

Public health students address inequality and food insecurity

Mon, 06/17/2024 - 14:22

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Janae Burney, Treasure Joiner, and Joseph Benefiel are making a difference addressing food insecurity at Tulane.

After learning about the prevalence of food insecurity among college students and meeting with coordinators of several university pantries to learn about their operations, public health student Janae Burney founded Students Against Food

Insecurity (SAFI) in the spring of 2022.

“As human beings, I feel we have an obligation to advocate for one another when we observe injustice and do all that we can to ensure that we are all being provided for,” Burney said.

According to the National Institute of Health, 1 in 3 university students experience food insecurity. College campuses are becoming increasingly aware of this and have taken action to address it in different ways. While Tulane provides resources for students in need through the Swipe Out Hunger program and Center for Academic Equity programming, there is still a need for a consistent resource for students who are not always able to afford a trip to the grocery store. Since its founding, SAFI has garnered support from several student organizations and university departments and distributed over 3,500 pounds of grocery items to the Tulane community.

“My hope is for the pantry to continue to provide supplemental groceries and nutrition education to the entire Tulane community.”

Janae Burney, SAFI President

"SAFI is an extraordinary organization founded and run by students driven to make positive changes in our community," Mollye Demosthenidy, Dean of Newcomb-Tulane College said. "Their dedication to addressing food insecurity is inspiring and embodies the spirit of compassion and service that uniquely defines our student body. I look forward to seeing the ways in which these students continue to make a lasting, meaningful impact in the world and their communities during their time at Tulane and beyond."

The SAFI Board is operated by an executive board and thirteen students and advised by Maurice Smith, Associate Director of the Center for Public Service.

President Janae Burney is a third-year student majoring in Public Health with a minor in Africana Studies. She is a Posse Scholar from Los Angeles. Her academic and career passions lie in studying maternal-child health and learning about initiatives that address the structural inequities that hinder communities from accessing health care.

First Vice President Treasure Joiner is a third-year undergraduate student studying Public Health and Africana Studies. She is a Posse Scholar from California and she is

passionate about maternal and child health and reproductive justice.

Second Vice President Joseph Benefiel is a junior majoring in Psychology with minors in Africana Studies and Gender & Sexuality studies. He is a Posse Scholar from Los Angeles. His academic interests include the intersections of research psychology and the LGBTQIA+ community.

"My biggest inspiration has been the interactions I've had with the students who utilize the SAFI pantry," Benefiel said. "Hearing how much the work we do makes an impact on their lives motivates me to continue working with SAFI."

In addition to providing the much-needed service of providing food to those in need, SAFI aims to increase awareness about food insecurity among Tulane students and the prevalence of food apartheid within the New Orleans community. SAFI collaborates with other student organizations to put forth initiatives focused on education about food insecurity and related resources, and champions impactful service events and excursions by forming long-lasting relationships with community partners.

The SAFI board is proud of the work they've done and the impact they've been able to have but they also have their eyes on the future.

"I hope to see SAFI expand at Tulane," Joiner said. "Our goal is to provide a variety of options for all students. For example, we are in the process of purchasing larger refrigerators and a deep freezer to store more items. We are also in the process of working with campus partners to use the pantry for other needs such as menstruation products."

"I would love to see SAFI move to a permanent space on Tulane's campus," Benefiel added. "The biggest hurdle we're constantly facing is making our resources as accessible as possible to the Tulane community, and I believe finding a home for the SAFI pantry on campus is the next step to making that a reality."

Burney likewise has her eyes fixed on growth.

"My hope is for the pantry to continue to provide supplemental groceries and nutrition education to the entire Tulane community, including expanding our distribution to dining and janitorial staff," she said. "Additionally, I hope to further develop our community partnerships to be able to redistribute food that typically gets wasted from local restaurants and grocery stores."