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News

# How \$5 million from Endeavor Health for Loaves & Fishes 'meets the moment'



Volunteers including Katie Maxon stock shelves at Naperville's Loaves & Fishes food pantry. *Paul Valade/pvalade@dailyherald.com, October*

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Katlyn Smith

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Loaves & Fishes Community Services uses a regional hub-and-spoke model to distribute food to families in need across four counties.

A major boost from Endeavor Health will allow Loaves & Fishes to further expand its reach and make food more accessible.

Endeavor will invest \$1 million annually for five years — \$5 million total — in Loaves & Fishes. The grant award comes as the largest food pantry in Illinois expects increased demand as a result of federal cuts to safety net programs.

“I didn’t know we could jump that high. We were completely honored, thrilled, excited. It’s just absolutely amazing,” Loaves & Fishes CEO Mike Havala said.

“The impact of this award is just tremendous.”

In 2021, the nonprofit opened an Aurora hub where food is received, stored and prepared for distribution. It was “really a game-changer,” Havala said.

Naperville-based Loaves & Fishes was able to expand its service area to Kane and Kendall counties.

“Today, we’re serving about 10,000 people a week,” Havala said. “We also achieved a greater scale of what we do by the hub-and-spoke model. So we reduced our cost to serve each client by about 40%, which is significant. This means that we’re utilizing community resources in a more efficient way.”

The Endeavor grant will specifically support “Hub 2.0,” a project that will result in 32,000 square feet of additional space or double the size of the current Aurora facility.

“That takes it to the next level, not just in capacity and how much we can do, but also *how* we do what we do,” he said.

### **A ‘community asset’**

Loaves & Fishes is the first recipient of Endeavor’s new Community Investment Fund Impact Award. Endeavor created the grant to fund initiatives that “emphasize innovation and partnership to address complex social drivers of health,” the hospital system said in a grant announcement.

“As food resources become less available due to whether it’s cuts to the SNAP program, inflation still being high, that puts a strain on people’s pocketbooks, and this award allows Mike and Loaves & Fishes and others to do more with the resources they have,” said Jeff Zakem, system director of community impact and equity. “So it really meets the moment that we’re in today.”



Volunteer Molly Blubaugh unpacks items at the Loaves & Fishes Naperville food pantry. *Paul Valade/pvalade@dailyherald.com, October*

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Loaves & Fishes became a lifeline during the SNAP disruption and federal government shutdown.

“We were seeing as many as 12,000 people during the time when SNAP benefits were not being paid, and it's settled back down a little bit,” Havala said. “But remember SNAP benefits and the eligibility for SNAP has changed, and so there's a lot more people at risk of either having less SNAP benefits or not being eligible at all.”

The “Hub 2.0” expansion will support new food distribution “spokes” in high-need areas. In addition, Loaves & Fishes will provide free, dedicated space for other pantries, fostering greater collaboration. It’s a “community asset, not just a Loaves & Fishes project,” Havala said.

### **The ‘whole person’**

Since its launch in 2022, Endeavor’s Community Investment Fund has provided \$31.2 million to 54 organizations.

“We know that health is more than health care alone. So if we're to think about and care for the whole patient, it's important for us to think about all those factors that happen outside of our walls,” Zakem said. “So we've been focused on food insecurity, housing insecurity, workforce development, certainly access to health care and behavioral health care.”



Endeavor Health CEO J.P. Gallagher visits the Loaves & Fishes Aurora Hub to announce a \$5 million grant award. *Courtesy of Endeavor Health*

Endeavor cited research that shows food insecurity is linked to higher rates of depression and anxiety, as well as increased use of emergency rooms. Loaves & Fishes previously received CIF awards to expand its mobile food program and to extend hours at its Naperville market, one of the distribution points or “spokes.”

“We know some of our patients, some of our families we serve, children that we serve, they don't have enough to eat,” Zakem said. “And so it's gratifying to be able to partner with Loaves & Fishes and say, how might we together help lift them up and help care for that whole person.”

The expansion project will also give Loaves & Fishes more cold storage — “integral to a lot of different types of healthy food products,” Havalala said.

The nonprofit is in the midst of a “silent phase” of fundraising and plans to go to the more public phase in the first quarter of next year. Construction is also expected to begin in 2026.



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