

PITTSBURGH POLICY INITIATIVE

IMPACT REPORT



LETTER FROM THE EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR

Dear PPI Community,

We are excited to share with you the highlights of PPI's work and accomplishments during the 2024-25 academic year. As you will see, our leadership team and policy analysts invested hundreds of hours to shape the foundation of this organization and expand our community-centered projects. These efforts helped to raise over \$5,000 in internal funding, develop key institutional partnerships with units across the University of Pittsburgh, and complete several policy analysis projects for community organizations throughout the city. Community empowerment is and always will be the driving force behind PPI. We are thrilled with the progress we have made this year in fostering the transparent, mutually beneficial relationships necessary to fulfill our mission.

The roots of PPI began to take hold in May 2024, when my co-founder, Jay Halder, and I initiated the first in a series of conversations about creating Pitt's first student-run think tank—a gap we recognized among student organizations. After many late-night phone calls and work sessions, we came up with an outline of the organization that would become PPI.

We brought new voices to the table, recruiting fellow students Raafay Khan and Marley Pinsky to join our founding team, and we kept building. The result was an entirely student-run think tank with a core focus on community. Rather than simply offering students an opportunity to draft white papers on opaque national policy topics with little tangible impact, PPI was founded on the premise that 1.) local voices are too often disengaged and disempowered in the policymaking process, and 2.) students have the knowledge, skills, and drive to change that.

The outpouring of support and enthusiasm PPI has received during our first year of operations far exceeded my wildest dreams. In the 10 months since we launched, we have welcomed over 40 student analysts to our organization, visited both of Pitt's Community Engagement Centers and Hazelwood office space, and presented our work across the university at the Community-Engaged Scholarship Forum and Spring 2025 David C. Frederick Honors College Research Symposium. Our work is supporting local organizations



tackling some of the most pressing issues in our region—from expanding home ownership to improving SNAP enrollment rates—in an ever-evolving and rapidly changing policy landscape.

Alongside our successes, this year has also been a learning process. We are forever grateful to the leadership and staff of the Office of Engagement and Community Affairs for welcoming us into their domain with an open mind, guiding our leadership team's approach to partnership, and creating opportunities for PPI to responsibly build relationships with community members. Moreover, we are deeply indebted to the members of the Homewood and Hill District Neighborhood Advisory Councils and many other local leaders and residents for welcoming us into their communities and offering honest, constructive feedback. Last but certainly not least, PPI's current position would not be possible without the support of the David C. Frederick Honors College, which enthusiastically embraced our organization in its infancy and whose strategic advising and empowerment of our leadership team has been instrumental in making PPI what it is today. We are excited to continue these relationships and expand our portfolio of institutional and community partners who share our commitment to community empowerment and student leadership.

Going into the 2025-26 academic year, we are incredibly confident in our positioning. In the coming months, we are excited to unveil two new facets of our organization—the PPI Analyst Bootcamp and the Policy Accelerator—which will launch in Fall 2025. We also completed a successful leadership team transition and early action

recruitment cycle. Two standout members of PPI, Andrew Pruden and Shanthi Bhaskar, were promoted to new roles as executive director and operations director, respectively. Both Shanthi and Andrew fully embody the community-engaged mindsets and values that guide our organization, and I am thrilled that they will carry our momentum forward into the coming year. Additionally, founding member Raafay Khan is maintaining his role as communications director, former analyst Ragan Liebsch is stepping into the finance director role, and we are welcoming five outstanding student leaders new to PPI into key leadership roles as research director, housing project coleads, and food security project co-leads. During our early action spring application cycle, we received nearly 40 applications and accepted 27 undergraduate students to join PPI in the fall 2025 semester.

Despite the profound challenges facing our nation, the state of Pennsylvania, and all of us who call Pittsburgh home, the future of PPI is bright. I am beyond excited about what our new leadership team has planned and the breadth of experiences our incoming cohort of policy analysts brings to this organization. With your continued support, we will keep fighting for a better future so that everyone is empowered to have a say in the policies that impact their lives and communities.

Sincerely,

Simon Wang,

Co-Founder and Former Executive Director



LEADERSHIP IN ACTION

The Pittsburgh Policy Initiative is proudly student-led by design. Our student leadership model is both a structural choice and, more importantly, what makes PPI different. By placing students at the helm, PPI ensures that emerging voices are not only heard but are actively shaping the direction, priorities, and strategies of the organization.

This approach empowers students to lead with purpose, bridging academic inquiry with real-world problem solving. Our leadership team works collaboratively to guide both the long-term vision and daily operations of PPI, ensuring that every project we pursue is grounded in community relevance and student-driven innovation.



Simon WangCo-Founder,
Executive Director



Jaydep HalderCo-Founder,
Operations Director



Raafay Khan
Communications
Director



Shanthi Bhaskar Finance Director



Sarayu Cheemalapati Research Director



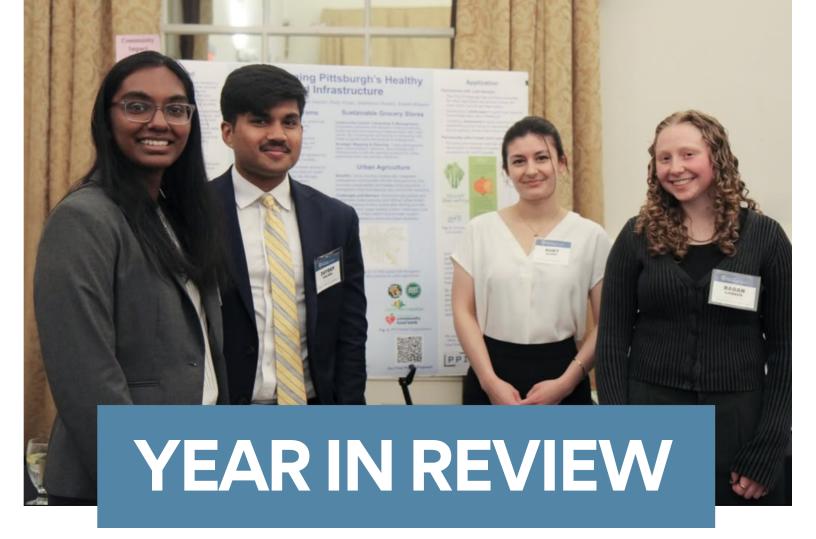
Andrew Pruden
Housing Project
Co-Lead



Helen KatyalHousing Project
Co-Lead



Bhavi PunjalaFood Security
Project Lead



MISSION

Uplift community voices in the creation, implementation, and evaluation of public policy by centering student leadership.

PPI was founded on the idea that rigorous research executed in partnership with local communities drives effective policy. Rather than researching from afar, we are committed to grounding our work in the ideas and perspectives of residents and local leaders in Pittsburgh.

In the 2024-25 academic year, we focused on deepening trust and building partnerships across Pittsburgh's neighborhoods. We collaborated closely with the University's Office of Engagement and Community Affairs and engaged regularly with Neighborhood Directors across the four Neighborhood Commitments. We introduced PPI to the Neighborhood Advisory Councils, whose leadership shapes the work of the Community Engagement Centers, and made it a priority to consistently visit community spaces, including meetings, workshops, and public events.

These relationships weren't transactional. They were built by listening, showing up, and asking how our capacity for policy research could be of service. As a student-led initiative, we know that credibility is earned, and this year, we took meaningful steps to do so.

While we're still growing and learning, our focus remains the same: to ensure that our policy work reflects the priorities of the communities we aim to serve.

GROWTH & PRESENCE

COMMUNITY PARTNERS

FALL RECRUITMENT

Over the course of the fall semester, PPI grew to include five executive board members and our first cohort of policy analysts:

18

Fall policy analysts recruited



cooperative ministries

SPRING RECRUITMENT

This spring, we doubled our analysts:

- 37 applicants
- 27 onboarded

2.5x

Growth in PPI policy analysts

JUST HARVEST EST. 1986

ONLINE ENGAGEMENT

PPI has rapidly expanded its online presence in the past 10 months to reach as many students and community members as possible:

374

Number of total followers across LinkedIn and Instagram





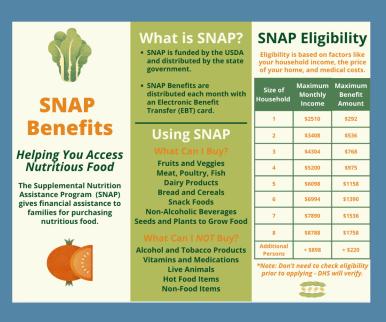
COMMUNITY IMPACT

* FOOD SECURITY *

Food insecurity remains a persistent challenge in Pittsburgh, where many neighborhoods experience conditions of food apartheid. To address the systemic and racially driven inequities in food access that determine where grocery stores and fresh food outlets are located, the Food Security Team focused on two main areas: expanding access to SNAP benefits and exploring urban agriculture as a tool to address food deserts.

In collaboration with two primary community partners, our five-member team achieved several goals in both areas and continues to develop their research into community -informed action. Their work to date has culminated in two comprehensive research proposals. The team showcased their findings through poster presentations at the University of Pittsburgh's Human Flourishing Symposium and Frederick Honors College Research Symposium.





In collaboration with **Fishes and Loaves Cooperative Ministries**, a food pantry in the Hazelwood
neighborhood, the team:

- Identified a critical gap in residents' access to information and support needed to enroll in SNAP benefits.
- Developed a user-friendly pamphlet outlining SNAP eligibility, enrollment, and benefits.

Alongside **Just Harvest**, a Pittsburgh-based nonprofit dedicated to ending hunger, the team:

- Built a volunteer training framework that will certify volunteers to provide hands-on assistance to residents navigating the SNAP enrollment process.
- Is drafting a white paper that establishes a standardized protocol for transforming vacant lots into productive agricultural spaces, from initial site identification to full-scale implementation.

* HOUSING *

As with many cities across the country, Pittsburgh has not been immune to housing market challenges.

This year, our Housing Team partnered with Catapult Greater Pittsburgh and Neighborhood Allies while simultaneously laying the groundwork for future relationships with local nonprofits operating in the housing affordability space. Our project co-leads and seven analysts worked diligently over the course of the spring semester to initiate these conversations and complete high-quality deliverables for our community partners.

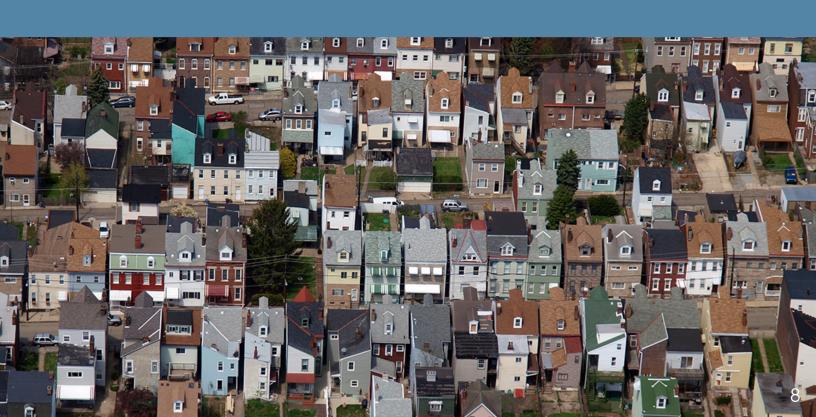
The team's early successes this year include the completion of a white paper and a series of policy position papers. Moreover, Helen Katyal, a co-lead of the team, was awarded funding from the University of Pittsburgh Department of Economics to spend the summer continuing her work with Catapult Greater Pittsburgh.

In collaboration with Catapult Greater Pittsburgh's Clinic for Legal Equity and Repairs (CLEAR), a program to help residents living without legal title, the team:

- Identified the regressive effects of the inheritance tax on low and middle-income families affected by "tangled titles."
- Authored a white paper outlining the facets of the Pennsylvania inheritance tax and the potential effects of active legislative proposals to change the code.

Working with **Neighborhood Allies**, a community nonprofit that works to build strong neighborhoods through unique capital programs, the team:

- Spearheaded a landscape analysis of local, state, and federal legislation affecting Neighborhood Allies' four key impact areas.
- Co-authored a series of policy position papers highlighting key housing legislation to support Neighborhood Allies' advocacy.



FUTURE DEVELOPMENTS

POLICY ANALYST BOOTCAMP

At the beginning of each semester, PPI will host a two-week Policy Analyst Bootcamp to immerse new policy analysts in foundational concepts, theories, and practices of policy analysis and community-engaged scholarship. Building on the workshops and lectures we offered last fall, we plan to hold our flagship curricular program twice annually—once in the fall and spring—to seamlessly onboard incoming analysts. The Bootcamp will be comprised of a dynamic blend of resources, including academic literature, podcasts, book excerpts, guest speakers, and field visits, to enrich the experience for our analysts.

POLICY ACCELERATOR

The Policy Accelerator will be a focused incubator for students who are passionate about solving a specific problem in the Pittsburgh community, offering them the unique opportunity to create and lead PPI's next research endeavor. Over the course of an academic semester, participants in the Policy Accelerator will 1.) develop their ideas through rigorous background research with support from the leadership team, 2.) solicit feedback from the community and populations impacted by the problem, and 3.) formulate an action plan for addressing the problem.



Through programs like these, PPI intends to continue its expansion and development as an organization with a presence not just on our campus but within our community. Having evolved from just an idea to a group of nearly 50 highly motivated students determined to leave a lasting positive impact on their city, we could not be more pleased with our growth this past year. With your support, we hope that this is only the beginning of a long and impactful journey.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Thank you to all the people, organizations, and institutions that contributed to making PPI a reality. In particular, we thank:

Catherine Cordova, PhD

Director of Community Engaged Learning, Frederick Honors College

Nicola Foote, PhD

Dean, Frederick Honors College

Keith Caldwell, EdD

Executive Director of Place-Based Initiatives, Office of Engagement and Community Affairs

Justin Dandoy, EdD

Director of Community Affairs, Office of Engagement and Community Affairs

Vernard Alexander, MA

Director, Homewood Community Engagement Center

Kelly Protho, MPPM

Director, Hill District Community Engagement Center

Heidi Ward, MBA

Director, Greater Hazelwood Neighborhood Commitment

Sierra Mason, MID

Project Manager, Greater Hazelwood Neighborhood Commitment

Gabrielle DeMarchi, MSW

Director of Equity Protection, Catapult Greater Pittsburgh

Shad Henderson, MPA

Director of Equity and Inclusion, Neighborhood Allies

Tom Berna, PhD

Operations Manager, Fishes and Loaves Cooperative Ministries

Ann Sanders, MID, MSW

Director of Public Benefits Policy and Programs, Just Harvest

Pittsburgh Policy Initiative

www.pghpolicy.org pghpolicy@gmail.com

WE THANK YOU FOR YOUR CONTINUED SUPPORT OF OUR PROGRAMS!