

Food pantry network getting \$5 million from new kind of Endeavor award

By Jon Asplund

Gift Article



Credit: Loaves & Fishes

Loaves & Fishes volunteers sorting and packaging food to be sent for distribution.

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Loaves & Fishes Community Services has won a \$5 million award from Endeavor Health — the largest and longest commitment yet from the health system's community giving program — to expand food distribution infrastructure across the Chicago area.

The award reflects Endeavor's push to create larger, longer-term and more transformational opportunities. The health system launched its Community Investment Fund (CIF) in 2022 after the merger of NorthShore University Health System and Edward Elmhurst Health.

The \$5 million Impact award supports Loaves & Fishes and its partner food pantries to provide fresh, healthy food to people in need, Endeavor said in a press release. It follows on top of CIF awards for the regional, Aurora-based group in 2022 and 2024.

Food is fundamental to people's health and to the community, so an investment in food is an investment in the health system's mission, Jeff Zakem, system program director of Community Impact and Equity at Endeavor, said in an email interview.

The award will help Loaves & Fishes expand infrastructure, procurement and nutrition programs through partnerships with other food pantries, he said.

The ability to launch a huge expansion "means that Loaves & Fishes and other pantry partners who will be sharing the space will have capacity to receive and distribute more fresh, healthy foods than ever before," Zakem said.

Greater collective food purchasing power lets all food pantry partners take advantage of lower costs through volume and reduced freight, he said, "which is critical at a time where the demand is tremendous and changes to SNAP will reduce the amount of food available to support the community."

The connection to health care is clear, he said, as access to health food, particularly fruits and vegetables, contributes to lower risks to chronic conditions, such as heart disease and stroke, type 2 diabetes, cancer, and high blood

pressure. Food is medicine, he said.

"While many patients have access to fresh, healthy foods and have time and knowledge to prepare those foods, we also care for many children, families, and individuals who do not have access to affordable and nutritious foods," Zakem said. "Treating symptoms of sickness is not enough, we need to treat the whole person."

Food pantry expansions

Loaves & Fishes' CEO Mike Havala said in an email interview that the Endeavor funds will serve as the lead gift for its Hub 2.0 expansion.

"Today, as the largest food pantry in Illinois, Loaves & Fishes is serving more than 10,000 people each week through our proven regional hub and spoke distribution model, anchored by the Aurora Hub," Havala said. "This coordinated approach, which includes thirteen distribution points or "spokes" across the community, has strengthened efficiency, expanded access, and reduced our cost to serve clients by 40%."

The expansion will allow Loaves & Fishes to reach two to three times the number of people served today by creating additional spoke locations in neighborhoods with the greatest unmet need. It will add 32,000 square feet to its hub, doubling the size of the current facility, and nearly quadruple cold storage capacity, he said, calling that capacity essential for distributing fresh, healthy food.

What's more, it deepens collaboration because the organization can provide dedicated, no-cost space for partner pantries, Havala said.

"Given the rise in food insecurity and the challenges many families continue to face, our region needs bold, collaborative action," he said. "This lead gift affirms the importance of our work and enables us to move forward with the expanded capacity our community needs."

Endeavor, he said, has been a supporter for many years and its spoke location at the Endeavor Plainfield facility helped increase the capacity to rescue and transport fresh food through funding of new trucks.

Evolution of giving program

When the newly merged health system created its investment funds in 2022, they were split evenly between the Edward Elmhurst component and NorthShore component. The two award programs were later integrated and altogether have doled out more than \$31 million to 54 organizations since their inception.

At first, awards were for one to three years, for a variety of services, equipment and capital improvements.

Zakem said the system looked at the program and saw early impact, but wanted to understand what happens when an award ends. That led to discussions of how to help organizations be more sustainable and have the greatest impact beyond the life of the temporal cash awards.

The new Impact award complements another transformational award category, the Capacity Builder award, both with an eye to helping organizations be more sustainable for the long run.

Beyond the host of yearly community awards given yearly through the CIF, Endeavor created a new category of award, in 2024, the Capacity Builder awards, to fund distinct 1- to 2-year projects that build up the infrastructure of community-based organizations. Those awards are \$100,000 to \$500,000 per year for up to two years. In January, Endeavor will announce recipients of the 2026 CIF Capacity Builder awards.

Impact awards are designed for about \$1 million funding over 5-years for organizations to come together to drive measurable impact and longer-term change. The Impact award emphasizes cross-sector and intra-sector partnerships between organizations that can uplift community members in greatest need.

"At Endeavor Health, our mission is to help everyone in our communities be their best. That starts with providing great care in our hospitals and doctors' offices — but it doesn't end there," Zakem said. "We know that health is more than health care alone. Health is deeply influenced by the conditions of our daily lives — the food we eat, whether we have safe and stable housing, connections with others, and more. These social and environmental factors play a powerful role in shaping one's health outcomes."

The move represents Endeavor's efforts to put larger, longer lived and more transformational funding in the hands of organizations that work across multiple groups through its CIF program, a major philanthropic initiative launched in

2022 after the merger of NorthShore University Health System and Edward Elmhurst Health.

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The award to Loaves & Fishes can transform the local charitable food system as the organization improves upon infrastructure, procurement and nutrition programs through strategic partnerships, he said.

The ability to launch a huge expansion "means that Loaves & Fishes and other pantry partners who will be sharing the space will have capacity to receive and distribute more fresh, healthy foods than ever before," Zakem said. "Coming together to collectively purchase food enables Loaves & Fishes and their food pantry partners to take advantage of lower costs through volume and reduced freight, stretching resources and complementing the food they receive from the food bank system and through food rescue, which is critical at a time where the demand is tremendous and changes to SNAP will reduce the amount of food available to support the community."

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"Today, as the largest food pantry in Illinois, Loaves & Fishes is serving more than 10,000 people each week," Havala said. The organization's hub and spoke distribution model features a centralized warehouse, its Aurora Hub, that supplies smaller pantries throughout the region.

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