

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

Food Insecurity



CARLOS T. CARTER

This month's Take Charge of Your Health Today focuses on food insecurity and the profound impact on our health — including a disproportionate burden on Black families. As you'll read, Carlos Carter, head of the Urban League of Greater Pittsburgh, and his team tackle this disparity head on.

Q: Carlos, the Urban League has been at the forefront of addressing food security and related supports. Would you share some of that history?

Carlos: Hunger and housing stability go hand in hand, so we've always operated an emergency food pantry (a pantry of last resort) that serves Allegheny County. Because of our location in downtown Pittsburgh, we can provide low-maintenance food products for unhoused people, as well as hygiene kits, diapers, and baby formula.

For many years, we've handled the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP/food stamp) outreach in Beaver, Butler, Lawrence, Greene, Mercer and Washington Counties. The program works with community gardens in Homewood, with additional assistance from United Health Care, Presbyterian Senior Care, Bethesda Boy Scouts, Bidwell, and Giant Eagle. Together, we've executed an intergenerational gardening and healthy eating and cooking program.

At Westinghouse High School, we established an in-school snack cupboard and monthly food deliveries for families whose children attend the school.

Each year, we hold our Annual Thanksgiving Distribution (ATD), which features a health and human services fair. Supported by our partners, ATD provides holiday "fixins," such as a vegetable box, gift card for a meat purchase — plus the opportunity to receive vaccines and eyeglasses, blood pressure and diabetes testing, dental exams, and mammograms. Community partners from Allegheny, Beaver, Lawrence, Greene, and Washington counties help us organize and serve over 900 attendees at the David Lawrence Convention Center.

It's clear to all of us that food insecurity must be addressed on more than one level, so we support the federal farm bill, which assists Black farmers and contributes to SNAP, childcare food programs (such as out-of-school meals for children), and senior food boxes.

Q: That's a lot of good work! Food insecurity is also linked to economic injustice and negative mental, physical, and emotional effects. Would you highlight programs the Urban League offers to help address economic stability?

Carlos: Our Urban Senior Jobs Program and Urban Tech Jobs Program improve skills that helps clients obtain life-sustaining employment.

Our Opportunity Brokers focus on removing barriers to employment by offering to clients training and financial support for uniforms, daycare, transportation, and rent, if necessary. Our Family Support Centers ensure that a household meets its living expenses and has food on the table for every member.

All this work with families is part of our initial assessment and guides our service plan.

Whether it's senior jobs, youth leadership, tech jobs, rental and mortgage assistance, or family support programs, the Urban League of Greater Pittsburgh provides methods to guide its clients toward a path of economic self-sufficiency. Our long-term goal is to stabilize our clients' housing and employment — and develop a path to homeownership and generational wealth.

New study lays foundation for link between prenatal nutrition and healthier moms and babies

A critical issue that affects millions of people in our country is food insecurity. About 9% of White households suffer from it compared to 22% of Black households.

Food insecurity happens when a person doesn't have regular access to enough nutritious food to meet daily needs, including lean protein, whole grains, fresh fruits and veggies, and healthy fats. The condition can be especially hard on the health of pregnant people and their babies.

When people don't have money, resources, or reliable places to get nourishing food, they suffer from poor nutrition, which contributes to heart attacks, strokes, diabetes, high blood pressure, kidney disease, and even obesity (from eating food high in saturated fat and refined sugar).

Food insecurity also impacts people's mental health. Struggling to find and afford nutritious food can increase stress and depression and make existing mental health conditions worse. Over time, the strain of food insecurity can lead to a complicated and downward cycle of mental health challenges.

The marked difference between Black and White food insecurity is caused by economic disparities, systemic racism, and historical inequities, especially redlining. It's resulted in a new term for food insecurity in marginalized communities: Food apartheid.

When someone is pregnant, the lack of steady, healthy nutrition not only jeopardizes their health, but also their baby's. "Pregnant Black people who experience food insecurity are at a higher risk for complications like anemia, preeclampsia, and low newborn birth weight," says Dr. Christine C. Call, Assistant Professor of Psychiatry at the University of Pittsburgh. "They also experience more stress, which raises cortisol levels and can



DR. CHRISTINE C. CALL

impact an unborn baby's development."

Dr. Call is lead researcher of Pitt's AMPLiFY study. The study's goal is to develop a survey of prenatal food insecurity that can be used in research and clinical settings. "Research about food insecurity during pregnancy is lacking," Dr. Call says. "We're hoping to change that, so we can study it and determine how it contributes to physical and mental health outcomes for pregnant people and their babies."

AMPLiFY participants complete a 1-hour, 1-on-1 interview (online or in-person) and online surveys that ask about food insecurity, eating, mood, discrimination, and demographic characteristics. Total time is about 1.5-2 hours. The study is ongoing and participants receive payment for their time.

"AMPLiFY will give us the tools to design a meaningful and relevant survey that captures the food insecurity of pregnant Black people and their babies," says Dr. Call. "We want to create a survey out of care for the people we're representing — one that's compassionate and respectful of their circumstances."

With the right survey, researchers can begin to gather information that may help improve prenatal health. The info may even become a factor in helping to lower our country's high rate of Black maternal and infant deaths, which is more than twice the rate of White mothers



and infants according to the CDC.

Understanding food insecurity is part of a bigger public health strategy to figure out and eliminate the root causes of Black maternal and infant mortality on a community level and nationally through policy changes.

"Research has taught us fundamental things about prenatal care, but we need more information specific to nutrition," says Dr. Call. "One of the key things we do know is that it's important to destigmatize food insecurity and reassure people that it's nothing to be ashamed of. Unfortunately in our country, 1 in 5 Black people experience food insecurity on a regular basis."

Dr. Call also notes the important role of trust between a pregnant person and their healthcare provider. "There's a lot of healthcare system mistrust in the Black community based on historical harms," she explains. "If you don't trust the healthcare provider who's asking you questions about your diet, how will you feel comfortable enough to ask for help with food?"

In the Pittsburgh region, Dr. Call encourages pregnant people to use resources that offer free nutritious food without judgement or stigma. "If you're pregnant and experiencing food insecurity, please know you're

not alone and it's not your fault, especially in today's economy where food prices have risen so sharply," she says.

Some of the resources include Adagio Health, which offers online sign-up for the Women, Infant, and Children (WIC) program, as well as an Eat Fresh Farmers Market program and free Pregnant & Powerful classes.

There's also The Greater Pittsburgh Community Food Bank's Food Finder Tool, Just Harvest's food stamps/



SNAP, Feed Hungry Kids, and Find Healthy Food services and The Pittsburgh Study's Family Resource List for support with child thriving and racial equity.

For refugees and immigrants, there's Hello Neighbor's Smart Start program.

Dr. Call also encourages family members and friends of pregnant people — as well as church and community leaders — to check in with them regularly. "It can be overwhelming and embarrassing to admit you don't have the resources to get the food you need for a healthy pregnancy," says Dr. Call. "Regular support from family and the community sends a powerful message to the person who's pregnant that they and their baby are loved and cherished and don't have to do it alone."

Adagio Health delivers vital healthcare and education to diverse communities at no or low cost.

A good neighbor in Western PA for over 50 years, Adagio Health offers health, wellness, and nutrition services and support. The nonprofit, 501(c)(3) organization's outreach now includes 62 counties across the state with care and services for approximately 115,000 patients and families. Among the programs and services provided by Adagio Health and its extensive network of providers and partners:

- * Reproductive health care services and adult preventive care including vaccines and chronic disease screenings provided at low or no cost to approximately 35,000 patients in western Pennsylvania.

- * Breast and cervical cancer screening services to nearly 6,000 patients in 62 counties across the Commonwealth.

- * A WIC program for 9,000 parents, caregivers, and young children in rural western Pennsylvania.

- * A nutrition education program for more than 50,000 Pennsylvanians — young children, teens, adults, and seniors.

- * Food Cupboards that supply nutritious food to about 1,000 Adagio Health patients and clients in immediate need (followed by referrals and connections to local food banks).

- * A Tobacco Prevention and Control program that serves approximately 3,700 adults and teens in western PA.

- * Education services focused on understanding reproductive health, preventing unplanned pregnancies, and making healthy lifestyle choices for roughly 2,000 students. The services are evidence-informed, age-appropriate, and delivered one-on-one and in group and classroom settings. Adagio Health is committed to



providing safe, compassionate care to diverse populations with unique needs, including members of LGBTQIA communities, immigrants, and women who have served in the military.

In 2022, Adagio Health commis-



sioned the RAND Corporation to complete a first-of-its-kind needs assessment of women veterans in western PA, with a full report of the findings published in March 2023.

Services at Adagio Health are designed to support individual patients and clients — and their families and communities. Studies show a woman with access to quality healthcare and affordable contraception is more likely to, on her own timeline, complete her education, get and keep a good job, financially support herself and her family, and invest in her children's future.

The organization serves diverse individuals from all socioeconomic backgrounds throughout western Pennsylvania and beyond. New programs include "Healthy Women For Life" — an Adagio Health initiative funded by the Pennsylvania Department of Human Services. Services provided as part of this project are free to eligible patients. Project goals are intended to advance accessible and inclusive women's health care, especially for pregnant and parenting women. Additionally, with funding from the U.S. Health Resources and Services Administration, Adagio Health is leading a multi-county consortium focused on the prevention of Neonatal Abstinence Syndrome (NAS).

Adagio Health provides all its services through state and Federal government funding, as well as local foundation partners and partnerships with a variety of community organizations and other funders.

For more information, visit Adagio Health's website at adagiohealth.org.