

Poverty, Policy, and Public Attitudes in Greater Kansas City


Convergence
Partnership

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PolicyLink serves as the program director for the Convergence Partnership, helping to develop and implement the plans and actions necessary to ensure that all people can live in healthy communities of opportunity.

In 2018 the Convergence Partnership provided grants to seven organizations to advocate for solutions that create equitable changes for diverse communities across the country. These profiles include stories that capture the experiences and impacts of this work from the perspectives of the community members, grassroots and community organizations, and funder partners involved.

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Changing the Narrative, One Story at a Time

There are two Kansas Cities—one in Kansas and the other in Missouri. Locals know them as KCK and KCMO (pronounced “K-C-Mo”) for short.

In both Wyandotte and Jackson counties, where KCK and KCMO are located, respectively, nearly one-sixth of the people are food insecure—that is, they do not have steady access to enough affordable and nutritious food. Many of these people live in communities of color. But the politics in Greater Kansas City are hard to navigate, and talking openly about race and racism can backfire.

With funding support from the Convergence Partnership, the Health Forward Foundation, which serves counties in both Missouri and Kansas, is working with organizations in the two Kansas Cities to collect stories from a diverse set of residents and put those stories to use to change public attitudes on poverty and to shape public policy around federal safety-net programs. The stories highlight people's experiences with several federal nutrition programs up for reauthorization under the Farm Bill and the Child Nutrition Act.

The Farm Bill, which is typically renewed every five years, supports agriculture and conservation, and includes the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP, formerly Food Stamps), the country's largest anti-hunger program. The Child Nutrition Act provides funding for programs such as free or subsidized school meals, and for the Women, Infants, and Children (WIC) program, which supports nutrition for pregnant women or new mothers and their infants and young children.

To gather stories, the Center for Neighborhoods (CFN) started by working in farmers' markets "because you get all different kinds of people there, and you can sit and talk and explain your work," says Dina Newman, CFN's executive director. Her group equips local community leaders in KCMO with the skills they need to advocate for their communities. In addition to farmers' markets, her group continued the dialogue during its regular leadership training programs.

In KCK, Rachel Jefferson is executive director of a neighborhood revitalization group called the Historic Northeast Midtown Association, or HNMA. Her organization benefited from working with StoryCorps, the national oral history organization, which recorded community members' stories. "I learned the value of people being the owner of their own stories," she says. "We have to be a good steward of those stories."

Together, the collected stories tell how "people from all walks of life, of all creeds and colors, can benefit from a little assistance," says Jefferson. These stories tap into a mutual aid narrative that challenges the popular—and often racialized—personal responsibility narrative that shapes how much of the public understands safety-net programs. "For example, one story was about a woman in an abusive relationship who used SNAP benefits to get out of that relationship"—the extra money to buy food gave her the financial stability to leave her abuser. Such stories are about individuals, but they also speak to the larger political and structural issues those individuals face, such as the woman facing abuse and a lack of services, a

family in a food desert, or a farmer whose crop yield is low one season. "If the systems were working properly," says Jefferson, "we wouldn't need to have these programs."

Selected stories were used on social media, broadcast on local radio, told live at public events, and presented to legislators. Testimonials also helped the community organizations involved in the story gathering learn from the communities about where to focus their energies. In addition, several artists were enlisted to create work based on the 100+ stories that were collected. The purpose? To reach audiences who would never read a policy brief or other technical document. Two visual artists created a touring art exhibit that was displayed at the Jackson County, Missouri, legislative offices for a full month, and a poet created a spoken-word art show.

"The stories put a human face on these programs," says Jefferson, "instead of talking about the tens of thousands of people who benefit." Stories not only influence the public, but also empower the tellers. In the process of sharing their own experiences, people who have benefited from government assistance assert their dignity. That is a vital ingredient of a strong community and, eventually, a movement. Little by little, organizers say, these stories change the larger, often racialized, narratives on poverty and aid programs.

"Organizers go out and hear diverse stories from barber shops and grocery stores and laundromats," says Adriana Pecina, senior program officer at the Health Forward Foundation. Health Forward and its partner organizations are working on narrative and policy change, and storytelling is critical in all their efforts, says Pecina. "At the same time as organizers gather stories, they're also educating community members about the policy issues. We want the communities affected by such policies to be a part of the process."

Putting Stories to Work in Policy Change

Telling stories may be emotionally satisfying, all the more so if they change people's attitudes. But changing the narrative is only part of the work of storytelling. Stories can also be used to help change policy.

Beth Low-Smith is the vice president of policy at KC Healthy Kids, another partner in the Kansas City work. Her group supports communities as they advocate for improving access to affordable fresh food and safe places to walk and play. Low-Smith works mostly with "grasstops" policy people, but says the work is incomplete unless she also engages with grassroots groups.

"The work I do is much stronger when it's collaborative," explains Low-Smith. "I don't always know what community stakeholders are going to want, and I need opportunities to hear their stories so I can be an effective advocate."

Grassroots stories inform which issues take priority, and the stories can be used as a tool of persuasion. At a recent visit to a US senator's office, for example, Low-Smith shared the story of a family forced to choose between complying with work requirements to receive SNAP, or being able to care for their kids after school. The legislative aide said he had needed a story the senator could use to justify opposing changes to SNAP eligibility that were proposed—but ultimately defeated—during the 2018 Farm Bill reauthorization. The senator himself may or may not have needed persuading, but he needed to persuade others.

The Farm Bill was reauthorized in late 2018 without cuts to SNAP food subsidies; that victory came in part thanks to work by partners in Greater Kansas City. These and other groups continued their policy education work on the reauthorization of the Child Nutrition Act.

Low-Smith's policy work can help communities become more effective advocates as well. She gives training on policy issues, writes policy updates, produces sample social media posts, and helps partners think about how best to respond to policy opportunities and threats. For example, she educated grassroots groups on both sides of the state line about the so-called "public charge" rule, which would give the Department of Homeland Security broad discretion to deny work visas or green cards to people who received public benefits such as SNAP, housing subsidies, or medical care. All of this work is informed by what community groups—such as those run by Jefferson and Newman—tell her they need.

Going Upstream on Equity

Support from the Convergence Partnership has enabled partner organizations in Greater Kansas City to deepen and accelerate their work because they're working together in new ways. "Thanks to this grant, we were able to put boots on the ground and hire staff who are recognized in the community," says Newman. That means they can draw on community expertise more deeply than before. And, importantly, they can now apply that newfound wisdom to their shared work on policy.

Low-Smith echoes that sentiment, and says that the learning goes both ways. "I think a lot about water policy," she says. "But it was community stakeholders who made the connections between water quality and food equity." Those insights have deepened her work on policy. She says they are also lifting up community voices in new ways, such as through the art exhibit and spoken-word show, and building a stronger community voice in the process. Many of those voices are from the communities of color most affected by poor water quality, food subsidies, and racial inequity.

Jefferson thinks back to what drew her to this work in the first place. Before joining the HNMA, she worked at a health safety-net clinic—it served anyone regardless of their ability to pay. "I wanted to work on the systemic issues that are at play long before people even get to the doctor's office—or that prevent them from getting there. In other words, I wanted to go upstream. Now I'm working upstream."

The Health Forward Foundation is going upstream, too. They are working more on health and racial equity than ever before. "We don't always use the term 'racial equity,'" says senior program officer Brenda Calvin, "because it's a delicate situation in our region. But we're committed to addressing disparities and systemic inequities as it relates to racial equity." Storytelling is a way to bring light to racial inequities and identify structural solutions. That's why Calvin says the Foundation works to capture authentic narratives of underresourced groups from the urban core to rural communities.

The Foundation's commitment, says Calvin, is reflected in its selection of grantee partners, and in a new board committee that will be focusing on equity. "The Convergence Partnership is setting the pace by supporting our local partners and advancing the conversation around racial equity, and that's a good thing," she says. "But we should not be outpaced by our partners. We have a responsibility to be courageous in our efforts as well."

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