



FIGHTING HUNGER IN HAMILTON COUNTY

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Panelists from three Greater Cincinnati organizations shared their insights on “Fighting Hunger in Hamilton County,” a WCC-Sponsored forum held at Mt. Auburn Presbyterian Church on November 18, 2025. Cold rain deterred some of the 51 registrants, but those who braved the weather were rewarded with eye-opening information.

Renee Mahaffey Harris, President and CEO of the Center for Closing the Gap; **Kurt Reiber**, President and CEO of the Freestore Foodbank; and **Amy Scarpello**, Senior Director of Rescue, Share, and Volunteer Engagement at La Soupe, discussed their services, goals, achievements, and next steps.

Kurt noted that although the Freestore is indeed the organization that sponsors the Rubber Duck Regatta, it is so much more. It is one of 250 partner and affiliate foodbanks that make up the Feeding America Network, operating 600 food pantries in Ohio, Kentucky, and Indiana, and serving families who are 200% below the poverty level.

Additionally, the Freestore offers wraparound support services to its clients, among them helping with rent and utilities; enrollment in SNAP and Medicaid; vouchers for birth certificates; transportation services; and a customer connection center.

“We also operate two workforce training programs. Cincinnati Cooks! (free to students) has two levels—one that teaches basic cooking skills, and an advanced program that teaches fine dining preparation skills. The Lift the Tristate program, developed with Gateway Community College, teaches enrollees to drive a forklift. Sixty percent



of the graduates of these programs have a criminal history. Now they are skilled employees and solid community members making up to \$25/hour.”

Rescue, Transform, Share is the mission of La Soupe, started 10 years ago by Suzy DeYoung, a chef who saw how much food was being wasted in her industry. Amy described the unique goal: to transform surplus ingredients into nutritious meals through the power of chefs, using food that would go to the landfill or lie fallow in the fields. “Thirty-one percent of food produced in the U.S. is unused. Since 2015, we have rescued 7.9 million pounds of food and created 6.7 million servings.”

La Soupe recovers products that are not useful at the pantry level. “Approximately 15 percent of people served require prepared food, because they lack the resources to prepare meals for themselves, and 50 percent would prefer a prepared meal. We work with 150 community partners, plus a crew of volunteers, to recover and deliver the food the chefs transform.”

La Soupe also operates two educational programs.

Cincinnati Gives a Crock works in the schools to teach students how to prepare meals for their families. Along with new skills, each participant takes home a crockpot and ingredients. *Cooking for the Family* teaches participants how to prepare a complete meal in a cast-iron skillet.

Other initiatives are the *Food as Medicine* program, which provides Nourish meals that follow the DASH diet, and medically tailored meals for people with specific needs. The Inspire program takes the La Soupe model of relying on the power of chefs to other pantries throughout the country.

Renee explained the goal of her organization is to engage, empower, and advocate. "Empowering is all about education," she said, "teaching people to do the most with what they have." Her organization works across the community with schools, churches, hospitals, and medical providers to provide education. "With education," she says, "people know what they need and can be empowered to advocate for themselves."

A direct correlation exists between accessibility to healthy food and outcomes for people with diabetes and cardiovascular disease. "Individuals who live in a 'food desert' (more than 2.4 miles from a grocery) don't know what that is. If there's a convenience store, then they have access to food—it's just not healthy food." She also pointed out where most fast-food restaurants and convenience stores are located—where students on their way to school have easy access.

"Understanding how to read a label helps you know what you're putting in your body. Seeing a diagram of what your body looks like with some of these diseases helps you know what the disease is doing to you and why you need to address your diet."

In Q&A following their individual presentations, panelists discussed correlations between hunger and violence; the impact of nutrition on birth weight and infant mortality; working with employers to ensure employees are making a living wage; and the ever-growing problem of immigrants who will not take advantage of the many resources that are available because they fear being picked up by ICE.

These three organizations and their community partners are making an impact, but there is consensus among them things are going to get worse. What can the average person do to help?

Kurt says, "Show us the money. Volunteer. Advocate with elected officials." He noted that canned goods drives are not helpful because they pull goods off the shelves, which leads to fewer donations. Cash donations are more effective because the Freestore can buy seven times as much with each dollar as an individual can.

Amy says be a food advocate. "Ask the manager of the store where you shop what happens to their leftovers. Encourage donation."

Renee suggests volunteering to teach a class on reading food labels or preparing a meal with what you have.

Kurt summed it up this way: "Tell people what you've heard tonight. That's how change will happen. Don't be judgmental. You don't know the circumstances that led to a family's situation. It is incumbent on all of us to step up and be the voice for the voiceless."

WCC thanks Mt. Auburn Presbyterian Church and Cincinnati Gives for co-sponsoring this event.