

## **A Ray of Hope in Appalachia: Combating Food Insecurity through Community Collaboration**

Amidst the picturesque landscapes of Appalachia, a silent crisis – food insecurity – persists. Despite the region's natural abundance, a significant number of its inhabitants, particularly in Ohio's rural areas, grapple with accessing healthful food.

Data from the Ohio Department of Health and the Ohio Department of Agriculture underscores the extent of food insecurity, defined as inconsistent access to adequate nutritious food for leading a healthy life. The contributing factors are multifaceted, encompassing socio-economic issues, transportation hindrances, and scarcity of supermarkets.

However, amidst these challenges, hope springs anew.

A groundbreaking food initiative is taking root in the region, thanks to the collective efforts of the Southeast Regional and Community Health (S.E.A.R.C.H.) Program of the Jackson County Health Department, the local group The Big Bend Beardsmen, and Rio Grande University. A key actor in this enterprise is Sam Canterbury, a Community Health Worker (CHW).

Community Health Workers, like Sam, serve as liaisons between health services and the community, to facilitate access to services and improve the quality and cultural competence of service delivery. Their roles are crucial in addressing social determinants of health, of which food security is a major component.

A focal point of the initiative is the establishment of a "grab and go pantry," aimed at providing immediate access to nutritious food for those in need. Recognizing the specific pressures faced by students, the program also provides hot meals at least once a month, a welcome relief during academically intensive periods.

The initiative made a remarkable stride with its first event, "Donate a Lunch, Help a Bunch." Community members were encouraged to donate the cost of their lunch to the cause. In reciprocation, the initiative provided students with free hot meals during their final exam week. This event not only met immediate needs but also enhanced a sense of community solidarity.

Michelle Kennedy, the Administrator at the Meigs Center, is a driving force behind these efforts. Born and raised in Meigs County, Kennedy understands the importance of coupling education with nutrition. She believes that these components are fundamental to community success and ensures that this philosophy underpins the initiative.

While the path to completely eradicating food insecurity in Appalachia is undoubtedly long, the dedicated endeavors of individuals and groups like Sam Canterbury, The Big Bend Beardsmen, and the S.E.A.R.C.H. Program are kindling hope.

Addressing food insecurity requires more than simply supplying food; it demands nurturing community resilience, understanding specific needs, and promoting sustainable changes. By consolidating resources and expertise, this new food initiative is making headway, one meal at a time. As community support continues, the prospect of an Appalachia free from the worries of the next meal becomes increasingly viable.

Sam Canterbury, CHW, Sam is working via a grant obtained by the Jackson County, OH Health Department to benefit regional residents including Meigs Countians.

