

## NUTRITION IS PRIMARY HEALTHCARE

Think of nutrition as primary healthcare. The mission at Antioch for Youth & Family is to nurture mind, body and spirit with purpose and persistence. When you think about it, taking such a holistic approach is vital to the economic well-being of the Arkansas river valley.

It is imperative to all of us that children go to school, ready to learn and not ready to eat and that employees are present and prepared to be productive. Smart food choices in the home make both of those things happen. Antioch provides food assistance in such a way that proper meals are served at home and paves the way for a lifelong appreciation for wholesome eating.

One-in-five in our area is food insecure with one-in-four elderly and one-in-three children at risk. For those who might consider those statistics as staggering, recognize that 72% of public-school children qualify for free/reduced priced meals (that's 10,200 children), 20% of local adults are living on disability insurance benefits and income levels in 27% of local households are at or below the federal poverty line.

Charolette Tidwell is in her twenty-second year operating on the front lines of the hunger battlefield. Starting with no more than a pickup truck and personal ambition, her organization has grown to serve as many as 30,000 people a month and is now the largest food-assistance program in the state.

During the pandemic, you will find Ms. Tidwell at Martin Luther King Park each Wednesday morning providing as much as two truckloads of food to over 1,000 families only to return to her pantry to assemble grocery boxes for a couple hundred more families for the next day and the day after that.

A total of 14 mobile operations take food to the elderly and disabled living in low-income complexes each month to assure that any lack of finances does not impede how they nourish their bodies. As a retired nurse, Ms. Tidwell knows independent living is vital to the well-being of our senior citizens and that compromised nutrition has a devastating effect on health.

For children, the Antioch in Schools Produce Program assures our youth have a proper understanding of the role balanced meals play in physical and intellectual well-being. Students at almost every Fort Smith Public School has been supported with take-home bags of apples, oranges, potatoes, kiwi, and once, even rambutan, a southeast Asian tropical fruit. You may have even passed Northside High School students dismissed from school carrying watermelons home. Antioch was the first organization in the state to introduce "Cooking Matters" into the school curriculum at Northside. Students opted-in to a once a week 30-minute class that introduced them to smart cooking on a budget.

Clearly, food insecurity represents a public health issue that should concern all of us, but its impact on women and children should be especially disconcerting. Female heads-of-households have a food insecurity prevalence rate almost 3 times the national average. Food insecurity affects the physical health of toddlers, impacts adolescents with depression and anxiety and pre-teens and teens with suicidal thoughts. A link exists between food insecurity and illiteracy. Even the mildest form of food insecurity is associated with risk of poor cognitive, social, and emotional development of children. It stands to reason that all of these consequences ferment to impact the river valley's economic competitiveness.

Thankfully, we do have individuals and companies willing to give and willing to care. The new 10,000 square foot Antioch Community Pantry on North 32<sup>nd</sup> Street serves as a true beacon of hope. With over 3.5 million pounds of food distributed in 2020, it is clear that much hope is needed and much more support of its mission needs to be garnered. With a valuation of almost \$6M and an estimated community economic impact of \$10.76M, it is clear Antioch is well worth the efforts.