

Take Charge Of Your Health Today. Be Informed. Be Involved.



THE GREATER PITTSBURGH FOOD BANK held one of its food drives outside PPG Paints Arena on Friday, April 10, as hundreds of cars lined the streets to receive the offerings. (Photo by Courier photographer J.L. Martello)



ESTHER BUSH

Food Insecurity

This month, the “Take Charge of Your Health Today” page discusses food access and insecurity in relationship with minoritized communities in Pittsburgh. The current COVID-19 pandemic has emphasized that access to food is a basic human right, not a privilege. How can we guarantee that we as a collective are working to ensure that African American individuals and communities are not left hungry?

As the Urban League of Greater Pittsburgh’s leader, it is my duty to think deeply about equity and access to resources. As an individual, my values and lived experiences propel me to reflect on what the overview researcher, Dr. Audrey J. Murrell, says about community resiliency and capacity. Taking charge of one’s health, as indicated in this Courier page, can help to shape future avenues for ensuring food abundance and resilience. It starts now with partnership and capacity-building among city entities, universities, community organizations and individuals.

The Urban League of Greater Pittsburgh has always been deeply committed to ending hunger and providing access to food in the region. Our Hunger Relief Services offer emergency food and a pathway to guarantee that people who cannot receive WIC benefits can still feed and protect their babies.

Healthy minds and bodies are critical. The City of Pittsburgh defines food insecurity as anytime folks do not know whether or not they have enough food to meet basic needs. Data from the City of Pittsburgh notes that 21.4% or 1 in 5 Pittsburghers are food insecure. This percentage is higher than the United States average of 12.3% and the Allegheny County average of 14%. We know that sometimes this means having to make difficult choices among buying food, paying rent, picking up a medical prescription, turning on the heat or other essential expenses.

Those choices should not have to happen. In response to COVID-19, and because many people have lost their jobs because of the pandemic, the Urban League continues to show up for those who need support the most. When our fellow neighbors cannot pay their bills, we try to help. We help those who need assistance to pay rent and security deposits. Our Housing Department continues to be a source of assistance even during the COVID-19 pandemic.

What is really telling about food insecurity data are the neighborhoods where disparity most exists. A food access map on the City of Pittsburgh’s website ([https://apps.pittsburghpa.gov/redtail/images/2325_FoodInsecurePercentage_\(Multicolor\).pdf](https://apps.pittsburghpa.gov/redtail/images/2325_FoodInsecurePercentage_(Multicolor).pdf)) shows many of Pittsburgh’s predominantly African American neighborhoods, like the Hill District, Homewood and Larimer, range from 23-70% food insecure. In contrast, predominantly white neighborhoods, like Squirrel Hill, Greenfield and Shadyside, range from 0-22% food insecure. We know that historical and current oppressions like redlining have had grave effects on people’s health, wealth and wellness. These numbers also remind us why we have to continue to do the work that we do.

The Urban League of Greater Pittsburgh will continue to fight for you. One way that you can fight for yourself is to complete the 2020 Census. When you complete the census, you help your community get its fair share of federal funds for vital programs. Please—if you haven’t done so already—complete the 2020 Census by visiting www.2020census.gov.

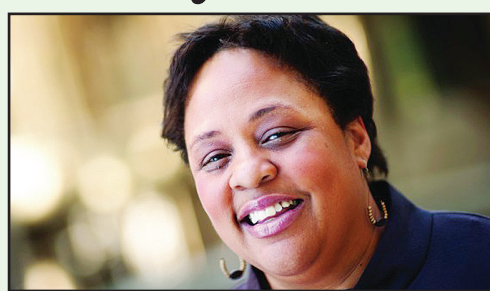
Thank you, readers. On August 13th from noon to 1 p.m. Dr. Murrell and Chef Pierre Claudy, founder of the E.A.T. Initiative, Inc. and owner of Arnold’s Coffee & Tea LLC in Pittsburgh, will join readers like you in an online conversation about food insecurity and how to take action. To RSVP, head to <https://bit.ly/2BGaz8o> for the open to the public Lunch and Learn. The “Take Charge of Your Health” page next month will reflect on six months of COVID-19 effects in the Pittsburgh region, with particular insight into how difficult it is to disrupt systems, and what lessons we have learned from the pandemic to implement transformational change. Specifically, we will talk with researchers whose interests include categorizing how the infodemic is differentially impacting certain populations, including racial and ethnic minorities. The World Health Organization defines the infodemic as the mass amounts of information about COVID-19 that makes it hard for folks to know which guidance and reports about the virus is accurate.

Food Insecurity and COVID-19

In late March 2020, an image of a mile-long caravan of cars leading up to the Greater Pittsburgh Community Food Bank went viral on social media and in national media outlets. The image captured people lining up—some for five hours ahead of schedule—for an emergency food distribution. The distribution happened at the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic that shut down the country, leaving many people without their usual paychecks. The image was a striking example of the number of people dealing with food insecurity.

The COVID-19 pandemic has not only been a health crisis but has revealed just how vulnerable food-insecure people are. When people lost income because of business closures, they became unable to afford life’s basic necessities like rent or mortgage payments and food. People who may have already been experiencing food insecurity had an even more difficult time once the pandemic began. But food insecurity—not having ready access to enough affordable, nutritious food—was a problem before COVID-19 halted regular life.

Years ago, during research about food insecurity, Audrey J. Murrell, PhD, acting dean, University Honors College, and professor of business administration, College of Business Administration at the University of Pittsburgh, realized quickly that no standard definition or measure of it existed. She and colleagues developed the Food Abundance Index, a data-driven tool that provides consistency in terms of defining and measuring food insecurity. It can be used as a scorecard to evaluate the effectiveness of different food interventions and, in turn, to better help people. The index includes five categories to measure food insecurity—access, affordability, diversity, quality and density—because food insecurity is not only about living near a grocery store or being able to afford food.



AUDREY J. MURRELL, PHD

“Food insecurity is multidimensional,” says Dr. Murrell, who is also professor of psychology, Dietrich School of Arts and Sciences, and of public and international affairs, Graduate School of Public and International Affairs. “People ask why we can’t just put a grocery store in a neighborhood that needs one. But can everyone afford the food inside it? Does it supply people with healthy and culturally appropriate food? What if the grocery store closes—then what? We made the Food Abundance Index in a way so that doing basic, foundational things—like putting a grocery store in a food-insecure community—doesn’t define ‘abundance’ for a neighborhood or community. People have a basic human right to access food. Doing the bare minimum isn’t innovative; it’s insufficient.”

Dr. Murrell encourages seeing food insecurity as a resilience issue—for people, their neighborhoods, cities and the food system. How can we build the capacity of a particular community to not only have food abundance but to be able to sustain abundance over time—especially in times of crisis like a global pandemic?

“The COVID-19 pandemic showed us how vulnerable our food-supply chain is,” says Dr. Murrell. “Food service companies and grocery store chains were disrupted. We saw farmers having to literally destroy produce and waste milk because their products couldn’t get to

people who needed them. When the supply chain is disrupted, we see price gouging. People then can’t afford the food to which they do have access. We need resilience in the food-supply chain.”

Dr. Murrell also spotlights how the pandemic has forced a change in the public’s perception of who is considered an essential worker.

“For the very first time, grocery store employees, food transportation workers and people delivering food are being seen as essential workers,” she says. “Jobs in the food-supply chain and the food system, particularly at the lower levels, are dominated by women and people of color. If that’s the case, then they ought to get paid as and get the health benefits of essential workers.”

According to Dr. Murrell, seeing food as social, economic and environmental sustainability issues creates resilience in our food systems. An updated version of her Food Abundance Index is being developed by the nonprofit organization Food21 (www.food21.org) and will have data about these issues.

When asked what people can do, in addition to donating to or volunteering at food banks, Dr. Murrell says people can purchase from local suppliers, which people rely on when national food-supply chains break down, and use their voices to advocate for people who are food insecure, food service workers and farmers.

“Food isn’t a luxury; it’s a human right,” says Dr. Murrell. “We should all bear the responsibility of being advocates for building resilient food systems regardless of where we live, what we look like or how much money we make. If we can’t do that, we can’t survive as a community, city or nation. The COVID-19 crisis has really made us pay attention to where the inequities are in our communities. If you’ve turned a blind eye to it before, you can’t now.”



IN ADDITION TO NON-PERISHABLE ITEMS, Chef Claudy Pierre, shown above, and others provided home-cooked meals to members of the Pittsburgh community on June 18. The event was titled “Third Meal,” with contributing partners Pittsburgh Gateways, Pittsburgh Green Innovators, the Energy Innovation Center, Super Bakery and Eminent Hospitality Solutions. Members of Phi Beta Sigma Fraternity Inc., were also involved. (Photo by Gail Manker)

Chef Claudy Pierre’s Eat Initiative

Founded in 2015, the EAT Initiative was birthed out of Chef Claudy’s vision to help feed and sustain food insecure communities. Since then, EAT’s primary focus has been to inject cultural competency

and food education into communities in Pittsburgh and around the world. Historically, food-insecure communities suffer from a lack of access to fresh food. Today, resources are scarce for these families

and individuals, and this disparity deters families and individuals from preparing new meals in more nutritious and cost-efficient ways. You can find more info on our website here: www.eatinitiative.org