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Preventing homelessness

The Urban League of Greater Pittsburgh (ULGP) was founded to help Black communities become economically self-reliant and empowered through education, health, quality of life, civic engagement, and civil rights and racial justice.

One of the most fundamental of all human rights is the right to a safe, secure home, which our Constitution protects under the Fifth Amendment.

As a HUD-certified housing counseling agency, the Urban League of Greater Pittsburgh in partnership with numerous organizations in our region, collaborate to offer programs that serve as structural interventions for preventing homelessness and keeping families together.

These programs are intended to help people not just survive but thrive.

Under the leadership of

Richard Morris, Director of Housing, the ULGP helps people:

Mortgage Foreclosure
ULGP staff work with homeowners who are in — or close to — foreclosure. “We serve as counselors to people who are overwhelmed by the thought of losing their homes,” says Richard. “We advise them about and help them file paperwork for the PA Homeowner’s Assistance fund

which is a grant program that helps homeowners pay their delinquent mortgage payments.

Homeownership and Eviction Prevention

Richard and his team hold monthly home ownership workshops for first-time homebuyers and young women. The all-day programs take place on Saturdays and feature leaders from the city’s Fair Housing Partnership, the PA Housing Finance Agency, local banks, realtors, and other experts.

One-on-one counseling is also available as is help with paperwork, which can be daunting for many people. “Richard and his team are always finding creative,

respectful ways to help people achieve home ownership,” says Carlos T. Carter, ULGP President & CEO.

One of the most creative and effective is a Financial Health Toolkit which highlights easy-to-use and affordable apps and websites that can help people save money, establish credit, and work within a budget. “We want individuals and families to know about and use everything that’s out there to achieve financial health,” explains Richard.

Rental assistance for families and individuals who are currently homeless is also available for things like a security deposit or initial rent,” he adds.

Even more important

than helping people find, obtain, and save and maintain homes, is the spirit in which the work is done. “Richard and his team are very good at treating everyone we serve with dignity and love,” says Carlos.

For Richard, the work is part of a greater plan. “I believe God gives each one of us a purpose,” he states. “Mine is to help people with kindness.”

For more information about all the ULGP programs — housing (and hunger services), economic self-reliance, youth leadership development, family support centers, and leadership and advocacy — visit the ULGP website or call 412.227.4802.

Stopping the disease of violence

At the University of Pittsburgh, Professor Richard Garland, Behavioral and Community Health Sciences (BCHS), believes our country suffers from the disease of violence and he’s made it his mission to foster collaboration that can help stop its transmission in Pittsburgh.

Richard serves as the Director of the BCHS Center for Healthy Equity’s Violence Preventive Initiative. He oversees training, data collection, outreach efforts and more — all aimed at reducing crime and violence through structural interventions that include helping formerly incarcerated Black men and women re-enter

their communities and avoid re-arrest.

It’s a formidable task. Two out of every three people released from U.S. prisons are rearrested for a new offense. About 50% of those individuals are reincarcerated within 3 years. In Pennsylvania, that percentage is 63%.

Initiatives include:
Reimagine ReEntry
Launched three years ago as a separate non-profit, Reimagine ReEntry offers support to people returning to Allegheny County after serving their sentences. Richard and his team walk alongside these men and women as they face systemic employment, education,

and other barriers that are even more difficult to deal with as parolees.

“We coach and mentor,” Richard explains. “We offer mental health services, workforce development and training, family reunification support, and housing assistance. Thanks to numerous community partnerships that provide funding, we’re able to give these men and women opportunities. Opportunity is the key to staying out of prison. When you have the freedom to choose from healthy options, you feel more empowered and in control.”

CommUnity Hospital Violence Intervention Project (formerly known as

G.R.I.P.S.)

CommUnity HVIP reaches firearm assault survivors from hospital sites, offering case management and social support. The goal is to prevent re-injury and criminal involvement.

Richard and his team help the individual create and achieve goals, such as training for and finding employment and completing education.

Homicide Review
Since 2012, the Homicide Review program has been keeping track of, gathering data about, and analyzing Pittsburgh’s homicides to identify trends and patterns, especially neighborhood dynamics associated

with violence.

The goal is to use this information to develop intervention strategies for reducing our city’s homicide rate, which increased 54% from 2019 to 2020. The data include what a typical homicide looks like in Allegheny county.

Richard, who’s dedicated his life to preventing violence, believes he’s setting an example for younger crusaders. As a young man from Philly, Richard served more than 23 years in various forms of incarceration before reclaiming his self-worth with help from members of MOVE whom he met in Philadelphia’s Holmesburg Prison.

“They made me who I am, these older inmates who mentored me,” he explains. “Now I’m older and it’s my responsibility to help put these young people on a healthier path.”

Richard adds, “Our community must come together to prevent violence through collaboration. Violence is not a Black thing or a white thing. It’s not a rich thing or a poor thing. It’s become an American thing. When you can be shot simply for turning around in somebody’s driveway or knocking on the wrong door in somebody’s neighborhood, it’s time for change.”

EPA urged to set higher air-quality standards

Allegheny County has a long history of air pollution that continues today, thanks to power plants, steel mills, and chemical manufacturing plants which emit high levels of pollutants.

In 2021, the American Lung Association’s State of the Air report ranked the Pittsburgh-New Castle-Weirton metropolitan area, which includes Allegheny county, as the 7th most polluted city in the U.S. for year-round particle pollution.

Allegheny County is also in the top 1% of U.S. counties for cancer risk from toxic air pollutants released from sta-

tionary sources, according to the EPA.

The result is some of the country’s highest rates of asthma, COPD, and cardiovascular disease, especially among low-income communities of color.

Efforts are underway to address air pollution in Allegheny County, including a Clean Air Plan launched in 2020. However, some community groups, environmental organizations, and health professionals argue the plan doesn’t go far enough.

One of those health professionals is Dr. Franziska Rosser, a lung doctor who cares for children with asth-

ma and assistant professor of Pediatrics at the University of Pittsburgh. Recently, Dr. Rosser testified before the EPA urging the organization to adopt a more stringent standard for PM2.5 that’s based on recommendations from the American Thoracic Society (ATS).

“Research clearly shows that adopting stricter standards will better protect the health of our patients and communities,” she explains.

The new standard would be an important structural intervention for clean air equity for Black communities — especially Black children who suffer from higher rates

of asthma than white children. Black children are also twice as likely to be hospitalized with asthma and 4x as likely to die from asthma than their White counterparts.

“Real change that promotes clean air equity must take place structurally at the policy level,” notes Dr. Rosser. “That’s why it’s important for Allegheny County residents to consider casting their ballots for political candidates who support clean air for everyone equally,” she states. There are also personal intervention tools that can help parents/caregivers protect children diagnosed with asthma.

One of the most effective is the free AirNow app. “You simply download the AirNow app to your smart phone and enter your ZIP Code,” Dr. Rosser explains. The app will display real-time outdoor air quality in a simple green-yel-

low-orange-red alert format.” (If you don’t own a smart phone, AirNow also has a website with the same information at airnow.gov)

The app is particularly helpful during air quality days in the yellow range. “In Allegheny County, we spend about half the year in the yellow zone,” says Dr. Rosser.

Even though yellow days are considered moderate, they may be challenging for some people in sensitive groups, such as elders, people with heart or lung issues — and children with asthma.

Dr. Rosser recommends parents/caregivers use the AirNow app to identify action or alert days, which start at the orange level. On alert days, everyone with heart or lung problems should pay attention and make changes to their outdoor activity. But parents of children with asthma can also use AirNow to learn how their child re-

acts to outdoor air pollution, especially on yellow days.

“Pay attention to any reactions your child has on yellow zone days and even a day or two after,” she says. “Is your child coughing more, for example? Is there a burning feeling in their lungs? Does your child need to use more rescue treatments? Share that information with your child’s asthma healthcare provider, so that together, you can create an action plan that allows your child to remain active and healthy.”

Air quality, like other social justice issues, impacts Black people unfairly, especially Black children. “My patients are children who — through no fault of their own — have been burdened with a chronic respiratory disease,” says Dr. Rosser. “Children deserve to play safely outside — to be kids. Good air quality is a human right and should not be a privilege of your address.”

Water is life – and a human right

Do you know who your water provider is?

Do you know where your water comes from?

Do you know how decisions are made about your drinking water?

These are some of the questions the Pittsburgh Water Collaboratory (PWC) is hoping will engage Pittsburghers and get them thinking about water justice and what it means to underserved communities. Water justice is the fair distribution and protection of clean, safe water among all people, regardless of their social, economic, or cultural background, including future generations.

The work that people and organizations do to promote water justice is called structural intervention. Structural interventions are the methods we use to change social, economic, and political systems for the better.

Structural interventions serve as the “boots on the ground” for dismantling inequitable systems that have come about because of systemic racism. The systems result in unfair policies, such

as redlining, low life expectancy, and, in the case of water justice, little or no Black representation in a water system’s operation and unequal pay.

In our region, the Pittsburgh Water Collaboratory (PWC) is laying the groundwork for altering the social context where water inequity transpires and persists.

Founded in 2018, the PWC joins two groups: Women for a Healthy Environment (WHE) and Pitt educators from Geology and Environmental Science, Public and International Affairs, Health Sciences, and Sociology.

In 2021, after a lengthy interruption by the pandemic, the PWC received a grant from Pitt to advance regional water equity.

Dr. Noble A-W Maseru, Professor of Public Health Practice, Director, Social Justice, Racial Equity and Faculty Engagement, Health Sciences at Pitt is a PWC member. In the early days of his career, Dr. Maseru worked in Tanzania where the government valued the importance of rural develop-

ment and farming for nation building and self-reliance.

“The national mantra was uhuru ni kazi ‘freedom is work’ and uhai ni maji ‘water is life,’ he explains. “But really, that’s true everywhere, isn’t it? When we think about the lead problems in Flint, Michigan or consider storm management and climate change in New Orleans, ‘water is life,’ and ‘freedom is work’ must become our mantra, too.”

Allegheny County has 36 separate water systems. All but one is publicly owned. In 2016, more than half the systems had water quality-related violations.

According to the WHE, communities of color are at a higher risk of lead exposure. They may not have access to safe, affordable housing or they may face discrimination when trying to find a safe, healthy place to live.

Why is it important to advance water justice along with workforce equity? There are two big reasons: First, the 2016 Pittsburgh lead crisis highlighted how important it is to have

open, honest water practices. Second, according to the Pittsburgh Water Sewage Authority (PWSA) Water Equity Task Force findings, Black contractors are underrepresented in our water systems’ workforce and, when they are employed, the pay is unequal.

“There’s also the contrast of Pittsburgh as a ‘most livable city,’ and human rights inequality, especially for African American men and women,” says Dr. Maseru.

What could improve water transparency, access, affordability, quality, and tie in measures of economic progress and community well-being?

The team compared each water system’s performance against a standard set of measurements and prioritized the need for a speedy transformation.

All this information helped the PWC create a vision for structural interventions that will ensure water justice in our region and integrate workforce equity measures from Dr. Maseru’s PWSA findings. “In a just environ-

ment, water data will be transparent,” explains Dr. Maseru. “Water system communication with customers will be open and honest. Grievances will be resolved quickly and community input will be welcomed.

“Water will be affordable,” he continues. “When someone has a financial hardship, there will be protection programs in place that are easy to find, understand and use. There will be no shut offs.

“Water will be clean and safe. Lead testing and treatment, if needed, will be free. So will information on service line inventories, full line replacements, compliance with state and federal drinking water quality requirements, and updated protection plans,” he adds.

“There will also be gender, racial, and pay equity within the water system infrastructure.”

The PWC assessed each water system on transparency, affordability, and quality. They drafted report card “grades” based on data gathered, sent them to the water systems, and asked

for feedback. “Four systems improved their practices and ultimately their grades,” notes Dr. Maseru.

This grading showed ample room for improvement and prompted recommendations from the PWC:

More state and federal funding

Supportive structures that help small and struggling water systems remain public.

Access to drinking water tied to wider measures of health and economic progress.

Climate change consideration in all planning.

A plan to deal with emerging contaminant threats — like lead — to water quality.

Workforce development, such as enhanced equitable contracting and salary-wage equity strategies.

Thanks to the PWC’s initial research on behalf of water justice, structural interventions can begin to take shape that will make Allegheny County’s water safe, affordable, transparent, and fair to all its citizens.