCOM and our neighbors.**

If you're already a UCOM supporter, thank you, and please keep doing what you're doing! **You can still help ensure that we reach our goal of \$10,000 new-supporter donations by sharing the stories of our**

**neighbors and the incredible changes they've made in their lives thanks to your support.**

You can even give NOW for #GivingTuesday. Just go to [www.UCOMgr.org](http://www.UCOMgr.org), click on the DONATE NOW button, and designate your gift using the hashtag. Your gift does not have to be a one-time donation. With one extra click, you can set up a regular monthly, quarterly or annual gift to invest in the lives of your neighbors.

**Use the hashtag #GivingTuesday and UCOM's own #GivingHealthyTuesday and share, share, share! Studies have shown that most new givers donate because of a personal connection, so let that connection be you!**

## *In a Class of Our Own*

*"I found out about the NOW program when I had a different doctor who found out that I had very high blood pressure. They wanted me to take medication, prescription drugs. I found out that I had not been eating properly. I wasn't doing what I should and trying to be as healthy as I should."*

Rosemary is not so different from many of our neighbors at UCOM. A senior on a fixed income, Rosemary has been coming to UCOM for a while now. As a member of the NOW program Rosemary is a participant in a cutting edge program designed to help low income individuals combat chronic illness through diet.

In order to supplement the healthy foods our neighbors like Rosemary receive, NOW enrollees are also expected to take six hours of health, nutrition, or exercise classes per enrollment period. Thankfully, UCOM offers many of those classes on site.

*"I really enjoy coming to the program, the programs are wonderful. They have teaching programs to help us make nutritious food that is reasonable on a low budget and how to incorporate a meal that is low in sodium. I have been to at least two of those different programs and they have been very helpful to me. As a result I've lost over 40 pounds. And*

*yes my blood pressure has gone down and I have continued to learn more about nutrition and other foods. I am determined to do the very best that I can."*

Cooking classes, exercise groups, freezing and canning classes, even a yoga class or two! All of these classes and more have been offered at UCOM and will continue to be a vital part of our education programs as long as you continue to support our mission. Better health is just a class away.



*Neighbors in the gardening program share their knowledge*



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**MISSION**

UCOM values individuals and builds community in southwestern Kent County by providing material and educational assistance to meet basic needs, improve quality of life, and promote self-sufficiency.

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UCOM makes it easy for you to donate at [UCOMgr.org](http://UCOMgr.org)  
My friend gave me a copy of your newsletter,  
I would like to share "love" with our neighbors too.