

## **The Fight Against Food Insecurity in Cincinnati, OH**

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Food insecurity, defined as limited or uncertain access to nutritionally adequate and safe food, is a nationwide problem affecting more than 10.2% of US households [1]. Locally, more than 270,000 families across Cincinnati experience food insecurity each year, impacting each of Cincinnati's 52 neighborhoods [2],[3]. One factor that contributes to this disparity is the low availability of supermarkets in the Cincinnati region, with the presence of food deserts on the rise. The US Department of Agriculture (USDA) currently identifies food deserts as census tracts with low-income areas where a substantial percentage of the population does not have access to grocery stores or supermarkets [4],[5]. For Cincinnati to meet the national average of 23-24 grocery stores within a 1 mile radius of residents, it would need at least 10 more supermarkets at minimum [6]. Furthermore, food access in Cincinnati was increasingly threatened last February when pandemic-era SNAP benefits were reduced. Unfortunately given these statistics, the amount of people experiencing food insecurity has continued to rise each year [7].

Food insecurity is a systemic problem, and one that has massive implications for children. In 2021, 33.8 million Americans were experiencing food insecurity, 5 million children lived in food-insecure households, and 521,000 children lived in households with very low food security [8]. Current evidence demonstrates that restricted access to healthy foods, such as in food deserts, leads to poor health-related outcomes, including obesity and higher BMI [9]. In fact, one study investigating the link between childhood obesity and future obesity in adulthood found that 55% of children who are obese will be obese through adolescence, and 80% of obese adolescents will remain obese through adulthood [10].

An increasing burden falls on food pantries and other community organizations to address this gap in food access. One pantry, Churches Active in Northside (CAIN), is working to fill this need for families and individuals in the community, with a mission to provide food to those who are experiencing food insecurity. The community of Northside, which includes CAIN, is a food desert, as seen in **Figure 1**, highlighting the need for organizations like CAIN to help meet the needs of residents.

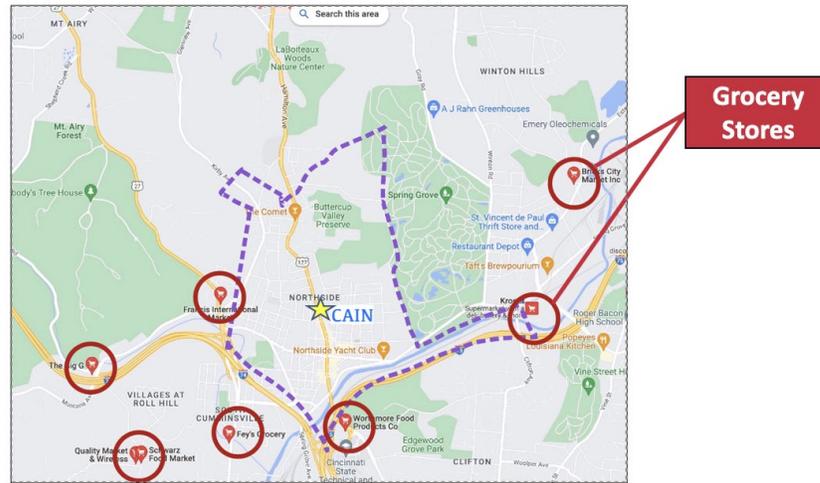


Figure 1: Food desert of Northside, Cincinnati

After COVID-19 started, CAIN’s services expanded beyond Northside, offering food and groceries to individuals in zip codes within greater Cincinnati [4]. Currently at the pantry, community members from all over the city are able to come once a week for free-choice grocery shopping, and once on Mondays for a hot meal (**Figure 2**) [2]. Staffed by volunteers from Northside and the surrounding areas, CAIN aims to be inclusive to people from all identities and backgrounds, supporting all patrons regardless of their spoken language.



Figure 2: Images of CAIN including grocery offerings and multilingual check in desk

Beyond the pantry, CAIN has built partnerships with other community organizations to expand resources for their patrons. One influential partnership, a local diaper bank called “Sweet Cheeks”, supplies diapers to CAIN to distribute. CAIN also provides Ubers to community members who don’t have a way to get to the pantry. They also offer bus passes to families to aid in transportation to and from the food bank. Additionally, the organization offers various extra services, including free haircuts, tax and financial consultations, and health clinics.

CAIN’s mission is supported by donations from community members, diverting waste from local grocers, taking part in the local food pantry network, and from community volunteers. Food is procured from local grocers when it is close to its expiration, but still consumable. There is also a local network of food waste diversion coordinated by the Free Store Food pantry which helps to deliver food to CAIN. Further, a local food insecurity prevention organization, La Soupe, provides to-go soup containers for the families to choose from. Other funding for food and goods is procured from donations.

CAIN provides a valuable support system for guests through combating social determinants of health through improvement of food access. Impacts from these interventions are great considering recent increases in rent in the greater Cincinnati area, much less the costs of owning a home [11],[12]. The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated the need for food access, with job losses, business closures, and disruptions in food production and distribution affecting communities [13]. The recent end of SNAP Emergency Allotments in March 2023, coupled with increasing inflation, further heightens the challenges faced by families in affording housing and nourishment [14]. Despite these obstacles, CAIN has extended its reach by expanding the supported zip codes, extending its food pantry's impact to neighboring communities in the greater Cincinnati area. However, there remain hurdles to overcome, such as the language barrier between Spanish-speaking clients and predominantly English-speaking staff. To foster effective communication and equitable services, solutions like hiring bilingual staff or offering language interpretation services need to be explored. CAIN's commitment to supporting vulnerable populations and its collaboration with community partners make it a crucial player in lessening the disparities in food access and overall well-being in the region.

Students and physicians play a vital role in advocating for the needs of CAIN and its community in Cincinnati. Open letters are an effective way for constituents to advocate for policy changes on behalf of community organizations: as students, we can write an open letter addressed to the city government that highlights the impact of food insecurity on the local population [15]. It is crucial to propose tangible ways in which the government can begin to tackle food insecurity. We would suggest initiatives that promote better food accessibility, affordability, and education for the communities of Northside. By outlining specific strategies, such as facilitating the relationship between CAIN and local food banks or community gardens, the letter can make a compelling case for the city government or Hamilton county authorities' involvement in increasing their fiscal support for CAIN.

Beyond addressing food insecurity, students and physicians should advocate for the government's assistance in supplying essential items that CAIN struggles to provide to its clients.

These items include toiletries and soap, which might seem trivial, but are crucial for maintaining hygiene and dignity [17]. By negotiating with big box retailers to obtain favorable prices or purchasing these items in bulk, the city government can make a meaningful difference in the lives of those in need [18].

Expanding social programs is another important issue that we can help advocate for. Students and physicians should emphasize the necessity of government assistance in helping residents navigate complex bureaucratic processes, such as obtaining driver's licenses, IDs, and social security or welfare benefits. Importantly, ensuring access to translators and multi-language accessible information is crucial for breaking down language barriers and ensuring equitable access these essential services and resources [19].

Lastly, students and physicians can help facilitate collaboration between CAIN and other organizations in the area. By fostering partnerships with other nonprofits, healthcare offices, and libraries, CAIN can leverage additional resources and networks to better serve the community's diverse needs.

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