

Forging Forward: United We Stand



Left: Melissa Hankin, Arsenal Family and Children's Center. Right: Dr. David Hall and Rodney Jones, Sr., East Liberty Family Health Care Center.

In partnership with The Pittsburgh Foundation, TABLE Magazine explores some of the complex, intersecting issues that challenge our region. As COVID-19 job losses endure and its economic effects linger, food security, housing, health care, transportation and child care rise to the top of the list for many of our friends, neighbors, colleagues and family members. The Pittsburgh Foundation helps to fund organizations doing cutting-edge work to address these issues. In honor of their work, TABLE has made a donation to each nonprofit covered in the series. If you are able to give, we hope you will do the same!

We are standing on the precipice of monumental change in the United States. No matter where you look, COVID-19 has unearthed inequities in many areas of life that have been bubbling under the surface until now. From food insecurity plaguing communities to a loss of healthcare along with rising unemployment nationwide, it is clear that in order to climb this mountain and create a more equitable and just society that benefits the many and not just the few means that we have to work together.

In this hyper-politicized world it is easy to assume that we can't agree on anything. However, when you scratch the surface and take away the spin, it is safe to say that most people value the same things. Access to nutritious, affordable foods is important to the health and wellbeing of everyone. We need clean air and water to survive. Affordable and quality housing,

public transportation, child care, and education are parts of the fabric that keep society from fraying apart. People must be able to seek medical attention when warranted without the fear of going bankrupt. Only when these needs, among others, are met in a robust and meaningful way for everyone, can a society hope to live up to its potential: innovating, creating and dreaming for a better tomorrow.

Recognition of these intersecting issues has led TABLE Magazine and the Pittsburgh Foundation into partnership to explore and communicate them more deeply. The Forging Forward series focuses on finding solutions to the societal challenges that impact us all. As the economic fallout from Covid-19 continues to hit home due to lack of federal support, people are fending for themselves in ways that may have seemed unimaginable just six months ago.

Stepping up to the plate are nonprofits such as the East Liberty Family Health Care Center, Heritage Community Initiatives, Arsenal Family and Children's Center, and the Women's Center & Shelter of Greater Pittsburgh. With the support from the Pittsburgh Foundation, these organizations are among the many in our region ready to fill the gaps and provide aid to individuals and families in critical need.

Forging Forward began its examination with a four-part conversation focused on food justice, food heroes and the compounding issues impacting our supply chain that brings foods from farm to table. How did COVID-19 interrupt the national



food supply to our region and how can we combat this moving forward?

Local farmers took center stage to discuss the challenges facing them as they work towards providing fresh, locally sourced produce as grocery store shelves were bare for perhaps the first time in memory for many of us. Partnerships were key for many of the farmers, including Jake Kristophel, who leases protected farmland from the Western PA Conservancy.

"Being a young farmer, I would never have been able to buy 60 acres with a barn and a house with everything on it," he said. Kristophel and his partner, Desiree Sirois, run Fallen Aspen Farm and recognize that sustainable farming is the only way forward in order to serve local and regional populations.

"The great disconnect is that people don't realize or understand where their food is coming from," he added. "Back in the day, you had a big sense of community. Everyone grew their own food, had their own chickens. There was local dairy and a butcher in every single town," said Kristophel. Now with COVID-19 spreading quickly throughout communities, mass-producers are shutting down, interrupting supply chains, and leaving shelves empty. Supporting local farms has never been more critical to help end food insecurity.

But it isn't just the supply chains that are impacted. People have been

laid off at rates not seen since the Great Depression, impacting their ability to purchase foods. Other neighborhoods that have experienced food apartheid for decades are struggling even harder to find solutions in their communities.

Organizations like 412 Food Rescue have risen to the challenge with an app, providing opportunities for people to do good by delivering produce that might otherwise be thrown away to organizations and nursing homes in need. "Removing these barriers is part of our model to bring food to where people need it the most," said Leah Lizarando, CEO and co-founder of 412 Food Rescue.

Many of the circumstances that intensify food insecurity also impact access to healthcare, transportation, child care, and housing. These intersectional issues, as well as providing support that lifts people out of poverty, can create stability both in and outside of the home.

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However, since the economic collapse brought on by this global pandemic, housing has become even more unstable for many of our neighbors.

"Housing inequities have always existed for many of our clients. COVID-19 has brought these inequities into the light, and it has also exacerbated them," said Nicole Molinaro, president and CEO of the Women's Center & Shelter of Greater Pittsburgh, which has been a valued community resource for adults and children experiencing domestic violence for more than 45 years.

"Right now, we know that domestic violence is increasing in severity and frequency, though many victims are unable to reach out for help because they are trapped at home with their abusive partners due to the pandemic," said Molinaro.

During this difficult time, WC&S has

been proactively creative in adjusting programming to meet constant and changing needs as well as working collaboratively with partners like Giant Eagle and the Greater Pittsburgh Community Food Bank to reach survivors where they are.

"Our hope is that more and more survivors will reach out for help when it is safe so that they can be connected to our dedicated staff and the resources they need to start on their healing journeys, free from abuse," she added.

Recognizing our own agency and power is something that Dr. David Hall, co-founder of the East Liberty Family Health Care Center, hopes will change the ways in which we perceive and access our healthcare system. Rodney Jones, Sr., CEO of the ELFHCC stresses the need to expand our healthcare system so that everyone is covered, regardless of employment status.

What do you spend your money on to survive? Do you put food on the table or go to the doctor? For more and more Americans, this impossible question is becoming all too common. At the ELFHCC about 39% of the organization's patients are on Medicaid. "So for those that are uninsured or underinsured, income determines their chance of survival. I believe if we had everyone insured, people would take better care of themselves because they could," said Jones.

"People have pride," he said. "You have someone without insurance but needs healthcare. If they could walk in somewhere and they know they have preventative care as well as acute care, I



Left, Nicole Molinaro, Women's Center and Shelter of Greater Pittsburgh. Right, Paula McWilliams, Heritage Community Initiatives.

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believe they would be more inclined to seek it," he added.

The ELFHCC prides itself on serving everyone with or without insurance. In fact, they want to ensure that those who would normally slip through the cracks have access, so ELFHCC doesn't take more than 30% insured for that reason.

"We provide quality care to everyone, without question," added Dr. David Hall, co-founder of ELFHCC. In the future, he hopes that the issue of insurance will be resolved so that no one is left without the care they deserve, expanding Medicare or Medicaid to cover all people.

But healthcare doesn't exist in a bubble. In fact, social determinants including access to food, education, child care, transportation, and shelter all impact quality of life as well as mental and physical health.

COVID-19 has also exposed the inequities of American society, including how we access quality child care in this country. Since most child-care centers have been forced to close during the pandemic, many things have been lost according to Melissa Hankin, executive director of Arsenal Family and Children's Center. The Center focuses on building nurturing relationships with children and families, an issue that the Pittsburgh Foundation sees as vital to building strong communities.

"We specialize in active learning through play so that children can explore and create in ways that help them learn and grow more meaningfully," said Hankin. Since the pandemic began in March of 2020, children have been sequestered for the most part in the home, losing valuable time to work on developmental skills in social settings that they would otherwise receive in preschool or other community spaces.

"The inequity comes into play when we look at child-care centers that are trying to reopen," she said. Some centers cannot afford to do so because of the additional costs incurred due to COVID-19, reduced enrollment due to families lost wages, and not being able to afford to come back.

There is also the well-understandable fear of not wanting to send their children back to a child-care center during a pandemic. Some staff has had to stay home, as well, to take care of their own families or find other employment during this time, making it challenging for centers

to open again. If they themselves are immunocompromised, it is not feasible for them to return to such a high-risk environment, especially when so many do not have adequate, or any, health insurance.

Hankin worries that without child care, children will not be prepared with the skills they need for the future. "This is not good for children, families, or the economy as a whole," she notes. She hopes that moving forward, our government will invest in helping centers recover to be a place of support for families trying to juggle everything on an even tighter budget than before.

"The barriers for all families to access child care need to be addressed and fixed. We need a sustainable plan to secure high-quality care in America," said Hankin.

As children age into the educational system, which has also been greatly impacted by COVID-19, it can be disheartening to think about what barriers many communities may face come this fall. Heritage Community Initiatives, based in Braddock, is committed to enable individuals and organizations to improve transportation, health, education, economic strength, and social vitality. This intersectional approach allows the organization to support families in a multitude of ways, providing support as needed on a case-by-case basis.

"There are a lot of folks that assume that people have access to vehicles. That is not the case," said Paula McWilliams, president & CEO. "If you put yourself in somebody's shoes, think about what it would be like if you didn't have a car or someone who could drive you to doctor appointments, grocery stores or job interviews. How would you get there if it took three buses or the bus didn't run to where you live?" The organization provides van service that can serve 14 people at a time for just 25 cents per ride.

She reminds us that regardless of zip code, tens of thousands of our neighbors are without transportation every day, and Heritage works to fill the gaps. "Access to transportation is fundamentally important when talking about serving communities," she added.

And when it comes to serving communities, the Pittsburgh Foundation recognizes the challenges that so many

are facing during these uncertain and unprecedented times. Regardless of background or political ideology, it is important that we stand together to help our neighbors in need. If you are able to contribute to the Foundation's Critical Needs fund, know that you are helping people in your own backyard.

"I am a mother of 3 small children and live where there are no busses. I am pleased Heritage continues as usual so I can keep my job at McDonald's in Monroeville," said a rider from Wall, PA.

When we all work together, treat one another with dignity and respect, and recognize ourselves in each other, we can make great strides towards equity and a better future for us all.

RESOURCES:

Arsenal Family and Children's Center
arsenalfamily.org

Black Urban Gardeners and Farmers
bugfpc.com

East Liberty Family Health Care Center
elfhcc.com

Heritage Community Initiatives
heritageserves.org

Kitchen of Grace
thekitchenofgracepgh.com

Northside Common Ministries
ncmin.org

The Pittsburgh Foundation
pittsburghfoundation.org

Repair the World Pittsburgh
wererepair.org/pittsburgh/

Western Pennsylvania Conservancy
westernpaconservancy.org

Women's Center and Shelter of Greater Pittsburgh
wcspittsburgh.org

412 Food Rescue
412foodrescue.org