

Sparking Solutions: Issue Profile on Hunger and Obesity

By Kate McGovern

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In our fourth issue profile to prepare readers for the Delaware Valley Grantmakers Sparking Solutions Conference, we provide an overview of hunger and obesity in the greater Philadelphia region and how the two conditions are connected.

Introduction

However contradictory it may seem, Philadelphia has a hunger problem and an obesity problem at the same time. One in five residents lacks proper access to food, says a recent report from the Greater Philadelphia Coalition Against Hunger. Three in five Philadelphia residents are obese, according to the city. These two statistics are very connected.

Many low-income families stretch their budgets by buying cheap, high-calorie foods with little nutritional value, according to GPCAH. A 2009 study identified this link on a local level. The authors from Temple University, The Food Trust and the School District of Philadelphia studied the behavior of the city's students. More than half of the students surveyed said they shopped at a corner store every day; 42 percent shopped twice per day, and their purchases were mostly chips, candy and sugary drinks. Spending only about \$1 per purchase, they came away with about 356 empty calories each time.

Stakeholders say recent events are making things worse. Last week, American Recovery and Reinvestment Act funding for food stamps expired. Around the same time, a Pittsburgh organization reported that residents trying to apply for the program through the state frequently have their applications lost or are unable to get their questions answered.

While it appears that obesity rates are declining, at least among young residents, the number of individuals in the area who are "food insecure" is growing. This means they lack the access to enough food for an active, healthy lifestyle, as defined by the U.S. Department of Agriculture. This increase means we can expect an increase in serious illness and chronic diseases, GPCAH reports. For children, this means their development and ability to learn are at risk.

Federal programs

There are numerous federal programs that address these issues. The Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program, also known as food stamps, helps low-income residents buy food at grocery stores, farmers' markets and small businesses. A third of the city's residents — about 470,000 people — receive SNAP aid, but another 150,000 are eligible and don't participate. Often, individuals don't know they are eligible or are discouraged by red tape or social stigmas, experts say.

But there's no surplus of benefits either. SNAP suffered a \$5 billion cut last week when the recovery funding expired. That reduction means that a family of four that qualifies for the maximum monthly assistance — \$668 — will lose about \$36 of that.

And Congress is considering bill that would cut another \$40 billion from the program during the next decade. The House passed H.R. 3102 in September. It is awaiting consideration in the Senate. In addition to the funding cut, the bill would allow states to require drug testing for beneficiaries and allow them to require that able-bodied recipients participate in job training. The proposal also would implement asset tests, like Pennsylvania did last year. In the state, most households with more than \$5,500 in assets are ineligible for SNAP.

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GPCAH has spoken out against the state's asset test. "We all know that savings is crucial in helping people transition from poverty to self-sufficiency," said Julie Zaebst, the coalition's policy center manager in a statement. "Forcing families to drain their savings before receiving any help will only make it harder for them to get back on their feet." The state is turning away federal SNAP dollars that would otherwise be spent at grocery stores, farmers' markets and small businesses across the state, GPCAH says. The Corbett administration said last month that it may reconsider the test.

Several other federal programs serve food-insecure individuals in Philadelphia, but participation needs improvement, according to GPCAH. More than 100,000 of the city's students receive a free or reduced-price lunch through the National School Lunch Program. Fewer than 60,000, however, take advantage of the breakfast program.

Residents also have access to the Women, Infants and Children program that provides low-income pregnant women, new moms, infants and children with food and nutrition education. In Philadelphia, more than 61,000 residents participate in WIC.

Opportunities & Innovation

What's working? Here we take a look at the broad overview of the strategies, collaborations and innovations being used throughout the greater Philadelphia region.

The region has many tools to fight hunger. The federal programs account for 96 percent of all food assistance. Only four percent is provided by charities, so strengthening and increasing access to these underutilized programs is key, GPCAH says.

GPCAH and other organizations are working to help residents sign up, but lawmakers have to be on board, too, they say. The bill under consideration in the Senate would prohibit the USDA from advertising SNAP, but the GPCAH report argues that ensuring that all residents have the food they need is a good investment. Preventable health care costs, lost economic productivity and poor education outcomes cost Pennsylvania more than \$6 billion each year, according to the report.

Other organizations working to reduce hunger and obesity in the region seem to agree with GPCAH's approach. Many focus on making the most out of federal programs, improving access to healthy food, providing nutrition education and advocating for policy changes. Below is a sampling of what local organizations are doing to combat hunger in the region.

Greater Philadelphia Coalition Against Hunger

GPCAH runs three programs to address hunger in Philadelphia. The first, the Hunger Fighters Network, provides more than 150 food pantries with funding and training. The SNAP Campaign assists area residents with applying for public benefits, and the Policy Center advocates for change in anti-hunger policymaking.

Nutritional Development Services

Nutritional Development Services, which is part of the Archdiocese of Philadelphia, also aims to make the most of federally-funded programs. It connects federally-funded programs with area schools, child care centers, shelters and community-based centers. In addition, it runs the Community Food Program, which ensures that donations from individuals, schools and parishes get to food pantries, soup kitchens and outreach teams.

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St. Christopher's Foundation for Children

St. Christopher's Foundation for Children runs Farm to Families, which works with community-based organizations to improve the availability and affordability of fresh food in north Philadelphia. The program also provides nutrition education, including budgeting, shopping and cooking tips. (For more on Farm to Families, see Sparking Solutions: Q&A with Jan Shaeffer, President of St. Christopher's Foundation for Children.)

Center for Hunger-Free Communities

The Center for Hunger-Free Communities is part of the Drexel University School of Public Health. The center works on four projects: Witnesses to Hunger brings mothers who know poverty first-hand into the national dialogue on hunger. Children's HealthWatch links policy to child well-being and development. The GROW Clinic serves undernourished children and their families based at St. Christopher's Hospital, and Outreach Services provides case management support and social services referrals.

Philabundance

By joining forces with the Philadelphia Food Bank, Philabundance became the area's largest hunger relief organization. The group has several programs: Fresh for All improves the accessibility of fresh produce; Community Food Center is a food pantry; Senior Programs delivers food to low-income seniors; Community Kitchen is a vocational training program that provides meals for emergency kitchens and other agencies; Grocers Against Hunger works with grocery stores to deliver unsold food to those in need; and Fare and Square opens non-profit grocery stores in areas identified by the USDA as "food deserts."

MANNA

MANNA cooks and delivers medically-appropriate meals to individuals in need. It also provides nutrition counseling to individuals with cancer, renal disease and HIV/AIDS.

The Claneil Foundation

The Claneil Foundation is a private foundation that aims to improve the health of families and communities through advancements in health and human services, a sustainable food system, education and the protection of the environment. Drexel's Center for Hunger-Free Communities is a funding recipient.

SHARE

SHARE provides nutritious food to 550 food pantries and 250 organizations each month. It is the lead agency in Philadelphia for the State Food Purchase Program and The Emergency Food Assistance Program, which use state and federal funding to provide food to pantries in Pennsylvania. SHARE also administers the St. Christopher's Foundation's Farm to Families program.

The Food Trust

The Food Trust works with Philadelphia to improve the accessibility and affordability of healthy foods. It works to improve access in schools, corner stores and grocery stores, among other places. The trust also advocates for policy change in many areas related to nutrition.

The Chester County Food Bank

The Chester County Food Bank collects, grows, processes, stores and distributes food to those who serve the hungry of Chester County. It distributes more than 1.8 million pounds of food per year to over 90 food pantries and other organizations. It works to end the cycle of hunger and poverty through nutrition-based, education-focused programs.

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Still, there is so much left to do. For a deeper look at how this issue is evolving, attend the breakout session “Hungry for Health: Strengthening the food safety net through policy and action.” Helping to ignite that conversation will be:

- Jan Shaeffer, St. Christopher’s Foundation for Children
- Laura Wall-Coalition Against Hunger
- Steveanna Wynn-SHARE
- Mariana Chilton, Drexel University
- John Weidman, The Food Trust

Further Reading

Want to dig deeper? Check out these useful resources and reports for understanding hunger and obesity in the region.

State of Hunger: Pennsylvania 2013

In this report, GPCAH examines the use of federal nutrition programs in the state. It provides four action items, recommending that stakeholders: work to raise awareness about programs like SNAP; remove barriers that keep families from accessing those programs; advocate for policies that strengthen the programs; and support legislation that invests in education and training programs so that families can afford nutritious food. The report includes a Philadelphia-specific fact sheet.

Hunger and Poverty Statistics

This report from Feeding America examines national poverty, unemployment and food insecurity rates. The organization found that while a relationship between poverty and food insecurity exists, unemployment rates are better predictors.

Join a Community Relief Movement: 2012 Philabundance Community Report

This report from Philabundance says that hunger is a community issue that needs community support. It shares stories from individuals who have used Philabundance’s services, farmers who support the organization and teachers who host food drives.

It also suggests ways that individuals, organizations and others can get involved. “There are so many ways for you to help,” the organization says. “We implore you to read their stories, get inspired, find your place and join the movement — so together we can eliminate hunger once and for all.”

Barriers to Benefits: Communication and Customer Service Problems in Pennsylvania’s Department of Public Welfare

This report from Pittsburgh-based Just Harvest reveals the difficulties that Pennsylvania residents encounter in applying for benefits from the state’s Department of Public Welfare.

The study was conducted because SNAP applicants and recipients often call Just Harvest for assistance with overcoming obstacles in obtaining and maintaining benefits through DPW, according to the report. The organization surveyed SNAP recipients and also made test calls to DPW’s help lines and assistance offices. The report calls on the state to fix the inadequacies and to be more transparent about its practices. It also asks that the federal government step in if DPW does not act quickly.

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