Greater Pittsburgh community food bank

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pittsburghfoodbank.org

Testimony of Colleen Young, Director of Government Affairs
PA Senate Democratic Policy Committee
July 31, 2026

Good morning. First, I would like to thank all the Senators on the Committee who voted to preserve the 2025 increases to the State Food Purchase and PASS programs in the most recent budget and to initiate the process to transition to chip-enabled SNAP EBT cards that will protect our most vulnerable neighbors from theft. These are critical investments, without which more neighbors would struggle to access enough food for their families.

Need in Our Service Area

The Greater Pittsburgh Community Food Bank serves 11 counties in Southwestern PA. Across our service area, according to USDA data compiled by Feeding America, 1 in 8 people sometimes or often do not have enough food, including nearly 1 in 5 children. In 2025, our Food Bank directly surveyed neighbors and found that an additional 15% of our neighbors only have enough food because they receive help through SNAP, food pantries, or other assistance. Together, this means that 1 in 4 of our neighbors in Southwestern PA is food insecure. That amounts to 600,000 people including children, seniors, veterans, people struggling with disabilities, and workers who are underemployed or receiving low wages. 80% of respondents to our 11-county survey shared that affordability was the number one barrier to accessing food.

We are focused on improving the lives of over 600,000 of our neighbors.

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Alarming as these figures are, *they likely understate the full extent of need* because many households fall just above the threshold for food insecurity while remaining a crisis away from needing help. For families with little financial cushion, unplanned expenses such as medical bills, car repairs, or reduced work hours can quickly affect their ability to buy food.

United Way of Pennsylvania's 2026 ALICE Report puts a precise frame around these households. **ALICE** stands for **A**sset **L**imited, **I**ncome **C**onstrained, **E**mployed. It describes households that earn above the Federal Poverty Level, but below what it costs to live and work in their county. In Pennsylvania, 39 percent of households fall below the ALICE Threshold, meaning more than 2 million families cannot reliably afford basic needs like housing, food, transportation and healthcare (United For ALICE 2026, p. 1).

In Allegheny County, a largely urban area, 36% of households fall below the ALICE Threshold, including more than 200,000 households when combining those in poverty and ALICE households. In surrounding counties with strong post-industrial legacies—such as Beaver (40%), Lawrence (42%), Fayette (43%), Cambria (39%), and Washington (36%)—similar or higher proportions of households struggle to meet the cost of living (United Way ALICE Project, 2024).

Rural counties across the region also face significant need: 39% of households in Somerset County, 40% in Greene County, and 44% in Indiana County live below the ALICE Threshold, while Armstrong County (39%) and Butler County (30%) demonstrate that even counties with relatively higher median incomes still contain large populations of families unable to afford basic necessities (United Way ALICE Project, 2024).

These data illustrate a consistent and region-wide pattern: while communities differ in geography and economic history, a significant share of neighbors across the Food Bank's service area may struggle to afford basic needs, including food.

Who is at Risk

Rising costs of basic needs are driving the increased demand for food assistance. In Pennsylvania, household expenses have grown faster than wages since the pandemic, leaving working families with the least purchasing power they've had in the past two decades (United For ALICE 2026).

Financial hardship does not affect households evenly. Across all 11 counties, the populations most likely to experience food insecurity include working families with

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children, particularly those headed by a single parent, older adults on fixed incomes, and younger adults early in their careers.

In every county, the ALICE reports show disproportionately high rates of hardship among single-female-headed households with children and older adults age 65 and over, indicating that caregiving responsibilities and limited or fixed incomes significantly increase vulnerability. Younger householders - especially those under age 25 - also face elevated hardship rates, highlighting the challenges of entering the workforce in a region where wages often fail to keep pace with the cost of essentials (United Way ALICE Project, 2024).

Our experience reflects these patterns: half of the people we serve are either older adults or children - groups particularly vulnerable to food insecurity. Many visitors to pantries in the Food Bank's network are working adults whose wages have not kept pace with housing, childcare, and utilities.

Consider a composite drawn from households our network served last year: Jessica is a single mother working in food service. Her income places her above the Federal Poverty Level but below the cost of living in Allegheny County. Although she receives some public benefits, she is not classified as food insecure. Yet when unexpected expenses arise and cost of living increases, food is often the only flexible part of her budget. Like many ALICE households, she is not captured in traditional food insecurity measures but is highly vulnerable to economic shock.

Many first-time visitors are like Jessica - neighbors who were previously managing but are now turning to the charitable food system. They are transitioning from *at risk* to *food insecure* in real time at our partner agencies' doors.

Food Bank Operations

In FY26, Greater Pittsburgh Community Food Bank distributed 43.8 million pounds of food, an increase of 830,000 pounds over FY25. Additionally, we:

- Served 6,000 more people through our pantries and direct distributions,
- Served an additional 7,000 children through our child nutrition programs,
- Distributed 600,000 more meals to 3,000 more people at our on-site Duquesne pantry, which is currently averaging 200 people per day, and
- Distributed 400,000 additional meals in Greene County through a new direct distribution site opened to fill a gap in access.

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Despite increased need and rising food costs, government assistance to source food has decreased dramatically in recent years. Government supported inventory has decreased at our food bank from 34% to 21% of total annual pounds delivered since 2024, primarily through the decrease of federal TEFAP commodities and grants to purchase local food.

To offset the shortfall in federal food assistance, we must supplement our inventory with wholesale purchases, which have risen from an average cost of $.93 per pound in 2024 to an inflation-adjusted estimate of $1.08 per pound for the current fiscal year. Meat and fish remain our most expensive products, now costing nearly $1.60 per pound wholesale, with cereal close behind. In FY 26, our purchased food costs were $2.4 million over budget, reflecting both the need to make up for losses in government funding and the demand surge we experienced during the government shutdown and SNAP pause.

To underscore the critical importance of government assisted food purchases, our best value products are produce and eggs, which we purchase directly from PA farms with PASS dollars and provide to all our pantries at no cost. In fact, we sourced 10 million pounds of food grown or manufactured in PA last year, which was a 4-million-pound increase over the previous year.

Additionally, while we provide government-supported food to our partner agencies at no cost, we must share some of the costs of our wholesale purchased food to ensure we have enough resources. We manage to cover more than half of those costs (on average across the network) through private donations, but many smaller agencies cannot afford to source higher priced foods from our inventory. Government assistance is critical to ensuring that agencies without a food budget can source more food to keep up with rising demand.

Impact of SNAP Cuts

In addition to food distribution, our food bank supports neighbors to access SNAP and other assistance for basic needs. Our SNAP outreach team consistently hears the same message from our neighbors – SNAP recipients faced with rising food prices are having more and more difficulty stretching their benefits through the month. Many recipients who receive the minimum $23 monthly SNAP benefit (primarily seniors on Social Security) have reported that the value of the benefit does not outweigh the administrative burden required to access and maintain benefits. Additionally, we know from our partners at PA DHS that more than 100,000 Pennsylvanians have lost access to SNAP since the changes in HR1 took place, putting additional strain on the charitable food network to help ensure no one

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goes hungry. For our service area alone, SNAP benefits have declined more than $5.6 million from June 2025 to June 2026.

The High Cost of Food Prices

In Cambria County, a young dad shared that he home schools his children and cannot afford to feed them lunch at home. Food prices are hurting them and making it harder to pay their other bills. Both parents work (mom actually has two jobs), and they rotate shifts so someone is always home with the children. Even with three jobs, they still can't make ends meet.

In Allegheny County, a senior living with a disability shared that she haggles with stores to get discounts on nearly expired food and regularly eats food that is past its prime by cutting off moldy bits and washing slime off deli meat.

In Washington County, John comes to distributions each month to pick up food for five senior citizens ranging in age from 65 to 87. He told us, "I'm trying to help them out and get them food and stuff, so they don't have to do without. Some people are diabetics and they need their insulin medication every day. Their bills are getting so high – utilities and the gas prices have gone up tremendously. They have a choice to make. Eat or pay bills and get whatever they need to survive. Sometimes these elderly people are going days without eating."

In Greene County, Marjorie shared that both she and her husband worked for the state prison and are now retired on their pensions. Between inflation and the cost of living, their finances are no longer secure. In addition to seeking assistance from the Food Bank, Marjorie shared that she has been putting off necessary dental care for months, knowing that they could not afford the care.

Charles served in the US Marine Corps and worked for decades as a truck driver. He shared that fuel costs and rising food prices make it hard to keep up with the basics. "You might pay $200 and only get five bags [of food]."

Belinda and her husband were financially secure, but when he passed away, everything changed. Now on her own, Belinda faces a difficult financial reality, earning too much to fully keep up with rising costs, but not enough to make ends meet.

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David is a 67-year-old former firefighter who gets by living in low-income housing and receiving SSI and SNAP. He uses a vacuum sealer to try to extend the life of his groceries and says the cost of living creates many challenges for people living in a rural area.

Cheryl is a 72-year-old breast cancer survivor. She receives SNAP but shared that she usually runs out of money by the 17th of each month. She shared that she gets food from the Food Bank that she typically would not buy, like eggs, that have become harder to budget for. Cheryl also picks up and buys food for her friend who is struggling and has no other support. For Cheryl, it's not just about getting by. It's about sharing what she has even when there isn't much to give.

Stacy has a metal rod in her back which makes movement and work a struggle. Her partner works, but their finances are tight. They often stretch meals to get by. She shared, "Sometimes you run out of milk and add a little bit of water to it, but just to make bowl of cereal. Sometimes that's how bad it is. I mean, everything's going up but your paycheck."

More Than Food – Neighbor Share Their Top Needs

With reports from the USDA's Economic Research Service that food prices will increase 3.2% in 2026, on top of increases to fuel, housing, healthcare, utilities and more, families are bracing to figure out how they will keep enough food on their tables. This June, our Neighbor Leadership Council developed a policy agenda based on the top 6 issues that create hardship in their lives, including food access, healthcare access, safe and affordable housing, utility costs, transportation, and overall economic security. See the attached agenda for more information.

Thank you for your time and consideration of any opportunities to improve the lives of our neighbors struggling to afford food and other basic necessities.