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Hunger & Health

Moving the needle in the fight against hunger

This week's Thought Leadership Roundtable is an edited version of a conversation that took place Oct. 30 at the seventh annual Hunger and Health event, a program hosted at the Westin Indianapolis by IBJ Media and Gleaners Food Bank of Indiana. Our panelists discussed the working hungry, what's driving food insecurity, and how collaboration is the key to offering sustainable solutions.

Q: One in three children still go to bed hungry every night. Are there misconceptions that persist about the realities of hunger in our world today?

David Hampton: I'm glad we started with that question. We have to be honest with ourselves and ask, as a community, are we moving the needle? Providing one meal a day is not alleviating hunger. There's still so much work to do.

Fred Payne: I think when we think about hunger, it's a misleading, amazingly deceptive phenomenon. We think we know what hunger looks like, but hunger has no place, race or face. When it comes to individuals who are actually working and hungry, we have a statistic that we track called ALICE. It's an acronym for Asset Limited Income but Employed Individuals. These are individuals who are working, but they are working hungry. They make more than the poverty level but not enough for a sustainable monthly budget. When we look at Marion County, about 42 percent of our households are in that ALICE population. In Hamilton County, that number is in the low 20 percent range.

Theresa Patterson: Hunger relief is a poverty disruptor. If you don't have money for food, you certainly don't have money for medicine and for health care. And if you are not attending to your health care needs, you can't go to work. These things are absolutely intertwined.

Q: There was a survey done here recently that really puts into perspective where things are. What was the survey and what were its big takeaways?

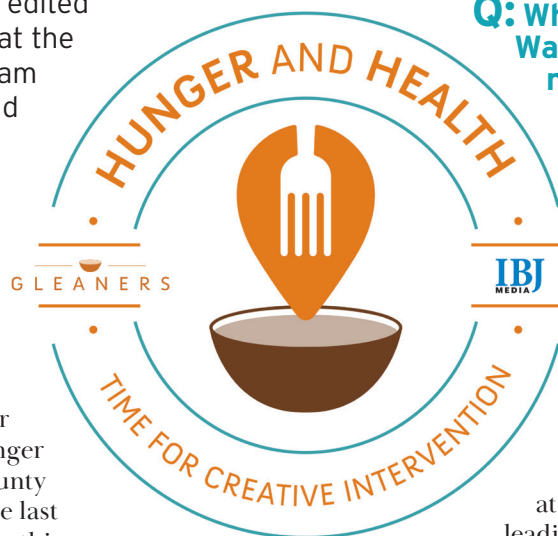
David Miner:

Indy Hunger Network has done six major surveys of hunger in Marion County since 2014. The last one was earlier this year. So, the situation, in a nutshell, is much worse than it was in 2014 and 2017. It's worse than it was just prior to the pandemic. It's worse than it was during the pandemic. The official report will be out probably in January, but it's striking that the pandemic has passed in terms of all the visible things that we associated with it, but in terms of hunger, it's still with us.

Q: Were you surprised that the hunger numbers were markedly worse?

David Minor: I was. One of the things we look at is the whole group of people who are needing food assistance. Many people's needs are met with the help of people in this room. Those needs might be met throughout the year, but some of the folks in any given week can't fit all the pieces together and they are literally hungry in that week. The survey found that the percentage of the broad group who are missing meals in a given week went up by more than 50 percent between 2021 and this year. So, a higher percentage of the group are not able to patch it together and they're literally going hungry.

Theresa Patterson: Dr. Virginia Caine of the Marion County Public Health Department shared data with us last week that reflects that the pandemic did none of us any favors in terms of health statistics. Name any measure and we're probably doing more poorly than we were before. So, we have work to do.



Q: When United Way hears numbers coming from a survey like that, what is the reaction?

Fred Payne:

Well, it just underscores what we need to really focus on. We need to address poverty at its core and the leading indicators of poverty. There are a lot of interventions that we need to be vigilant about to make sure we're addressing poverty. Education, job security, and safe and affordable housing. Those are the things that could lead to poverty, which then would lead to food insecurity.

Q: Fighting poverty is a team sport requiring collaboration among the public and private sectors, non-profits, and neighborhood groups. What does collaboration look like in the fight against hunger?

David Hampton: At LISC, our mission is to close the racial wealth gap and to help level the playing field. Food justice, food apartheid, and supermarket red lining, these are some of the things we think about in community development to help us truly understand some of the longstanding systemic issues we are fighting. It truly takes a group effort. At LISC, our approach is place-based, and it's designed to build an ecosystem. [With help from Elevance and the city of Indianapolis] we are working to build capacity and sustainability on the northeast side where there is a food desert, a bank desert, and a school desert. When you think of the John Marshall area, the school is closed down, there's no bank, there's no grocery store. It's truly an economic desert, which creates issues of life expectancy. You can't eat, you can't really learn, so our children are being affected. It's hard

to get a job when you're in poverty, and so if you're not working it's hard to continue to feed your family. It's a vicious cycle, and it truly takes a team effort and a community effort to offset longstanding injustices.

David Miner: I've been part of Indy Hunger Network since it got started 2009. It brings together all the different major players—Gleaners, Second Helpings, Meals on Wheels. That group has made a lot of progress. If we aren't together, we can't really think about tackling the whole thing. I think collaboration is a critical part of it and really enables a lot more progress.

Q: Are there barriers to collaboration that are out there that make it difficult for folks to come together and collaborate?

Fred Payne: I think there are perceived barriers. There are more people and more organizations that are willing to partner and to really understand what's needed to tackle this issue. We have about 89 accredited United Way partners throughout central Indiana. They are in various lanes, but they are all connected in trying to alleviate poverty. So, when we talk about food insecurity, a person may be food insecure because they don't have any transportation to get to the food. We have partners who can help with some of that transportation, but people might not access the services that are provided.

Q: What can the business community do when it comes to collaboration?

Fred Payne: Cook Group is a good example. They saw a need, they saw an issue and they focused on a specific community on the northeast side [where Cook built an assembly plant and helped create a grocery store]. They've addressed issues dealing with employment, issues dealing with food insecurity. I think private industry can continue to be a partner by helping to provide resources, but then also by using their platform to bring awareness to the issue and bring awareness to the solutions.

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David Miner: We know that hunger impacts worker productivity, and so businesses can look at and understand that maybe their lowest paid employees are in that ALICE group. Are they struggling? Am I losing productivity because some of my workers are struggling? In that regard, there is a new opportunity in Indianapolis called the Good Wages

to the programs. It's really striking. WIC serves women, infants and children—our most vulnerable. But at one point only about 55 percent of the people who are eligible were enrolled in the program. So, there are some barriers to accessing these programs. Affordable housing and affordable childcare are other areas where I think government has a role to play.

presence at the State House, because that's where the rubber meets the road as we talk about access to affordable housing, and access to a lot of other things. Be part of a coalition. Forty people raising an issue at the State House speaks a little bit differently than one person. Forty groups speak a little differently than just one. Make sure you are engaged with local political leaders, whether on the state or local level. And make sure you are supporting these coalitions.

health—all the trauma that comes with that. Just handing out enough food is actually not enough.

“We think we know what hunger looks like, but hunger has no place, race or face.”

FRED PAYNE

Initiative, which is operated by Employ Indy. Employ Indy will certify and celebrate employers who pay a living wage, and that's an important step to ending hunger.

It launched in April of last year. I think we had 70 employers certified, and it was a nice mix. The hunger community led the way, with Gleaners, Indy Hunger Network and Midwest Second Helpings as certified employers. There were also some employers from the faith community and a number of non-profits, like United Way of Central Indiana, and businesses from large to small in the mix. So, it was a good start. But we have a long way to go, obviously, with thousands of employers.

Q: When we speak about collaboration and intervention, how can we involve those who need services?

Fred Payne: It's really talking to individuals who are in this situation about the solution for it. At United Way, we have something called a Parent Advisory Council. We get them together and we get their thoughts about how we solve community issues. We take what they share with us and try to incorporate it into the way that we operate and the issues we address.

David Miner: I think this is a growth area for a lot of organizations. It's a best practice to have people with lived experiences in positions of leadership and authority.

Theresa Patterson: We have to do more than just listen, we have to listen and then we have to act. We can't gather people and ask their opinion and then not do anything about it.

Q: How can we better involve government in addressing the challenges of poverty and hunger?

David Miner: That's a great question. It's been mentioned that most of the food that goes to the hungry is already coming from federal nutrition programs. So just supporting the programs that exist and making sure people get access to them. A surprisingly high percentage of folks who would be eligible if they could get through the process don't get access

Q: How does the lack of affordable housing play into the hunger equation?

David Hampton: The bread and butter mission of LISC is affordable housing. The first level of building wealth is owning a home. When you start there, you can begin to hit some of the other areas of poverty. We live in the era of the working-class poor. The key is identifying the barriers and removing as many barriers as we can. Housing is too expensive nationwide. The average price of a home in Chicago is more than \$700,000. If you make \$40,000 a year that may seem great, but what kind of home can you really afford at \$40,000 if you have a family? These are real issues we have to grapple with.

Q: What is the government doing to help with health care?

Theresa Patterson: There are some wonderful federally qualified health care centers, but we know that in Marion County alone around 10 percent of the million people who live here are uninsured and some are uninsurable. So, we're leaving a lot of folks off the table. We know there is inequitable access to health care. In our organization we are providing low barrier/no barrier access. You don't need insurance, you don't have to pay a co-pay, you don't need to speak English to come to us. Over half of our patient population is Black and 25 percent are Hispanic. We know there's a problem. We know that we need to think outside the box, and that's where we can lean into our community partners that maybe can help us fill those gaps where government isn't able to do that for us.

Q: What are some specific areas of public policy that need to be addressed, and how can companies and individuals get involved in those discussions?

Fred Payne: Part of it is really being aware of what the issues are, but then also understanding that there are coalitions that are built around the state that are addressing specific issues. One of the things that we hold very true at United Way is our

Q: Do you feel that major grocers, restaurants, and food providers are doing all they can to repurpose leftovers? Any idea how much food is still being wasted?

David Miner: The national statistics suggest that 40 percent of food is still wasted across all categories, from farm fields to someone's refrigerator. It's a large, complex issue, but we can make improvements at a whole bunch of steps along the way. We're having conversations right now with our national elected leaders about something called the Food Date Labeling Act. The idea here is to simplify the labeling so that people don't throw away food that's still perfectly good. It takes people coming together and asking our elected officials if they will sign on to the Food Date Labeling Act, because this will make a real difference to hungry people. The best way to do that is to be part of a group who knows what's happening, who's tracking the legislation and could let you know when it's time to act. You can sign up with Gleaners; you can join Bread for the World. There are several other good advocacy groups that allow individuals to come together to make a real difference.

Q: Childcare costs are sending many into poverty. A single parent making a decent wage will not qualify for assistance with childcare costs, so they end up putting their groceries on a credit card, sending them further into debt. How is this being addressed?

Fred Payne: The strategic plan that we just kicked off in July is really focusing heavily in that area. We're looking at things we can do to help. We all know about the benefits cliff—an individual who believes that if they make X dollars more an hour, that's going to make them ineligible for certain benefits, and so it keeps them in a lower wage bracket. Whether that's perception or reality, it happens to be a fact for some people. When we talk about how we can work with government, that is one of the areas that we believe should be addressed. People are making a choice between increasing their household income or ensuring that they have affordable childcare, too.

Progress can be defined in different ways but in terms of employers recognizing the need and the issue, I think they're engaging a bit differently with their employees, in part because of COVID. Families are having to make some decisions, and that's where a remote work environment has become more favorable to some families because it helps them to offset some of those childcare costs.

Q: What role do schools play in solving food insecurity?

“If you don't have money for food, you certainly don't have money for medicine and for health care.”

THERESA PATTERSON

Q: What role do trauma and mental health play in food insecurity?

Theresa Patterson: There is not enough mental health care in our community to address the needs that are out there. We're trying, but we need a more scalable solution. And when we look at individuals experiencing homelessness in our community, it's almost exclusively serious mental illness, concurrent substance use disorder—and there just aren't good accessible solutions for that right now.

David Miner: We're doing a really good job of feeding people, but we're not making them food secure. Although they're okay this week, they're still worried about it. And that has a lot of impacts on mental

David Hampton: In 2016, the mayor met with all of the local superintendents of public schools. There was a consensus that the rates of free and reduced lunches in our schools was more than 70 percent, and that was pre-COVID. During COVID, we saw some incredible efforts within our schools because we knew kids were not eating breakfast at home. And sometimes they're not eating dinner, either. So, COVID may have moved the needle a little bit during that limited time frame. But now, post-COVID, I think we're back to some of those same numbers, or perhaps worse. We're one of the top three cities in the country, I think, in terms of food deserts and food insecurity. It's something we have to address on all levels, certainly within our school systems.

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Q: You mentioned other cities. What unique challenges does Indianapolis face in fighting food insecurity?

David Hampton: It's sort of an amalgamation of issues, but one of our unique issues is transportation. If a food desert is characterized by no healthy grocery store or food option within a one-mile radius, then many of us who live in even fairly high income

that, but we have to really nail down how we can attack the issue holistically so that we have a sustainable model. Right now, transportation is a very difficult issue to address.

Q: I understand the Gennesaret Free Clinic is doing some amazing collaborative work with people facing hunger. Can you talk a little bit more about collaborative efforts that you're undertaking?

Theresa Patterson: We're operating a free medical hub clinic located inside the St. Vincent de Paul Food Pantry. We got a wonderfully generous donation at this time last year and sought to really rethink how we were delivering our free health care. So, we opened our clinic inside St. Vincent de Paul. We're there six days a week; we're there on the weekend and we're

there in the evening because some people can't come to the pantry or they can't come to the clinic if we aren't open during off hours. Ours is a free clinic. You don't need insurance. You will leave with your medication if that is what is needed. We've also added point-of-care lab testing. We chose the food pantry because there are so many people there every single week. I believe the best medicine is on the other side of the clinic wall—it's the food. But sometimes you need real medicine, too. Our whole mission is only possible because of these collaborations. We must work in lockstep together or we are never going to make progress.

David Miner: I'd also like to give a shout out to Indy Hunger Network. I sit on a national board where groups like Indy Hunger Network come together, and there are about 60 of these organizations across the country. The Indy Hunger Network is literally the finest of those organizations in terms of collaboration and driving progress. So, we have a lot to be proud of here in Indianapolis, although the challenges are many.

Q: We talked earlier about the effort to save food by reforming food labeling and educating consumers about that issue. What other programs are out there to educate consumers about food and nutrition?

David Miner: There are a whole bunch of good programs around the city. Indy Hunger Network operates one of those doing cooking education. It's certainly something that needs even more attention, so it's an important component of this. If you don't know how to prepare the food that you just picked up at Gleaners, what are you going to do?

Q: How about rural Indiana? We've focused a lot on urban hunger, but the hunger situation is very real in rural Indiana, too.

David Miner: In the hunger study I mentioned earlier, the data for rural and urban areas don't look much different. But in rural areas the problem is less apparent. It's more hidden, and there are fewer services. If you pick one of the Gleaners rural service areas, there might be four food pantries serving an entire county. In Indianapolis, we have 200 food pantries, so a lot of people are pitching in. In rural areas, the population is smaller, but they're harder to serve because of transportation issues associated with long distances. But there's another issue. When we were making a film about hunger in rural areas, we had a contact who approached 10 families about being part of the film and they all said no, because they knew they would be known by their neighbors.

Q: How can young people get involved in fighting hunger?

Theresa Patterson: Our clinics are operated by judiciously chosen staff, but we leverage volunteers—doctors, nurses, pharmacists, and students. We love having students help at our clinics because we want to expose them to the social determinants of health. You can sit in a classroom and learn all about the social determinants of health, but until you come and see the impact—until you see, touch, feel, smell the social determinants of health—you're not going to really appreciate what some of our friends and neighbors are going through. And the younger folks are so smart, so innovative. We're counting on you to learn what the problems are and pick up the baton and take it to the next level. You guys are great at crowdsourcing, crowdfunding. Volunteer—and educate your friends about volunteer opportunities. We're on the official rotation for several schools in the area. The kids from Butler and IU come and do their family health, family practice rotation with us. I don't want them to leave until they say the magic words: "I will never be the same kind of practitioner that I would have been if I hadn't come here." It's so impactful. Come see what's happening for yourself.

David Miner: I'd look for an advocacy organization to be part of to speak up for whichever part of this issue really moves you. Find an organization that's advocating in that part of society and get involved.

Fred Payne: Volunteering, getting engaged, getting involved, attaching to an organization that you're passionate about, because that's when you start to evolve and learn more about the things that we read and we see in the media on a surface level. Being attached to an organization helps you to go a little bit deeper on the issue, and then it grows from there. You can utilize the things that you know, your technology, all of the things that you can bring to the table through your lenses. You can help organizations, whether it's on the advocacy front or it's just the practical things that you bring to the table that someone else can't bring to the table. So, volunteer. Get engaged.

Q: Fred, you mentioned the ALICE population earlier, the working hungry. How is United Way trying to help them?

Fred Payne: One of our partners is Second Helpings, so when it comes to providing food, we make sure we are supporting organizations like that. But beyond that we have our Center for Working Families model, where we're trying to make sure that people have the supports around them to have the awareness and training to get a better job. I think the most recent data tells us that individuals who

"The national statistics suggest that 40 percent of food is still wasted across all categories ..."

DAVID MINER

level neighborhoods live in food deserts. But you may not think about it because you have a vehicle you can drive. In the neighborhood I used to live in, we could drive to Whole Foods, but how expensive is Whole Foods? Nobody in the 'hood is going to Whole Foods. They can't afford it. There have been efforts to provide some ride shares to grocery stores and things like



Dr. David Hampton has been the executive director of LISC Indianapolis since 2021 and oversees program development, fundraising, and coordination with real estate development lending. He previously served as deputy mayor of neighborhood engagement for the city of Indianapolis and was a senior pastor for 20 years before retiring from pastoral ministry.



David Miner is a volunteer with Indy Hunger Network and Bread for the World. He was the founding president of Indy Hunger Network after a 28-year career at Eli Lilly and Co., where his final role was as a senior executive for Elanco. He is steering committee chair for the Good Wages Initiative and has become a leading expert on hunger in Indianapolis.



Theresa Patterson is executive director of Gennesaret Free Clinics, which she joined in 2019 after serving as CEO of Verve Health, a Carmel-based population health management company that provides onsite health care, health screenings and wellness programming in employer-based settings. She started her career as a registered nurse at Community East Hospital.



Fred Payne is president and CEO of United Way of Central Indiana. He previously served as Commissioner of the Indiana Department of Workforce Development after being appointed by Gov. Eric Holcomb in 2017. Prior to serving as Commissioner, Fred was an executive at Honda's Indiana Auto Plant and spent his early career practicing employment and labor law.

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have engaged with that model have increased their household income by somewhere around \$12,000 a year. That's significant.

We're also engaged with organizations like the Coalition for Homelessness Intervention & Prevention, which is trying to make sure that we're sheltering people and we're making sure that they're off the street. So that helps people who may be in that ALICE population who may have a tough time. Some of them may be teetering toward that poverty line.

Q: Is poverty a 'them' problem or an 'us' problem?

David Hampton: I'll answer that anecdotally from my days as a pastor. A church that I led in Brooklyn started a hot meal program. Every week after Wednesday bible study, we'd serve a hot meal for people who were hungry. After the first month or so, I noticed that a lot of our church members were eating the food. I made an announcement that the program was for people on the outside, that it wasn't for us. Someone pulled me aside and pointed out that many of our church members were hungry—they were just too proud to say so. It was a pivotal moment for me because it helped me realize there is no "us" and "them." We have to find ways to just provide, and those who need will come.

"Providing one meal a day is not alleviating hunger. There's still so much work to do."

DR. DAVID HAMPTON

Whether you're urban or rural, your Zip Code should not determine your life expectancy, should not determine your quality of life. All of us in this room, to the extent that we have the power to do so, should invest in areas that have been underinvested, that have been underserved, that have been disinvested. We know those places. Let's put the focus there and begin to move the needle. It's us.

Fred Payne: When we think about poverty and hunger being something that happens to other people and people who are not around us, the facts don't lend themselves to that. It's just not true.

Q: The 2024 Indiana General Assembly will convene in a few months. What are some specific policies or proposed legislation we should support on the hunger front?

Fred Payne: In the last legislative session there was a lot of movement in areas on the social services side that allow more people to be eligible for childcare and things like that. We want to make sure that we're

continuing to focus on some of those things, but really looking at starting to educate our legislators on the total need in the community. The ALICE population is a population that kind of gets overlooked, because they are working, and a lot of times the emphasis is on people who are not working. We need to make sure we don't take our foot off the gas for those who aren't working, but we also need to make sure that we're focusing on those who are working and who just need a little bit more intervention to help them move to that next level.

Q: What would you like to see happen in the next 12 months when it comes to addressing hunger and the working poor?

Theresa Patterson: I want the data to tell a different story. I want to move the needle. I don't want to do this work just to do this work, and I don't want it to be a Band-aid. I want to move the needle.

David Miner: I'd love to see twice as many organizations be part of the Good Wages Initiative. I'd love to see us go back to the child tax credit that

took kids out of poverty for one year during the pandemic. Can we find some form of that to make that kind of a dramatic reduction?

David Hampton: I'd like to see more of the collaboration that we've discussed. Let's use organizations that have the capacity to help get food to our communities.

Fred Payne: I'd like to see the numbers move in a different direction than they are today. ●



1 in 9
Hoosiers is
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—  —
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