



# A tale of pandemics

As the coronavirus pandemic has spread across the U.S., its disproportionate impact on Black Americans and other people of color has been stark. Long-standing inequities are receiving renewed scrutiny, creating deeper understandings of crises that existed all along. By Deborah Todd

**T**he double-doored glass entrance to the Sto-Rox Public Library is locked these days, as it has been on and off since March, when COVID-19 shut down nonessential operations in Pennsylvania and much of the nation. But beyond the rows of desktops and hip-height bookcases, Jackie Page can be seen rushing from behind the counter of Love Rocks Café to greet a visitor.

When Ms. Page relocated her busy North Versailles-based catering business 17 miles northwest to McKees Rocks borough in February 2019, the library already served as a popular gathering space, and it didn't take long to make an impact in the community. The aroma of cranberry rosemary chicken, shrimp and grits, and mac and cheese attracted

customers throughout the block. Ms. Page's easy banter and embracing personality pulled in new faces from across the neighborhood.

The first quarter of last year brought in around \$12,000, and by the end of 2019, the business saw around \$50,000, much of that due to a low overhead and Ms. Page serving as a one-woman shop. The successful start fueled plans for new locations, hiring employees, and an ultimate vision for a restaurant group that would feature an eatery and craft beer pub named for her deceased sister Raquel.

Then in March, Allegheny County's non-essential businesses shut down under Gov. Tom Wolf's order, and any ground gained last year was lost within weeks.

"It was busy, sometimes I would have every seat at the counter and tables taken. People

would be standing in line getting their to-go's, and I'd literally be standing here wondering, how am I going to do this? Then 10 minutes later I'd have everyone out the door," recalled Ms. Page from behind the empty counter, salt and pepper braids tied in a loose bun atop her head.

"The ideal is to sell 30 meals a day. I was lucky if I sold 30 meals a week the last month."

For Ms. Page, and Black and brown business owners in Allegheny County and across the nation, systemic financial inequalities that served as looming obstacles prior to COVID-19 have come crashing down in ways that could potentially bury these businesses en masse. By April, statistics began to reveal that a disproportionate impact on people of



Jackie Page is still preparing food at her Love Rocks Café in McKees Rocks borough, but she's relying on takeout orders to keep money coming in during the pandemic.



color was taking hold not only for business owners but also across almost all measurable aspects of life.

For example, a survey by the economic development consulting firm Fourth Economy showed that Black unemployment in the U.S. was 16.7 percent in April, compared to 14.2 percent for whites. By June, Black unemployment rates held steady at 16.8 percent while white unemployment fell to 12.4 percent.

In September, a compilation of COVID-19 statistics by race gathered by Carnegie Mellon University's CREATE Lab showed that Black Allegheny County residents had 1,745 cases of COVID-19 per 100,000 population, compared to 685 per 100,000 for white people.

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The pandemic's impact on Ms. Page illustrates several challenges. Savings weren't enough to support rent during the disruption to her business and, as a renter, she couldn't refinance property or repurpose the space to generate cash flow. When she tried to apply for the Paycheck Protection Program (PPP), which provided small business owners \$659 billion for payroll costs, rent, mortgages, utilities and other expenses, she learned she was ineligible because her business does not support at least two employees.

Her application for unemployment was denied because, while she supported herself through the business, she never paid herself an actual paycheck. Now, to help keep some money coming in, she is selling pre-ordered family dinners for takeout from Love Rocks Café.

As Khamil Scantling, founder of the Pittsburgh regional Black business directory *Cocoapreneur*, watched the PPP loan process unfold, it confirmed every fear she had that it would exacerbate inequalities during a time when Black entrepreneurs could barely hold their heads above water.

“A lot of small business owners might be able to go to the bank, get a business loan, leverage their house or something they have equity in, and that is just not a reality for a lot of small Black business owners,” she explained. “A lot of us start businesses through crowdfunding or [community development financial institutions]. We don't go through traditional institutions, so there was no working relationship where you could call up the bank and say, ‘Hey, Frank, can you walk me through my PPP?’ There was just a different dynamic for Black business owners.”

In an effort to close the gap in relief, Ms. Scantling teamed up with Brandon Brooks, CEO of the small business crowdfunding site *Inventrify*, to create the Pittsburgh Black Business Relief Fund. The *Inventrify* campaign, which started in an effort to support Black businesses whose property was damaged during social justice protests, raised more than \$80,000 to provide mini-grants to Black businesses affected by the shutdown. So far,

16 local entrepreneurs—including Ms. Page—have received funding for the effort. But scores more, unfortunately, were turned away.

“I had \$88,000 liquid and ready to go. Our requests for funding totaled about \$190,000, so I'm \$110,000 short of being able to give every person who applied everything they asked for,” Ms. Scantling said. “It seems like \$100,000, when you're splitting it amongst an entire community, is nothing.”

By the time the *Inventrify* campaign was underway, it had become part of a loosely affiliated network of intervention efforts sparked by nonprofits, foundations, grassroots organizations and activists across the county designed to support underserved communities during COVID-19.

The emergency nature and origin of the programs allowed for a level of collaboration and flexibility that delivered goods and services faster and distributed funds more efficiently than traditional models. The organic collaborations, ultimately, saved businesses and possibly lives in a time of crisis. But they also fall painfully short of what is needed in order to not only restore underserved businesses to the levels at which they were operating before the crisis, but ensure that they can survive the next disaster to come.

**B**efore the first case of COVID-19 was confirmed in Allegheny County, Dr. Elizabeth Miller, medical director of Community and Population Health at UPMC Children's Hospital, had an inkling that the region's communities of color would bear the brunt of its impact in terms of health.

“Infections follow the fault lines of structural inequalities. This is not new, it's something we knew long before,” she said.

Beyond a disproportionate infection rate that would ultimately lead to higher deaths among underserved communities with preexisting medical conditions, Dr. Miller knew that essential workers who were people of color were putting themselves at risk for exposure at far higher rates than other groups. She also knew that the overall impact of the shutdown would further separate underserved

communities from much-needed resources and services.

In the first weeks of March, Dr. Miller deployed community health teams to underserved neighborhoods for deliveries of food, formula and medicine, and advocated for changes to late arrival penalties and other clinical policies that would discourage patients without transportation from accessing care.

Concurrently, Shanon Hughes, founder of the Wellness Collective, a membership group of neighbors who support each other through emergencies, was hosting meetings with other community service providers to assess how to prioritize needs of individuals and families suddenly cut off from income, transportation and potential sources of food. Within weeks, Ms. Hughes, who also founded the media accountability group The Narrative Justice, was able to establish a community delivery hotline that took groceries, prescriptions, medical supplies, hygiene products and other necessities to the doorsteps of the underserved.

Around the same time, the maternal and child health care provider Healthy Start was transitioning Demia Horsley from a role in program development and management to one overseeing a newly created COVID doula program, which connected expecting mothers with doulas to provide free virtual education and services before and during deliveries. The program intentionally reached out to Black doulas who were affected by the shutdown so they could serve Black mothers and keep their businesses going.

1Hood Media founder and activist Jasiri X and his team had already been handing out N-95 masks to frontline workers by April, when statistics made it clear who was being impacted most by COVID-19. Jasiri X also joined Dr. Jamil Bey, president of the “think-and-do” tank UrbanKind Institute, and Dr. Cheryl Hall-Russell, president of the diversity consulting firm Black Women, Wise Women, to create “What Black Pittsburgh Needs to Know about COVID-19,” a weekly Facebook Live chat that discussed resources, statistics and general information related to coronavirus in Allegheny County. Since that time, the program has evolved to discuss a range of topics affecting Pittsburgh’s Black community.



To address health needs during the pandemic, particularly in Black communities, Pittsburgh nonprofits like 1Hood Media have been stepping up to help. From left, 1Hood volunteers Shyheim Banks, co-founder Jasiri X, Farooq Al-Said and Brittney Chantele pack up masks for distribution.

While grassroots organizations were hitting the ground running to meet the overwhelming demand for supplies, Ms. Hughes said foundations and nonprofits were behind the scenes working to ensure that the groups had the resources that they needed to serve their clients.

“We have some dope people who work in the foundation community and recognized the gaps and barriers in resources and support, and they were really intentional from the beginning. I didn’t reach out to any of them [for funding], they reached out to me,” she said.

POISE Foundation President and CEO Mark Lewis said the organization made a point to reach out to engage smaller community organizations and churches because they directly serve under-represented communities but don’t traditionally receive foundation dollars. POISE put out a call for \$500,000 for the creation of a critical needs fund, ended up raising a little more than a million dollars—including support from other local foundations such as The Heinz Endowments—and distributed \$900,000 to support different groups’ efforts.

In late February, Mr. Lewis and several local entrepreneurs came together to form the Black COVID-19 Equity Coalition, a collective of epidemiologists, researchers, entrepreneurs and public officials determined to study the long-term impacts that the virus would have on the region’s Black communities.

Since its inception, the coalition has formed task forces, including a data research group tasked with gathering COVID health data by race, a task force that investigated how information about testing was being distributed to the Black community, and a Black Business COVID-19 Working Group in which Ms. Scantling and others work to fill gaps in funding for entrepreneurs of color. The coalition’s ultimate purpose is to move past the emergency to narrow down disparities exposed by coronavirus once and for all.

“We were either disinvested or not invested in for the last 400 years,” Mr. Lewis observed. “How do we get to where there’s a specific plan and investment into the Black community that provides us the resources we need to have the opportunities to become what this country says every citizen and individual has the right to become?”

For Ms. Hughes of the Wellness Collective, the unprecedented level of cooperation among providers was a start.

“2020 has been so foundational that it’s tearing away all of the things that weren’t right, that didn’t exist and weren’t working. The collaboration was beautiful and necessary,” she said. “Being able to see and hear people who typically weren’t seen or heard, to be person-centered and body-centered. I feel like that’s what society should be, and it’s never been that way before.” **h**