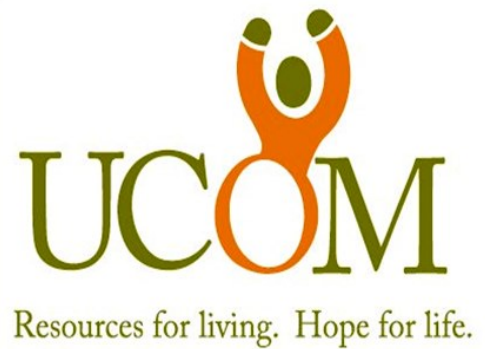


County Wide Support:

County Wide Food Drive volunteers collect food from locations dotted throughout Kent County. In 2015 UCOM's collection site brought over 16,000 pounds of food to the pantry system. The 2016 County Wide Food Drive was Saturday October 6th.



Fall 2016

United Church Outreach Ministry

1311 Chicago Dr. SW, Wyoming, MI 49509 616.241.4006

www.UCOMgr.org

It's All About Relationships

**By Bruce Roller—
Executive Director**

When UCOM moved to our current building in 2005, Shawn Keener our Program Director insisted on only one thing. “My office has to be on the main floor, just off the food pantry. I lose contact with our neighbors if I am upstairs or in another wing of the building,” she explained.

That is par for the course for our intrepid director. “It’s not programs. It’s people,” is her usual reminder. When there is an option to make our space more aesthetically pleasing, Shawn always weighs this in the light of convenience and welcome



for those who depend on our services.

In a recent discussion about moving a couple of tables of clothing from the front hallway, Shawn is the one who remarked that scores of people every week stop to check those clothes and take more than half of them. “Our main clothing area is not always

accessible, so I think we can abide some disarray rather than to curtail our mission of providing basic needs.” “Apparently our neighbors prefer the hospitality of accessibility to things they need to the dignity of perfect neatness without the service.” Check and mate.

One might think that more than two decades of providing the best possible services and referrals to literally thousands of people would burn a person out. Not Shawn. Why is that? “It is all about the individuals who come to us. Everyone must be treated equitably. Each person must be the most important person we are serving at that moment.”

By her job description Shawn meets with clients, prepares reports, manages grants, supervises program staff and volunteers, creates and implements internships, collaborates with community agencies, serves on boards and committees, and acts as liaison with court services. That would be overwhelming enough for many, but Shawn goes on to remind all of us that serving others comes first in the work we do. Above all, she emphasizes that consistency and fairness do not always come easily, and she bears the brunt of the disgruntled and frustrated. She always advocates for our neighbors, is loving and giving to those in crisis, and forever willing to go above and beyond to meet a need or provide compassionate direction. She has spent more than 20 years at UCOM empowering positive outcomes for families in Kent County.

No wonder our staff is in agreement that Shawn is WONDER WOMAN. Her assessment: “I love what I do.”



When a Meal is More Than Just a Meal

By Erik Keener –
Assistant Executive Director

The Holidays are a wonderful time of year. For many, the turning of the leaves signifies the start of a season filled with festive gatherings, warm evenings spent sitting by the fireside, and cozy chats with friends and family.

Sadly for many of our neighbors this idyllic vision of the holidays is just that. For countless families struggling with poverty the holidays are an added layer of stress in an already stressful life. To those struggling just to keep the lights on, the prospect of gifts and family gatherings can be daunting at best.

Thankfully organizations like the Salvation Army and Toys for Tots do tremendous work to help ensure that no child will be without a gift this season.

But what about the Holiday meal? What about that time of fellowship and family that stands out so vividly in the memories of so many a past Holiday? If you're a family trying to choose between a hearty holiday meal or paying to heat your house, which would you choose? At UCOM we believe that no one should have to make that choice and everyone deserves a holiday meal on their table.

That's why UCOM participates in the Holiday Giving Network. In addition to being a site for low income families to register for Toys for Tots or the Salvation Army's Angel Tree program, UCOM also works to ensure every family that comes through our door has food for at least one of those memory building meals.

Every family that comes to UCOM in need of a meal for Thanksgiving or Christmas will receive either a basket with

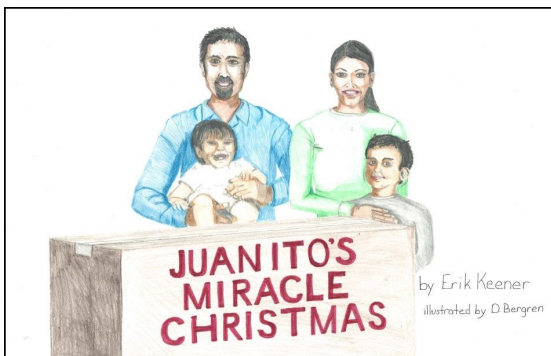
all of the fixings to prepare a holiday meal or vouchers to purchase food. Over 1200 families signed up for a basket with UCOM last year and between now and the end of November another 1200 will sign up this year.

It would be impossible for UCOM to handle that many baskets by ourselves. Lucky for us, our tremendous network of churches, schools, businesses, and supporters like you are there to help. For around \$50 you can purchase all of the items needed to make a wonderful holiday meal for a family of four and help alleviate just a small amount of stress.

UCOM still needs people to provide hundreds of baskets to families in need this season. We need drivers to deliver baskets to families and we need holiday foods to help put together baskets for the families we can't match with providers.

If you or someone you know would like to be a provider or would like to deliver baskets please call us. The amount of joy that a simple meal can bring a family is overwhelming. The smiles on the faces of families as you bring them a lovingly prepared package of food are heartwarming. The memories that are made, the laughter that is shared, and the stories that are told, are everlasting.

For more information about being a provider, please contact UCOM Program Director, Shawn Keener. 616-241-4006



Have You Heard Juanito's Story?

Juanito's Miracle Christmas is a story of the incredible impact your giving can have on the lives of those in our community. The story may be fictional, but its characters are all too similar to so many of our neighbors in need.

If you haven't already read Juanito's Miracle Christmas and would like a copy of your own, please let us know on your donation envelop and we'll send you one.



We are all a work in progress.

**By BettyBeth Johns –
Community Development Manager**

She's not "there" yet. In fact, this week has been another unexpected setback as she fell ill and had to take several days off work to recover. But Cindy's* story is full of hope; alive with determination, courage, and gratitude. UCOM is proud to walk alongside her as she steps into a brighter future.

Her life had been challenging – little money, a 'broken' home, few mentors. But she'd managed to get through high school, tried college, and found a job she loved. She was doing well – moving up in the company. She married, had children, and moved out west to help her husband's family run a successful tourism destination.

Like so many others, the economic downturn hit Cindy's family hard. The business suffered and her relationships suffered, but she persevered. And then a serious car accident took away her income, her family security, and led her down a long dark road of pain killer addiction and instability. She had spent ten years "doing everything right" and in one painful, awful year, her world shattered.

For several years after she, did "what she needed" to keep her children fed, housed, and clothed. Her now ex-husband drifted in and out of their lives, sometimes supportive, sometimes threatening, never reliable. She was a careful budgeter and worked enough to pay for necessities. She maintained a morality that separated the responsibilities of motherhood with her personal demons. She stole money and pills to feed her addiction.

Eventually she landed in the county jail. Separated from her children, she was ready to face reality and mapped out a plan to drag herself out of the hole into

Workforce Development

Your generous donations help people like Cindy find work, achieve personal goals, and build towards better lives. UCOM's Workforce development program is making tremendous positive changes in the lives of our neighbors.

which she'd sunk. She asked, and received, jail support in the form of counseling and work release. During her work release experience, she was encouraged by her supervisor to pursue job coaching at UCOM.

Brimming with energy, but with a short attention span, Cindy was tough to pin down. She is smart and savvy, but lacks patience to sit through training. She has set personal goals and she is driven to achieve them. She is highly motivated to prioritize quality time with her family and understands that in order to be the mother she wants to be she needs to 1) stay clean 2) stay out of jail 3) work to pay the bills and 4) repeat daily.

She's smart enough to know she needs help, humble enough to accept it, and tenacious enough to heed advice that is moving her along the path to success.

UCOM helped Cindy put together a resume, gave her interview clothing, and helped her practice language that would indicate her aptitude without attitude. She was on time and on task at all of her coaching appointments and soon secured an interview with a local metal plating company. She got the job on the spot. Two weeks after her hire, her employer sent an email to UCOM, indicating that Cindy was well liked by coworkers and that she was working out very well at her new job.

Cindy knows too well that success is a moving target and that there will likely be more bumps in the road. She knows, too, that UCOM will be with her should she need support in the future.

Through the generous gifts of our neighbors and supporters, UCOM builds community by investing in real people navigating real challenges. We work tirelessly to build skills sets in individuals who indicate their desire to be contributing members of our community. It's a self-perpetuating cycle of validation, support, education, partnership and giving back. We are humbled and grateful to be able to do this work every day.

**Cindy is not her real name. UCOM strives to preserve and protect the privacy and dignity of our clients..*



Resources for living. Hope for life.

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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.

Please accept my donation in the amount of \$ _____

Name: _____

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