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Beginning of a New Change? How Pittsburgh Regional Transit's Pilot Program Could Improve Food Insecurity In The Hill District

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CAPTION: A photograph of a sunny summer afternoon in Pittsburgh showing three Pittsburgh Regional Transit buses carrying passengers to their desired destinations throughout the city and greater Pittsburgh Area.



ABSTRACT:

Food insecurity, a state of not having sufficient access to quality nutrition that inhibits one's livelihood, has become a growing national issue as a result of socioeconomic inequities, the COVID-19 pandemic, and the state of the national economy, among other issues. Although governmental food assistance programs significantly improve food access and quality issues, many food insecure individuals still suffer from malnutrition as a result of a lack of access to nutritious food because healthier foods have a much greater cost than those considered unhealthy. As a result, many opt for unhealthy options at the supermarket in order to get more total meals from their benefits and avoid being hungry for an extended period of time. While this solves their short-term hunger, it presents a cascade of potential long-term health problems, often in the form of non-communicable diseases related to poor diet such as high blood pressure, heart disease, and diabetes, which threaten the lives of those financially unable to easily make healthy dietary choices. In Pittsburgh's Hill District, the local community has been without a grocery store for the better part of the last 30 years (all years but 2013-2019), which has created a need for bus transportation to grocery stores. Unfortunately, utilizing the bus as a consistent method of transportation is likely too expensive to be feasible for food insecure populations. An annual bus pass, according to Pittsburgh Regional Transit, costs \$1072.50, and individual rides cost \$5.50 round trip at the full rate.¹ For individuals making necessary, critical decisions on how to most effectively spend their money, this added constraint brought upon by bus transportation costs presents a direct hindrance to the health of Hill District residents. In order to promote better health and well-being for this population, a reduced rate or free of charge bus transportation system is necessary to ensure better nutrition, health outcomes, and livelihood for food insecure residents in Pittsburgh's Hill District.

KEYWORDS: food insecurity, food access, public health, public transportation

Though hunger and food insecurity are common in the United States, having consistent access to healthy food is a fundamental human right that should be protected by national and local

governments. The U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) describes food security as “access by all people at all times to enough food for an active, healthy life.” With this in mind, food insecurity, which refers to the lack of access to sufficient, safe, and nutritious food for an active and healthy life, is a persistent problem in America.² In 2020, about 14 million households did not have enough food to meet their needs, and this affected their health and well-being accordingly.³ Despite being one of the most developed nations in the world, millions of Americans struggle to put food on the table, with more than 35 million individuals experiencing food insecurity in 2021.³ On top of that, more than 7 million households were still food insecure even though they received federal food and nutrition benefits through assistance programs.³

Food insecurity, and hunger more broadly, plays a vital role in how individuals function in their local, regional, and national societies. Prolonged food insecurity can indirectly lead to increased healthcare expenses, greater dependence on government programs, and extended bouts of economic instability. The COVID-19 pandemic has further exacerbated this cascade of issues experienced by the food insecure, with millions losing their jobs and facing economic hardship. Additionally, pandemic-induced lockdowns have further worsened the U.S. hunger crisis by disrupting the food supply chain, leading to food accessibility issues and increased prices.^{3,5}

Notably, food insecurity disproportionately affects certain communities, including predominantly African American communities, rural communities, and single parents. African American and Hispanic households are twice as likely to suffer from food insecurity compared to white households.^{4,5} The wide discrepancies in food insecurity observed between populations can be attributed to a never-ending list of systemic, institutionalized issues that are endemic to American society. Specifically, one could cite inappropriate government budgeting, race and sex-based wage inequality, general socioeconomic inequity, and much more as major contributors to the population stratification of food insecurity.

Additionally, a common misconception is food insecurity is a relatively stagnant, constant struggle for those affected. In reality, most food insecure households are not without food all the time, but food insecurity is reflected in the purchasing choices households need to make daily. Many families have to choose between buying food or paying for other necessities such as rent, healthcare, and transportation. The high cost of healthy food options, such as fresh fruits and vegetables, compounds this strain by additionally cutting off reasonable access to healthy food, which leads to forced, poor dietary choices as explained previously.^{3,6}

Fortunately, there are numerous local nonprofit and government initiatives aimed at addressing food insecurity in America. One of the largest anti-hunger programs is the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), which increases the food budget of vulnerable families so they can access proper nutrition. Programs like this provide food assistance to low-income households, school children, pregnant women, and infants. Non-profit organizations play a crucial role in addressing food insecurity by serving as reliable, local community healthy food sources. For example, food banks and soup kitchens generally prepare and distribute meals to those in need, while community gardens promote local food production and access to fresh produce. Unfortunately, many nonprofit and government programs and organizations are often underfunded and face systemic challenges in

reaching all eligible individuals, which greatly limits their impact when looking at the issue from a state or nation-wide view. For example, the SNAP benefit per meal does not cover the average cost of a meal in most regions of the country because the maximum benefit amounts are fixed across the United States despite differences in food costs.^{2,4} This has dire consequences for urban dwellers, where the cost of goods is often higher on average than in suburban or rural areas. Pittsburgh's Hill District community is no exception to this rule as they have faced a continuous, sharp decline in food quality and access over most of the last century due to the plethora of reasons mentioned thus far.

Within Pittsburgh, the Hill District is a low-income, predominantly African American community near downtown that has been disproportionately plagued by food insecurity in light of the COVID-19 pandemic, inflation, and socioeconomic inequities. Historically speaking, the Hill District was a bustling cultural hub featuring vibrant local businesses, great night life, and a tight knit community. In the 1950s, though, the city of Pittsburgh began the process of "urban renewal" and the building of the Civic Arena, which notably resulted in the displacement of 1,500 families from the Lower Hill through eminent domain.⁷ This decision had catastrophic effects on the entire Hill District and shaped the community's actions throughout the following few decades. Many were forced to relocate to entirely new neighborhoods, find new professions, permanently close businesses, and build new personal and professional relationships as a result of the changing infrastructure around them. By 2010, the Hill had lost about 80% of its total population and 40% of its residents fell below the poverty line, a staggering contrast from the once lively community it was.⁷

At the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020, an assessment of food insecurity using the Food Abundance Index (FAI) conducted by researchers at the University of Pittsburgh described the Hill District as a "food desert" - an area that has limited access to affordable and nutritious food.⁸ Namely, Hill District residents lack a grocery store within convenient walking distance due to the unique geography of the community, which is situated on a steep plateau entrenched within city limits. While there are an abundance of local volunteer organizations throughout Uptown and the Hill District addressing food insecurity, there is simply still not enough food to go around to meet the needs of the food insecure population.

Local soup kitchens, such as Jubilee Kitchen, which is situated between Uptown and the Lower Hill, help to combat the lack of access to quality, nutritious food by offering fresh, hot meals daily. A consistent volunteer at Jubilee Kitchen, Angel, described Jubilee as "less crowded" at the beginning of each month, but quickly becomes "busy" following the first week as individuals use up their SNAP benefits. Oftentimes, there is simply not enough nutritious food to go around to all of those in need, especially near the end of the month. It is commonplace to see extremely long lines extending from soup kitchens at the end of the month where many individuals may leave unfed. On the other hand, the beginning of the month is often slow, with food regularly being discarded. In other words, there is a disconnect between the resources being provided and the timing of the needs of the population. Due to the sheer magnitude of food insecure households in the Hill District, organizations like Jubilee Kitchen can only offer a temporary fix to their community's chronic issues with food access and quality.

According to *Applied Economic Perspectives and Policy*, food access in the context of food insecurity can be measured by both affordability and physical access.⁹ In the case of the Hill District,

both of these markers represent very pertinent issues regarding food access. Not only is healthy, nutritious food unaffordable, even for those receiving government assistance, there are also physical barriers to convenient grocery store access following the closing of the Hill District SHOP 'n SAVE in 2019, which was the only grocery store within convenient walking distance of the community. In fact, the Hill District has been without a grocery store for the better part of the last thirty years, creating a longstanding need for affordable bus transportation to grocery stores. A prospective cohort study of Hill District residents' grocery shopping choices throughout the 2010s revealed the largest proportion (63%) of the community's residents bought their groceries at Giant Eagle in South Side, likely due to the relative affordability compared to grocery stores located in the Oakland, Squirrel Hill, and Shadyside neighborhoods.¹⁰ Because of the Hill's unique geography and distance from South Side, walking to the grocery store would involve a 1.5-mile trek down the hill crossing the Birmingham bridge, and walking through stretches of busy highways to reach the final destination. When combined with the 1.5-mile trip back up the hill, with groceries in tow, a grocery store trip on foot as a Hill District resident sounds like an arduous, nearly impossible feat, supporting the need for safe, affordable bus access.

While Pittsburgh Regional Transit offers multiple bus routes from the Hill District directly passing the South Side Giant Eagle, the cost of using public transportation is likely too great for those suffering from food insecurity. An annual bus pass, according to Pittsburgh Regional Transit, costs \$1,072.50, and individual rides cost \$5.50 round trip at the full rate.¹ For food insecure individuals and families in the Hill District, the cost of transportation to the grocery store creates additional constraints on their budgets and presents a significant barrier towards reliably accessing healthy food options.

Although Pittsburgh Regional Transit has expensive individual fares, there are policies and programs in place that make bus transportation more affordable for individuals requiring financial assistance. Pittsburgh Regional Transit offers reduced-rate annual, monthly, and weekly passes that are more affordable for individuals utilizing public transportation regularly.¹ Furthermore, children who are 5 and under ride free, and children ages 6-11 ride for half of the regular fare, which allows parents to bring their small children with them when using public transportation to grocery shop.¹ Additionally, senior citizens ride for free, making it easier for the older population to access groceries.¹ However, Pittsburgh Regional Transit's existing policies do not sufficiently help individuals under 65 dealing with food insecurity and need additional discounts to further assist this population. Many individuals who are on SNAP benefits use public transportation and have difficulty paying for simple necessities. Reducing the cost of public transportation for these individuals is one way to improve their lives and make sure they have access to food and other necessities.

A new program that could address the concerns of food insecure public transportation users is the Allegheny County Discounted Fares Pilot Program. This program, which started in November 2022, provides qualifying SNAP recipients less than 65 years of age with a reduced rate of bus transportation.¹¹ Head of the Pittsburghers for Public Transit, Laura Wiens, happily stated "we know that for low-income and very low-income households, even a half-fare discount or other fare discount can be an insurmountable barrier to access to transportation."¹¹ Reduced rates keep more money in the pockets of low-income citizens who desperately need transportation for food. In addition, this program

will likely not be costly for the city because the individuals targeted for this program would have better long-term health outcomes if they receive aid. A healthier, well-fed population has fewer health issues, greater productivity, and a greater sense of happiness, which could all result in a population-level decrease in pharmaceutical and medical expenses, among other benefits. Along with meeting their basic needs, this program has the potential to catalyze a revitalization of the Hill District as their constituents' livelihoods improve directly as a result of the program. Many city officials and residents are hopeful this will serve as a preliminary step in the right direction to begin formally assisting the food insecure population in the Hill District, which can pave the way for additional legislation in the future.

The challenges Hill District residents have faced and continue to face surrounding food are immense, such as limited grocery store access, expensive transportation options, displacement in the 1950s due to eminent domain, and many more. Although there are many local nonprofits, including soup kitchens and produce gardens, there has not been a formal city initiative to address these issues specifically within the Hill District. To remedy these long standing issues, the Allegheny County Discounted Fares Pilot Program aims to consistently help those with food insecurity issues in Pittsburgh's low-income neighborhoods, including the Hill District, by providing significantly reduced rates on bus fares for low-income households and individuals. Easy to access, affordable transportation allows for more nutritious food choices by this vulnerable population. With less expenses going to transportation, individuals can spend more on healthy foods and prioritize their health and well-being more than was previously possible. As "Just Harvest" spokesperson Emily Cleath said, "If they could just show their SNAP card on a bus, it's a huge stress relief for them, to be able to not have to budget to go get food."¹¹ The pilot program, intended to last a year, has approved 5,854 people for the program, all of whom are receiving a public transportation discount.¹¹ Though the results of the program have yet to be published, we support and predict this approach will have a lasting positive effect that Pittsburgh can be proud of. This program, combined with raising awareness to the importance of proper nutrition and good health, can help to combat food insecurity struggles in the Hill District and foster hope for this population for years to come.

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