

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

## Housing Security

For December's health focus, University of Pittsburgh student Michelle Dougherty highlights the latest research on housing security, including the role of community safe spaces. In response, Carlos T. Carter, President & CEO of the Urban League of Greater Pittsburgh, explains UL housing support for people who face money troubles due to rising rent.

**Q: Carlos, Michelle's article mentions "rent burden," which happens when the money people spend on rent causes financial distress. How is the Ur-**

**ban League able to help people who are rent burdened?**

**Carlos:** To reduce the stress of high housing costs for low- to moderate-income families, the UL offers services aimed at stabilizing housing situations. Our organization doesn't provide funds directly, but it does connect eligible households to rental assistance programs and provides housing counseling. Since the pandemic, we've worked with agencies that focus on eviction prevention and support via magistrate court intervention, mediation with private

landlords and subsidized housing providers, and delinquent payment plan options.

However, the cost of rent is rising above the 30%-35% standard. As rental prices began to increase, we realized that income, employment, and additional subsidized housing issues must be addressed. We created the program Moving on Up, which provided support for rental assistance and concentrated on employment/training, budgeting, and financial literacy. It also addressed the affordability of where a person lives, including



CARLOS T. CARTER

stabilizing income and spending, and creating and following a budget.

Although some people expect that government intervention will save the day, we shouldn't count on COVID-type funding increases from the upcoming administration.

Instead, the UL will continue advocating for more subsidized housing, ways to turn vacant lots and run-down houses into livable spaces, discontinuing rental space price gouging, and giving workers a livable wage.

**Q: Michelle also highlights the importance between housing security and community spaces. How does the Urban League support this connection?**

**Carlos:** Our Family Support Centers foster a safe community space in three different neighborhoods. The centers empower families by offering tailored resources and programming, including ways to access help, connect with others, and build resilience.

The centers help families achieve economic self-reliance through parenting workshops, early childhood education, health services, financial literacy classes, and employment assistance. They emphasize early childhood development via resources for parents and programs for children that give our kids a strong start in life. They provide immediate crisis help, too—for example, food and diapers—all while helping families develop long-term success strategies.

To learn more about the centers and programs, visit [ulphg.org](http://ulphg.org) and click on Family Support Centers in the drop-down menu.

## Community spaces can help reduce eviction and alcohol-related impacts

Marginalized communities suffer unequally from "rent burden." Rent burden happens when someone spends more than 30 percent of their income on rent. This hardship makes it difficult for people to afford other necessities like food, clothing, and utilities.

Like other inequities, rent burden for marginalized Black communities is the result of historic, systemic, and economic factors, including redlining and other discriminatory practices.

Rent burden can lead to housing eviction (situations in which landlords force renters to move). Eviction, research shows, has a negative impact on people's physical and mental health, including chronic conditions like diabetes and high blood pressure, as well as anxiety, depression, and substance use.

This isn't surprising. Eviction is a traumatic event. Not only eviction itself, but also the threat of eviction can be stressful. The threat can feel never-ending and can leave renters feeling trapped.

Michelle Dougherty, University of Pittsburgh PhD student in the School of Public Health's Behavioral and Community Health Sciences, is a researcher studying eviction and its impact on health outcomes. Michelle's latest work focuses on eviction, alcohol use, alcohol-related impacts, and how they interact.

"What we've learned is that in some cases eviction may increase alcohol use and the risk of alcohol-re-

lated impacts like suicidal thoughts and domestic violence," Michelle explains. "Likewise, domestic violence and job loss associated with alcohol use may increase the risk of eviction."

Because people can experience an increased risk of both eviction and alcohol-related impacts—and they can sometimes be related—it's important to identify resources and assets that can protect against both issues.

Michelle's research relied on a gracious group of mostly Black, heterosexual women in 12 different Pittsburgh ZIP codes who shared their lived experiences about eviction and alcohol use.

The research featured initial and follow-up interviews, as well as photos. Participants used their own cameras to explore their communities, snap photos of resources they felt would prevent or reduce eviction and/or alcohol use—and explain why those resources were important.

One part of the research findings was expected: Organizations that provide help with housing needs—along with legal assistance, financial help, and wraparound services—are crucial for preventing eviction and reducing eviction threat. "Participants experienced rent burden and described living paycheck-to-paycheck," explains Michelle. "Several shared how receiving legal or financial help to prevent eviction reduced their stress, which helped them consume less alco-

hol." Organizations like Just Mediation and the Urban League of Greater Pittsburgh offer crucial help with housing security and other needs. However, identifying and connecting to an organization can sometimes be challenging for people who are dealing with eviction and/or alcohol-related impacts.

That's where Michelle's research showed something unexpected: The importance of community



MICHELLE DOUGHERTY

spaces, and social benefits," she says.

Through participants' photos, Michelle learned that recreation spaces, social and spiritual engagement, and opportunities to exercise can serve as an alternative to drinking. "Access to spaces and activities that don't center around alcohol can help individuals build connections with others who drink less," she explains. "This, in turn, contributes

In one photo, a participant captured an image of a local library's community bulletin board, which offered information about community events and resources. Along with the photo, the participant noted, "Sometimes getting help can feel kind of intimidating because you got to call during a certain time, or you got to go in person, you got to do all this, bring all these documents.... It's comforting to know that this information's here and (you) can just take what you need and use what you need to use and it (does) not feel intimidating."

In another photo, a different participant snapped an image of an outdoor walking path next to a river with the Pittsburgh cityscape in the background. The participant noted, "I tend to drink when I'm stressed, but going on this walk really helps to calm the stress down, and... limits the drinking of alcohol, which can lead to negative effects."

Michelle plans to share what she's learned with other researchers and organizations that work on issues related to housing security and alcohol-related impacts. She hopes to continue investigating how to improve access to these community resources and spreading the message that community safe spaces matter.



Churches fall into this category, for example, as do public libraries, community centers, alcohol-free recreation events, and outdoor green spaces where people can exercise and connect with nature.

The importance of supportive social connections in these spaces can't be underestimated or overlooked Michelle feels. "They offer practical, emo-

to lower alcohol consumption.

"All of this can lessen people's feelings of isolation and despair," Michelle continues. "The spaces make it easier for people to feel less stressed and more empowered to reach out for help when they need it—and ultimately improve their well-being and health outcomes."

## Just Mediation Pittsburgh offers free, confidential, and voluntary mediation services for tenants and landlords

When tenants and landlords need to resolve a housing dispute, many turn to local organization Just Mediation Pittsburgh (JMP).

JMP supports people and communities in conflict to create their own solutions constructively through accessible mediation, facilitation, and creative problem solving.

JMP opened for operations in 2020 during the COVID-19 pandemic. The organization offers an alternative approach to conflict resolution outside of the traditional court system. JMP's skilled mediators create a neutral setting where landlords and tenants can find com-

mon ground and resolve their conflicts amicably.

At the heart of JMP's mission is a commitment to conflict resolution by empowering individuals with tools for constructive dialogue that paves the way for impactful and positive outcomes. Since the beginning, JMP has trained more than 75 community mediators who engage in peace-building, dialogue, and constructive resolutions.

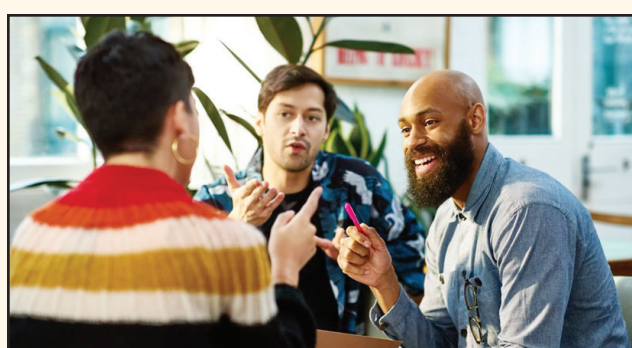
Operating remotely, JMP's program uses virtual mediation sessions via Zoom. Participants can join the session via video or phone, supported by our staff who make

sure everyone is ready to participate. JMP staff is committed to making the mediation process as accessible and convenient as possible for everyone.

Teaming up with local service providers, such as RentHelpPGH and Neighborhood Legal Services, JMP ensures participants have access to many community resources. These partnerships support JMP's efforts, helping participants tap into programs that offer help tailored to each person's lived experience.

### How to use Just Mediation

Tenants and landlords can request a mediation



by filling out an online intake form on JMP's website at [justmediationpgh.org](http://justmediationpgh.org). Wait times vary and filling out the online intake form is the quickest way to receive outreach.

Tenants and landlords can also request mediation by calling and leaving a message at 412-228-0730 or emailing [info@justmediationpgh.org](mailto:info@justmediationpgh.org). Please allow up to 10 business days to receive outreach. The JMP team will attempt to contact the initiating party via phone, text, and email, so please keep an eye on devices after applying.