

**Name the Grand Challenge: Food Justice for Birmingham: Providing a Model for
Alabama and the US**

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Description of the Problem to be addressed: The Grand Challenge we propose to address is food injustice which manifests as hunger and food insecurity in Birmingham. Across the world, 1 in 9 individuals are chronically undernourished. In 2016, 41.2 million people in the US lived in food-insecure households and Alabama had the 2nd highest food hardship rate in the nation. The City of Birmingham and UAB both experience food insecurity in the citizens, students, and clients they serve. In Birmingham, 230,000 people are food insecure and 76,000 of those are children. UAB Blazer Kitchen has provided over 56,000 meals since March of 2017. The largest numbers of recipients were working adults aged 19-59 with males were more highly represented than females.

Beyond the humanitarian crisis of adults and children going without food in our community, hunger is rooted in other social ills. First, food insecurity is a health issue. Inadequate food security leads to diabetes, high blood pressure, and childhood obesity because families lack sufficient funding to purchase healthy foods and opt for calorie dense, low nutritional food. Nutritional deprivation, even short term, causes life-long negative impacts for children. Lack of wholesome food affects the brain and causes issues which cannot be undone which increases inattention, cognitive deficits, and delayed development through childhood. Additionally, negative social stigma surrounds food insecurity. The fear of being labeled as inferior or needy keeps individuals and families from seeking assistance and services reduce hunger. Additionally, the practices of food programs and social services may reinforce stigma by having limited food options, controlling food selections and choices, and not consider culture and preference when providing assistance and services. Finally, food insecurity disproportionately affects the most vulnerable in our society. The homeless population are the most vulnerable to food insecurity because they lack social stability, reliable income, and many other social necessities. Feeding America, the largest food assistance program, reported that 10% of their recipients were homeless. Children and the elderly also experience high rates of food insecurity in the US. In Alabama, 24% percent of all children and 17% of all elderly adults experienced food insecurity last year. Food insecurity forces citizens to make choices between eating and paying for other critical needs in the family. The starting point to true food security is examining the causes, and solutions through a social justice lens.

Arguments about why food insecurity persists in the US range from overpopulation to inadequate food production. Neither of those arguments, however, provide credible evidence of explaining the problem. The US produces an excess of food each year, and every day, enough food is thrown away to feed most US citizens. The real issue is that of social justice around the production and distribution of food. To do food justice, we must acknowledge social trauma and the persistent racism, gender and class inequalities that are the structural causes of inequality in food security. Further, we must return control of food production and distribution to the local level. Finally, we must pursue equitable food practices and policies that promote human rights such as a livable wage for farm workers or the ability for people to feed themselves with dignity.

Desired outcomes and the conceptualization of the plan of work to achieve them: The multifaceted plan to eradicate food insecurity in Birmingham and positively impact overall food justice throughout Alabama works across three levels of intervention – individual/family, community and institutional. Desired outcomes include 1) Increase access to healthy food across Alabama for individuals and families; 2) Enhance community capacity for the production

and distribution of local food; 3) Increase knowledge of and advocacy related to equitable food policy in Alabama; and 4) decrease stigma associated with receiving food assistance in Alabama.

Individual/Family Interventions: We will work to provide access to healthy food options to every citizen in Birmingham through direct food provisions. This will be done by engaging the food bank network in Birmingham and Alabama to develop and expand its capacity so that every person in Birmingham and Alabama has the ability to feed themselves with dignity. First, we will start with Blazer Kitchen that serves UAB students, faculty, staff and UAB Medicine patients. We will work to expand and duplicate that service by establishing a coalition of Higher Education Food Banks in Alabama to share best practices and research food insecurity. We will consult with colleges, universities, and trade schools to start and build capacity for a food pantry on every post-secondary campus in Alabama. Next, we will work with other community-based agencies in Birmingham to grow the number of food pantries and feeding sites available to all citizens. These agencies will include food bank network, homeless shelters, and soup kitchens as well as non-traditional agencies such as the Jefferson County Library Cooperative to enable them to become a feeding site. We will seek models from other states who already provide feeding through public libraries, and work with policy makers and library staff to provide these direct services. Additionally, we will work with all community partners, including homeless shelters and other types of temporary housing in the city of Birmingham, to be able to provide healthy and culturally-appropriate food options to their clients in a manner that supports the dignity of individuals and families and reduces the stigma of hunger and poverty.

Community Interventions: At the community level, we will help to build capacity for food production and the development of food policy at the local level with two initiatives. First, we will work with neighborhood associations, schools, and shelters to create a system green houses and community garden that are accessible to citizens in their areas. These green houses and community garden initiatives will be overseen through the creation of a Garden Corps initiative that will be housed in the Office of Service Learning and Undergraduate Research at UAB. Garden Corps members are AmeriCorps members who are trained in gardening and urban farming. They work to teach community leaders to treat the soil, select appropriate produce, and plant according to seasons of growth. Garden Corps members will work with the Jones Valley Teaching Farm to continue to provide education and learning for school children in Alabama around healthy food options and gardening. Second, we will establish a food policy council in Jefferson County that will determine ideas and information on community food security and develop community food policy priorities.

Institutional Intervention: We will create a Center for Food Justice at UAB, housed within the Department of Social Work (College of Arts & Sciences) that will conduct research related to hunger, including equitable food policies at the state, federal, and international levels. This Center will provide advocacy work throughout the state related to hunger and work to address policies that negatively impact food resources. This Center, through research and advocacy, will provide education to policy makers at the local, state, federal and international levels. The Center will also provide information that will be available directly to the public through a web archive of its research.

List of potential team members:

Internal Partners

Benevolent Fund - Blazer Kitchen
Department of Biology
Department of Nursing
Department of Public Health
Department of Social Work
Division of Student Affairs
Institute for Human Rights
Office of Service Learning & Undergraduate Research

External Partners

Alabama Cooperative Extension Service
Alabama Possible
Birmingham Botanical Gardens – Master Gardener Program
Birmingham Southern College
Citizens Advisory Board – City of Birmingham
City of Birmingham
Community Food Bank of Central Alabama, Feeding America affiliate
Jefferson County Department of Health
Jefferson County Library Cooperative
Jefferson State Community College
Jones Valley Teaching Farm
Lakeshore Foundation
Lawson State Community College
Magic City Harvest
Miles College
Samford University
SIFAT (Servants in Faith and Technology)
Shipt
University of Montevallo

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