

Fulcrum Podcast Episode 2: Tackling Community Health Needs

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Urban Alliance (urbanalliance.com/fulcrum)

Jaleith Gary

Hey, everyone it's Jaleith Gary, your host of the Fulcrum Podcast by Urban Alliance, and today I am joined by my colleague and friend, Angela Colantonio.

Angela Colantonio

Hi, everyone!

JG

And we are excited to talk to you about our community's health needs and some of the ways that we are working with programs to address them. Angela, why don't you take a moment to introduce yourself so everyone can get to know you better.

AC

Sure, I'm really excited to be here and be featured on the Fulcrum. Very exciting. So yeah, my name is Angela. I'm the Director of Implementation for Health and Basic Needs Initiatives here at Urban Alliance. So, what I do here is I help manage three of our five initiatives, which are Beyond the Basics, Charis and Revitalize. And those initiatives provide platforms for offering support to the programs and ministries that we work with. And those ministries specifically work on the areas of basic needs, health—both physical health and mental and emotional health.

JG

Yes, so she's doing quite a bit of work, actually. So, I just wanted to thank her for taking time out of her day to be part of this project and to share with you all.

So, one of the things that I love about the work that we do in Hartford is that we are really trying to address specific needs in our community and we are really strategizing on the best ways to do that—so, we're not reinventing any wheels or duplicating any efforts, but we're really coming alongside different programs. And one of the things I find really interesting about Hartford is that it's a food desert. I've never understood why that had to be.

AC

I'm glad that you brought that up. So, a food desert is where there's not access to fresh and healthy foods, so that

has a lot of different effects. People who don't have access to fresh and healthy foods experience a lot of different health needs, so things like obesity and diabetes are seen more often.

JG

And like high blood pressure, hypertension and things like that.

AC

Right. So, we see that a lot more in areas like Hartford, that is categorized as a food desert.

JG

So, tell me, Angela, what are some of the programs in our network doing to address health needs in our community?

AC

So yeah, there are some ministries that identify themselves as a health ministry, but there's a lot of social and environmental determinants of health that other ministries are addressing in other ways. So, for example, poverty is an underlying cause of a lot of adverse health conditions. So, ministries like food pantries and soup kitchens or ministries that are offering case management and coaching to help people set goals and achieve greater life stability—those ministries are more indirectly addressing health needs by targeting the underlying causes of those health needs. And there are health disparities, especially in urban environments. Health disparities are preventable differences in disease burden that are experienced by certain populations or disadvantaged populations. So, ministries can be addressing those systemic injustices that cause different health conditions. So again, those basic needs ministries or different care and counseling ministries are really helping people overcome some challenging situations that are then causing different health conditions.

So, a lot of times in Hartford, we see things like obesity and diabetes and cancer and respiratory conditions that are largely affected by things like food deserts, that we've been talking about, and unsafe neighborhoods where people don't have as much opportunity for physical exercise, or poor housing conditions that lead to exacerbate asthma and things like that. So, like I said, there may not be many ministries that identify themselves as a health ministry per se, but there's a lot of different ministries that are tackling these needs in a lot of innovative and unique ways.

JG

That was really insightful. And just to be clear about the connection between poverty and health and nutrition—Hartford does have a lot of those small bodegas and by and large when people do want to get their fruits and vegetables, they're going to be canned, right? And so you're going to have a lot of sugar which is related with the

increased rate of diabetes. And you have a lot of sodium which leads to high blood pressure and hypertension and things like that. And so that can also put a limitation on physical activity, just in and of itself, being that you don't feel well enough to even want to exercise, right?

AC

It's like a vicious cycle. When people have limited financial resources or even access to transportation, they have to make a lot of tough choices. A lot of a lot of the time those decisions may lead to poor health down the road.

JG

Sure. I think about what it would take for a grandmother who also cares for a couple of her grandchildren to go by public transportation to an actual grocery store, like a supermarket, right? The only full-service supermarket in Hartford is on Park Road in Parkville over by the movie theater, right? Like exit 44.

AC

Like that Stop & Shop.

JG

Yeah, that Stop & Shop right there. But you think about someone who lives in the South End having to get there. That's quite the distance to travel. And then, once you get there, you have to get back with all your groceries.

AC

Yeah. So, the programs that we work with are really reaching those people who are struggling and helping them to meet their needs and give them the tools and resources to achieve greater life stability so that they can overcome those challenges and hopefully move beyond them.

JG

Right! And one of the things that Hartford does have to combat the fact that it is a food desert is the farmers market, which I love. I get a lot of fresh produce there. And oftentimes it's less expensive than the produce that you can find in the grocery store. It's locally grown, so you're supporting your local farmer.

AC

Right. And we partner with six of the farmers markets in Hartford through Revitalize to help connect residents to that asset in the city. And we do that by providing toolkits and resources to the programs that we work with so that they can connect the people they serve to, not only the farmers markets, but different health resources and services in the city and the surrounding areas.

JG

I've got to say that the Revitalize Packing Party is one of my favorite things of the year that we do. So, for everyone out there, I get to DJ the packing party and we have—I don't even know. How many churches, organizations, and volunteer groups come?

AC

Over a dozen and we usually have like a hundred people or so and it's definitely a party. Yes. Thank you for DJing. It definitely feels like a party, but we have fun serving together. And yes, that's where we pack all the resource bags that go out in the community and have all the information about free and low-cost health services as well as the farmers markets. That's when we put together the toolkits that we then give to the programs that we're working with so that they can then give it to the people that they serve. So that's just one of the ways that we support programs through one of our Initiatives.

JG

Right. And one of the things that we include in those bags is the coupon that individuals can redeem at the farmers market so they can get fresh produce. They learn about the fact that WIC and food stamps and SNAP benefits are doubled at the farmers markets. And they're further incentivized to use them because then they can see the value of going to the farmers market, not just because it has better produce available to them than your local bodega, for example, but also because you get twice the amount of food, right?

AC

Right, so that's really where Urban Alliance comes in and has that value add of providing the farmers market coupons to the programs. Not just to give them free money, but to really help them understand that these resources exist in the city—that they can use their, like you said, their SNAP benefits, their WIC benefits. And we do know that the people that we're reaching with the coupons are people in need. Because when they redeem a coupon, we work with the farmers market managers so that they ask each person that comes to complete a short survey. And through that survey, we know that the coupons are bringing people to the market who have not been there before. And, through that experience, they even plan to return to the market in the future.

So, it is a really valuable tool for the programs to connect the people they serve to that resource and to know how to use the benefits that they already receive there.

JG

I've had the privilege and honor of being able to go out on a Community Health Outreach a number of times since I started working at Urban Alliance. I think I came in the fall of 2012, so my first outreach was 2013; that June. And since then, I've gone every year with the exception of one. And when I go, my church is always offering prayer to

people who open their doors to us. Sometimes we're leaving the bags on the door handles and being respectful, right? But we do ask people after we tell them about what's in the bag and the fact that we're open and welcoming them to our programs. We tell them—we ask them, rather—“Would you like any prayer for anything?” And they often times will say, “Yeah.”

AC

Yep. So, the resource bags are not just a tool for the churches to share that information, but it's also an opportunity to express a Christian witness in the community and to build those relationships with the people they serve and the people in their neighborhood. So yeah, the bags are handed out through that one-day Community Health Outreach, which Urban Alliance hosts, to just convene the different churches that are having their own outreach efforts. They also are distributed through existing ongoing programs like food pantries. So, there's a lot of different ways they're handed out, just depending on the programs' unique ways that they operate and how they want to reach out to the community.

JG

What I appreciate about our approach to that is that we're not trying to change the essence of a program, so to speak, but we're really just equipping a program to serve the people that they meet in our communities in deeper ways. So, we're not saying, “Hey! Open your own farmers market!”, because that would be a big undertaking. But, you can connect people to farmers markets and to your programs that can help meet other needs. So, it's even a more holistic approach, I think.

AC

Right. So, we provide the tools and then, based on whatever works for a program, they're able to use that tool in a way that best meets the program's needs and the people that they serve.

JG

Yeah, I think that's great.

AC

And that's how a lot of Urban Alliance's tools and resources work.

JG

Right. Of course.

But you know the community health outreach is a tried-and-true strategy for us to connect people to different resources. But, I know that this year, you created a new program development opportunity for our program

leaders to opt in to.

AC

Right. So, this year, we're offering the opportunity for programs to start a community garden. So that's just another example of a toolkit that we provide to programs. And then they can use it in a way that best meets the needs of the people that they serve and can be fit into their program and services. So yeah, we're offering that opportunity as a pilot this year—providing the materials and the technical assistance to be able to start a community garden, which is very exciting.

JG

Yes! I know that you are really excited, particularly because you're a great gardener.

AC

Well, I don't know if I'm a great gardener, but my dad has always had a garden since I was born. So, I've always grown up with a garden in my backyard and having that access to fresh fruits and vegetables on a regular basis. So, I know how awesome it is, and I'm excited to see that being shared with others.

JG

Gus gave you a green thumb. To those of you listening, if you ever come to UA—which we'd be happy to host you and give you a tour and introduce you to everyone here—you would know Angela's desk when you saw it. It is the greenest desk at UA. She's got some plants over there and clean oxygen, right?

AC

Yeah, so I'm excited to be kind of managing that opportunity and just making that available to our programs. So, this year, we just kind of put it out there. We didn't have a specific expectation, per se, but we did share about it. And we have a youth ministry at Bible Way Temple Nation in the North End of Hartford that took advantage of that opportunity and started a garden with their youth group. So, getting their young kids involved in planting and growing and harvesting, hopefully, some vegetables, which is really cool.

JG

Yeah, that is really cool. I've seen a lot of news articles and blog articles about urban farming, even. So, I'm really glad that our young people are going to be able to gain some new skills in farming and gardening.

AC

Yeah, and like we were talking about before, Hartford is a food desert. So really taking advantage of that opportunity to create a space where fresh food can be accessed...and I'm really excited that the young kids are

involved are seeing how food is grown and even just using that as an opportunity for the ministry to teach the kids, not only about the health aspects of growing food, but also using that as an educational tool as they teach Bible lessons. Because we do see in Scripture a lot, references to gardening. Humans were created in the garden. There's a lot of metaphors—"you reap what you sow" ...

JG

...the branch and the vine ...

AC

Absolutely! So, all around, a really great opportunity. I'm excited to see where that goes in the future as well.

JG

Actually, I'm really curious—you may know the answer to this—is there any correlation between young people gardening and their intake of fresh vegetables, or vegetables and fruits in general?

AC

Yeah. I can't cite a specific study off the top of my head, but definitely early exposure to growing fruits and vegetables and being involved in that leads to healthier habits as kids grow up. I know it's true for me.

JG

I think there is just a genuine curiosity about food and about science and plants and things of that nature. And I would be surprised if kids weren't more interested in what they ate based on the fact that they grew it. I think that there's maybe even a sense of pride that is instilled. And the fact that that's something that they grew, that they cultivated into the soil and all of that.

AC

So, we'll have to report back after the end of the season to see how it went with Bible Way. But yeah, I've been excited to check in with them to see how things are going.

JG

Yeah! I'd love to come visit their garden with you sometime.

AC: Yeah, for sure!

JG

When you started pulling together the toolkit for community gardens, what was the biggest challenge in that?

AC

Well, Hartford, like we said, is a food desert, but there are actually some great community organizations already doing some gardening in this city and advocating for that—so organizations like Hartford Food System and KNOX. So, we not only work with the churches and organizations in our network, but we tried to build relationships with community organizations and kind of bridge those gaps, so that the programs in our network can really benefit from everything that's out there.

So, at the beginning of the process, I did some of my own research and wanted to definitely connect with those organizations that are already doing that kind of work in the city. So, just understanding from them what things to look out for—kind of troubleshooting ahead of time—what we might confront. So, just understanding that really what you need is a sunny space and access to water and good soil and then from there, you know, some seeds, and off it goes! It can easily take off.

JG

Awesome. Awesome. Awesome.

If there are program leaders listening to our podcast, what would you want to tell them?

AC

This year, it's a little too late to start a garden right now, by the time that this goes out. But definitely, if this is something that you're interested in incorporating into your program, whether it's a youth ministry like Bible Way, or if it's a food pantry and you want to offer fresh food to the people that you serve, or if you have a health ministry and you want to incorporate that into some type of teaching or workshops or classes—there's a lot of different ways that you can do it or just if you have a support group and you want to have an outlet for them to engage in or support their emotional and mental health, gardens are great for that as well. It's like therapy.

So, there's a lot of different ways that you can incorporate it into a program. I would encourage anyone interested to reach out to me at Urban Alliance, so we can start thinking about next season. It's never too early to start planning and getting an idea of who might be interested and who we can support.

JG

All right, well, you heard her! If that's something that you're interested in doing, definitely reach out. She's very kind and fun to work with.

AC

I would love to hear from anybody interested. I love talking about gardening.

JG

So, Angela, I just want to thank you so much, again, for joining me today. It was so much fun to talk to you about all of the different needs in our community and the way that network participants and their program leaders are addressing them in really meaningful ways. And I know that pulling all of those resources together and coaching and TA-ing program leaders to do their best jobs at executing these strategies is a lot of work. So, I just want to acknowledge and thank you for that. And I look forward to seeing you tomorrow.

AC

Well, thanks for having me. It's really a pleasure to work with all the programs in the Urban Alliance network that are really doing the hard work. So, thanks for having me. I hope everyone enjoyed our conversation.

JG

Thank you all for listening. And if you would like to learn more about getting involved with community gardens or Urban Alliance's health initiative, Revitalize, in any way, you can simply go to urbanalliance.com or reach out to me or Angela via our email addresses or on our contact pages on the website. We look forward to hearing from you and we will talk to you soon.