



**LEFT:** Hunger Outreach Project club sponsor Laura Berns leads a meeting after school Oct. 31. Last year, HOP held multiple food drives, and they recently collaborated with Operation Food Search to provide food to local communities. “[Our goal is] to help with canned food collections [and] monetary donations, and this year, we are also volunteering at Operation Food Search,” Berns said. (Photo by Ginger Schulte)

**RIGHT:** Food deserts cause inhabitants to rely on convenience stores for food, such as Dollar Tree or any gas station store. In 2016, Metro Market, a mobile grocery store, began bringing fresh and healthy produce to these poorer neighborhoods. “Unfortunately, there are a lot of food deserts in St. Louis,” Kristen Wild, Operation Food Search Executive Director, said. “What we’re trying to do is ... ensure that they have food that people can access.” (Photo by Ginger Schulte)



# food insecurity is real

## response efforts to the ongoing food crisis

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**T**hroughout St. Louis, food insecurity remains a prevalent issue for many families, which means they do not have a stable source of proper food. According to the 2016 Missouri Hunger Atlas, 16.4 percent of households in St. Louis County are uncertain as to when their next meal will come. Each year, nonprofits such as Operation Food Search work to decrease these numbers by distributing food to members of the St. Louis community.

“One of the things that’s most surprising to people is that food insecurity is everywhere,” Kristen Wild, OFS Executive Director, said. “It’s not just in the city.”

One reason why food insecurity happens is because of food deserts. A food desert is an area, typically in a less privileged community, that does not have reliable sources of healthy food, like grocery stores. For example, there are many food deserts in the northern part of St. Louis, and oftentimes, residents in these areas lack the transportation to go to grocery stores in other areas. This leaves people with options like convenience stores at gas stations, fast food chains and dollar stores, perpetuating food insecurity.

“In a lot of these places, there are no grocery stores,” Wild said. “There might be a gas station with a convenience store where they could buy snack foods, but they can’t purchase foods that really constitute healthy meals.”

OFS operates under three pillars: meeting the immediate needs of the community, building “nutrition IQ” and championing changes in policies. They consequently have created many different programs in an effort to aid those who are suffering from food insecurity. To help provide fresh and healthy food in food deserts, OFS partnered with Metro Market, a nonprofit mobile grocery store that visits communities in need every week.

Another program rolled out by OFS is Operation Backpack, which provides children who are receiving free or subsidized lunches with meals over the weekend.

“Operation Backpack is a program where we are providing food to about 8,500 kids every week on Friday or the day before a break, and they take home a backpack filled with food every week,” Wild said. “These are a lot of the same kids who were on free and reduced lunch and breakfast who don’t necessarily have confidence that they’re going to have a meal over the weekend, so we’re able to satisfy that need.”

Hunger Outreach Project, a club that works to inform students about food insecurity, partnered with OFS at the beginning of the school year to provide students

with a way to help fight hunger in St. Louis. Throughout the semester, members have volunteered at OFS and given back to the community.

“We helped [OFS] take the food that has been donated and put it into boxes to take to different food pantries around the city,” HOP club sponsor Laura Berns said.

At this year’s powder-puff football game, HOP will require spectators and players to bring at least two cans of food and will donate them to food organizations.

HOP collected about 150 cans of food at the previous powder-puff football game and later donated them to a local Jewish food pantry.

“Powder-puff is our biggest event of the year,” senior Callie Cox, HOP Executive Board Director, said. “It’s a fun way for the students to come together while supporting a good cause.”

Food insecurity is often a symptom of poverty, which can lead to issues such as unstable housing and inability to afford childcare. OFS programs help people in need in all areas of life, not just food.

“What we’re really trying to do is to meet the immediate need and make sure people are fed,” Wild said. “But we’re also trying to prevent hunger from happening in the first place.” ■

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