

Developing Future Pittsburgh Food Equity Ambassadors: Program Review and Recommendations

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Background on the Pittsburgh Food Equity Ambassador Program


One in five Pittsburgh residents struggle to regularly provide healthy, adequate meals for themselves or their families. This is otherwise known as an individual or family being “food insecure” or experiencing food insecurity. There can be multiple factors that contribute to food insecurity. Still, when more than 20% of Pittsburghers experience food insecurity, disproportionately affecting People of Color, specifically people that identify as Black, it is clear there are systemic problems that require the reimagination of current systems and implementation of new, inclusive policies. The Pittsburgh City Council declared racism a public health crisis in the greater Pittsburgh area. Their declaration is supported by the findings that there is more than six times the number of Black Pittsburghers living in Healthy Food Priority Areas than White Pittsburghers (2020 FeedPGHReport).



Healthy Food Priority Areas (HFPA) are parts of a city that are prioritized for action against food insecurity by the recommendation of community groups and food equity advisors, to shift the framing of its areas of high food insecurity away from the “food desert” narrative (Johns Hopkins Center for a Livable Future, 2018). Initially developed in Baltimore in 2018, the HFPA designation helped city planners determine targeted investment strategies and specialized zoning rules (Baltimore Department of Planning, 2016). In Pittsburgh specifically, census data was mapped and tracked to identify areas considered Healthy Food Priority Areas in food availability, food access, and food utilization.


Food Availability was calculated by considering the percentage of households with no vehicles and the area of each census tract considered to be beyond reasonable walking distance from a food market for small, fresh food markets. Food Access was determined by the percentage of households with an income 185% below the poverty line. The Food Utilization Score is rates of adult coronary heart disease, obesity, and diabetes were considered in equal part to determine Food Utilization. The score ranged from 0 - 30 and areas higher than the score of 18 were then identified as HFPAs.

The Pittsburgh Food Policy Council aims to build a food system that benefits the Pittsburgh community, economy, and environment in ways that are just, equitable, and sustainable. They assemble over 100 individual members and organizations to reach community-led solutions and policies that promote a local and resilient food system, sustainable agriculture, equitable development, and access to nourishing food. As a collective, they coordinate across food system sectors and seek policy and programmatic solutions that benefit the Greater Pittsburgh region.



In joint action with the national [Healthiest Cities and Counties Challenge](#), The Pittsburgh Food Policy Council worked with the City of Pittsburgh, Allegheny County Health Department, American Heart Association -- Greater Pittsburgh, and One Pennsylvania to design and pilot two cohorts of the Pittsburgh Food Equity Ambassador program, which were hosted virtually in 2021 and 2022. The Ambassador program centered on the voices and leadership of community members who have had lived experiences with food inequity.

The Pittsburgh Food Policy Council received applications from Pittsburgh community members that wanted to become Pittsburgh Food Equity Ambassadors. The Pittsburgh Food Policy Council prioritized people who identify as People of Color, had lived experience with food insecurity, and lived in Healthy Food Priority Areas. They received dozens of applications from individuals across the greater Pittsburgh area to participate in the program. The screening process for applicants asked about their residence, demographics, experience with food insecurity, and the use of SNAP and similar resources. Selected applicants were provided a stipend as they attended sessions with policymakers, food system leaders, and local elected officials to increase their knowledge and work alongside and advocate for a more resilient food system to meet the needs of all Pittsburghers. Ten sessions were held biweekly over five months, in the sessions they shared their experiences and built upon the first Cohort's policy recommendations. Ambassadors were awarded a total of \$600 for their participation in the program and extracurricular engagement. A funded facilitator assisted the ambassadors throughout their participation in the program.




Over 20 Ambassadors, largely from Healthy Food Priority Areas, completed the program which increased their leadership skills to collaborate in a diverse group and participate in creating policy solutions alongside the local government. The Pittsburgh Food Equity Ambassadors contributed significantly to each others' knowledge and community as well. Ambassadors shared that the diversity of their peers cultivated great dialogue and insight into the intersectionality of their family stories and upbringing, ethnic background, and economic status. This dialogue allowed them to expand their views as they related it to other individuals or families experiencing similar challenges in their neighborhoods or places they volunteered at.

The first cohort of Ambassadors set forth a detailed list of six action items for the Mayor and Council to act upon. This ranged from improving the quality and affordable buying options for residents to low-income bus fare programs for folks enrolled in SNAP. The first cohort of Ambassadors laid significant groundwork for the second cohort to build off of. The second cohort of Ambassadors moved forward with the action items and additionally held a Public Hearing to call for the Mayor and Council to pass a \$10 Million Food Justice Fund.

Pittsburgh Food Policy and Collaborating Organizations: Seeking Food Justice Fund

The second cohort channeled their efforts into advocacy, building off of the previous six recommended action items drafted by the first cohort. Therefore they channeled their energy into raising awareness about the Food Justice Fund and setting up a Public Hearing. The plan for the Pittsburgh Food Justice Fund will increase public investment in a just, equitable, and sustainable food system that supports the local communities, economy, and environment. The fund prioritizes investments in grassroots efforts to address food apartheid, centering those most




impacted. The Food Justice Fund Committee collaborates with the community and organizations across multiple sectors aiming to reduce food waste, aggregate local farm fresh foods for distribution to corner stores and bodegas for increased access, and to facilitate connections throughout the food system (such as local farmers growing food for local institutions), among many other great initiatives.

The Pittsburgh Food Policy Council, Pittsburgh Food Equity Ambassadors, and several other community members gathered in unity in September of 2022 to call for a \$10 Million Food Justice Fund to be allocated in the City of Pittsburgh 2023 budget. Abdul Kadir Charombo, a Pittsburgh Food Equity Ambassador, who grew up a farmer alongside his parents said in his testimony “We also need to see more food cultural tradition as part of protecting our identity of food as Medicine... I’m here to call [for the] \$10 Million to create the Pittsburgh Food Justice Fund [to incorporate food as medicine]. In December 2022 the Mayor and Council approved a 3 Million Dollar investment in a Food Justice Fund. The collaboration of community members and Ambassadors demonstrates the interest and need for improving local food systems in Pittsburgh. The Pittsburgh Food Policy Council remains engaged with community members and partners for the design and implementation of the use of allotted funds. The success of the public hearing demonstrates the power of passionate and informed community members who envision an accessible-for-all food system.

Analysis of Participant Evaluations and Interviews


Evaluating the previous Pittsburgh Food Equity Ambassador program, I communicated with staff at the Pittsburgh Food Policy Council, former Pittsburgh Food Equity Ambassadors,



and community partners. The goal was to gain feedback on the program and identify ways to improve the design of the program in the future with a focus on being leadership-focused and promoting the long-term engagement of the Ambassadors. I requested feedback from Ambassadors on curriculum, leadership styles, diversity of colleagues, and realistic participation of community members.

I contacted former Ambassadors from the second cohort for interviews to evaluate their insight, suggestions for improvement, and concerns. The Ambassadors contacted were those who completed the second cohort completely by attending all sessions and extracurricular activities. The interviews were one-on-one discussions in which I asked the former Ambassadors a series of questions in reference to their experience and knowledge gained. I informed them that in future cohorts when funding becomes available, it would not be replicated as executed previously and will be more leadership-focused. Asking them to ponder the potential of the program and the capabilities of Ambassadors provided vital perspectives for the improvement in the design of the program.

The Ambassadors, generally, had shared that they benefited from the program and learned more about the resources and challenges in their community. All former Ambassadors praised the Pittsburgh Food Policy Council's efforts in selecting a diverse and representative cohort, sharing that they felt the diversity of ethnic background, age, and city district positively impacted their knowledge and engagement. They each shared that they gained a better understanding of the greater Pittsburgh food system and the available local resources. Additionally, they all shared how participating in the Ambassador program encouraged them to




continue to be involved in the community through attending or listening to local government meetings, volunteering, and contacting elected officials on issues related to food justice.

Some Ambassadors expressed that there were specific topics of discussion that stood out to them or they had not heard of before. Many Ambassadors had expressed interest in Urban Agriculture in the Greater Pittsburgh area and wanted to continue to learn more about it and how they can get involved. Another popular topic among the Ambassadors was how someone can grow their own food in their garden, and participate in, or start a local community garden. One Ambassador shared that gaining knowledge of how “food deserts” came to be in Pittsburgh gave them a better understanding of the geopolitics affecting people in the community.

Program improvement was a bit tricky as many of the Ambassadors liked the program as-is. However, when reminded that the PFPC is seeking to redesign the structure of the program, interviewees began to dig deeper and share some suggestions. Though they were understanding of the risks imposed by the COVID-19 Pandemic, many say hosting the program fully remotely sometimes inhibited their engagement or caused frustration as some people spoke repeatedly and folks didn’t feel they could say what they wanted to due to time constraints. Just over half of the Ambassadors interviewed cited that the conversational nature of meetings led by the Ambassadors made them feel they did not receive enough information from presenters because their fellow Ambassadors spoke too much, and though the discussion is a good thing, it also felt as though not enough information was received from presenters and time ran out before committing to action regarding the subjects discussed.

Accountability and challenging peers to get out of their comfort zones to engage in conversation was shared sentiment among them. They also added that responsibility for



communication and communication between the Ambassadors should be enforced. Clarity of the role of the Ambassadors, what they can and cannot do in the role, and who they should reach out to, was also repeated as a suggestion for improvement. They shared that this would allow a better understanding of what attainable goals would be for the Ambassadors to operate as extensions of the Pittsburgh Food Policy Council.

One of the desired takeaways of these interviews is feedback on how the design of the program can be improved and how to maintain the permanent engagement of Ambassadors after they graduate from the program. Some feedback included a more in-depth understanding of the roles of Ambassadors, biweekly meetings after the program ends on events or pressing issues in the community, goal setting on how to respond to issues in their communities, and maintaining a direction of progress. They added that focusing on leadership skills such as public speaking, adding action to their opinions and concerns, connectivity, and good communication would be beneficial for their personal development and in their roles as ambassadors.


Most, if not all, shared that they want to maintain long-term involvement with the Pittsburgh Food Policy Council. They shared that the knowledge they gained and an understanding of the collaborating organizations working to end food apartheid and improve access is inspiring to them to continue to be engaged. They reiterated that clarity on their role as Ambassadors after the program ends would be highly beneficial in understanding how they can support the shared interest of food equity efforts by PFPC and their personal capacities. Suggestions included leadership workshops during and after the program, the detailed role of Ambassadors' capabilities, biweekly meetings on goal setting, and check-in on their progress.



Key Insights and Recommendations

Thankfully, the former Ambassadors took time out of their busy schedules to meet with me to discuss how the Ambassador program can be improved in design and execution. Their responses were thoughtful and realistic considering the constraints such as the availability of fellow Ambassadors, staffing, and health and safety measures related to the Pandemic. It speaks volumes of the attention to detail by the Pittsburgh Food Policy Council and the quality of the program that a pilot program with such lofty goals was highly successful. The success of this program can have different measurements, however, maintaining interest and increased community involvement, *and* having multiple former Ambassadors and community members champion a Food Justice Fund into a 3 Million dollar reality is an incredible feat from a brave idea.

The program's design can be improved by fostering leadership skills and providing actionable items, in addition to the information provided to the Ambassadors. Hosting leadership workshops as part of the curriculum, or additional sessions can provide the opportunity for practicing public speaking, testimonial writing, listening and communication skills, and coalition building, in a safe space. Many Ambassadors may not have had an opportunity before participating in the program to speak at a public community or City Council meeting or to work across the aisle with different organizations to find a middle ground and collaborate. Having these sessions as part of the program will increase the confidence of Ambassadors to reach out to their community, their elected officials, and community organizations to support food justice in Pittsburgh through action. Providing actionable items, such as practicing writing a testimony, or calling their local elected officials' office to share concerns, or encouraging a community




organization to sign on to a proposal will allow them to utilize the means available to them to create positive change.

Establishing a clear and concise “job description” enables Ambassadors to work within a scope that promotes long-term engagement with the Pittsburgh Food Policy Council and the community. Former Ambassadors shared that they have an interest in continuing to affiliate with the Pittsburgh Food Policy Council. By creating a job description of the responsibilities and goals of the Ambassador program, Ambassadors will work within the framework to expand their skill set and participate in meetings and community events.

Engaging the Pittsburgh Food Equity Ambassadors long-term can look different for individuals. Some Ambassadors expressed wanting to further their education on the subjects discussed during the program while others were interested in volunteering at local organizations. Few shared wanting to receive stipends if there were ongoing tasks to be completed, while others were interested in participating in a volunteer capacity. Hosting monthly Ambassador meetings of ongoing initiatives by PFPC, available volunteer opportunities in the community, and upcoming events and City Council meetings with food justice items on the agenda can be a great way to keep former Ambassadors engaged in ending food insecurity.

Proposal and Strategy for Implementation

The Program budget will need to increase in future iterations of the Ambassador program. Due to repeated expressed interest in hosting meetings in person, travel costs, supplies, and possible rental of locations will likely be required to maintain in-person meetings throughout the Ambassador program. Increasing partnerships and staffing may also be required which would




require additional funds. Potentially factoring in an Ambassador program completion ceremony or funds to donate to a community resource as a cohort may also be beneficial. Factoring the above reasons along with fringe benefits and stipends, my suggested budget would be \$60,000 to cover inflation and an increase in expenses.

The proposed future, leadership-focused Ambassador program should have a detailed description of duties and responsibilities, that can be measured by outlined goals, the requirement of hours contributed, and attainable end-of-cohort project within a specified timeframe. This can be done in various ways but ultimately provide the Ambassadors with a reference point of expectations and resources to accomplish their end goal(s). The Pittsburgh Food Policy Council should have a metric with clearly defined expectations in which they hold Ambassadors accountable, perhaps adjusting expectations for paid and unpaid personnel.

The recommended proposal for retaining long-term engagement with Ambassadors, irrespective of available funds is the following: creating a detailed Pittsburgh Food Equity Ambassador role with responsibilities including regular attendance to meetings held by PFPC for Ambassador involvement, participating in local organization meetings that push forward food equity policy to local and state elected offices, raising awareness in their local districts and collaborating with other Ambassadors or community members to create a project or initiative to benefit the community. Ambassadors that maintain long-term involvement in this capacity will undoubtedly build coalitions and bridge gaps in their community creating a stronger network for the Pittsburgh Food Policy Council and more empowered Pittsburghers.

The projects can vary based on respective district or community needs. However, an example of the proposal in action is that set up on the “job description” for the Ambassadors,




they will participate in regularly scheduled meetings with the PFPC to be aware of initiatives in the community and policies being pushed to reach elected officials, and from there will raise awareness by hosting meetings at their local library, coffee shop, or school. This outreach initiative will be a catalyst for community members to be informed and engaged, and ideally, contact their local leaders and community organizations to get on board in pushing forward just food policies. Ambassadors can be compensated by the PFPC based on metrics of reviewing efforts of raising awareness in the community and efforts to engage community members for set topics, within a timeframe previously set by the PFPC.

Financial Sustainability of PFEA

The Pittsburgh Food Policy Council members are pioneers, in many ways, including the Pittsburgh Food Equity Program. Though it is generally a low-cost implementation of the program it can present a challenge to maintain ongoing, steady funding to run the Ambassador program annually. As with many nonprofit organizations seeking funding, research is required on available grants and funding opportunities. With the direction of my supervisor, I sought out local and national funding streams to sustain the Pittsburgh Food Equity Ambassador program.


Often the first thought is to seek out Government funding through grants. There is an exceptional amount of grants available listed on [Grants.Gov](https://www.Grants.Gov). Although the long list of grants may be intimidating to search through, fine-tuning the use of keywords and qualifiers can be a significant help in determining which grants can be applied for. Applying for as many as possible as they relate to the purpose can increase the chances of qualifying for a grant.



The Pittsburgh Foundation is a local philanthropic organization that aims to connect donors to the community. The Pittsburgh Foundation has scholarships, grants, and crowdfunding opportunities available for local nonprofit organizations and businesses. They are currently rolling out information for the 2023 grant cycle. However, they have a [Small and Mighty Grant](#) for local organizations that may have otherwise faced obstacles in securing funding or were overlooked. The 2021 awardees also received support during 2022, which if repeated, would provide Ambassador program funding for up to two years.

Walmart provides local Community Grants with awards up to \$5,000. Applying for a [Walmart Community Grant](#) can allow the PFPC team as supplemental funding can allow wiggle room for incidental expenses or be the difference of accepting additional Ambassador(s) to expand the program. The grants sought to fund the Food Equity Ambassador program will overlap for many of the funding areas that Walmart is grant-eligible including Community and Economic Development, Diversity and Inclusion, Education, Hunger Relief and Healthy Eating. The Pgh Food Team can apply for up to 25 grants within a grant Cycle. The 2023 grant Cycle should open in February 2023.

Feeding America supports local, community-led solutions to end hunger through its [Food Security Equity Impact Fund](#). There is great flexibility in the proposal of the application, which can continue to support ongoing efforts or new ones. The proposal guide highlights that the organization should involve individuals most impacted by food insecurity to create a more just



food system. This is a core value of the Pittsburgh Food Equity Ambassador program and they would be a great fit for a grant. Sustaining programs through the Implementation grant can receive up to \$500,000. The Pgh Food Team will need to become a partner or collaborate with a Feeding America Member to apply for this grant.

[The Kroger Co. Zero Hunger | Zero Waste Foundation's Innovation Fund](#) provides Charitable Funds to organizations and nonprofits. Kroger Co. Zero Hunger provides grants to community organizations that help in a variety of ways including increasing nutrition information and access to healthier foods. The Ambassador Program reflects this initiative because it engages local individuals who have been impacted by food insecurity and/or hunger and provides education on available resources, local food initiatives, and nutrition. Applications can be submitted by creating an account on their website.

It is a good practice for organizations to diversify their streams of income. Therefore, a recommendation for the Pittsburgh Food Policy Council is to apply for Government grants and one or more of the above-mentioned organizations. Additionally, the Pittsburgh Food Policy Council can host crowdfunding online by reaching out to their network of donors or hosting a fundraiser to meet new donors to the organization.

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