

HCEDC Small Business Spotlight
Empowering Communities: Leeja Carter, Ph.D,
A Journey from Grassroots to Nonprofit Leadership



*Leeja Carter, Ph.D, CEO & Founder,
Coalition for Food and Health Equity*

A Vision Grows in Hudson County

In the heart of Hudson County, a dedicated and visionary leader and Fulbright Scholar, Leeja Carter, Ph.D, spearheads a transformative mission to bridge the gap between food insecurity, nutritional equity, and overall well-being. Her nonprofit, the Coalition for Food and Health Equity (CFHE), embodies the power of partnership, bringing food entrepreneurs, for-profit organizations, and government agencies together to create systemic change. Dr. Carter's work, as she describes it, “carries a touch of magic that's turning the tide in the fight against food insecurity and building resilient, healthy communities.”

From Grassroots to Nonprofit in the Face of COVID

Dr. Carter's journey to the Coalition for Food and Health Equity began in 2012 as a researcher in Chicago and then Brooklyn; her work included a Fulbright fellowship to London. This scholarly path was the foundation that prepared Dr. Carter, along with 13 of her students and Jersey City residents, to co-create a grassroots project known as the Hudson County Hunger Project (HCHP) in response to the challenges posed by restaurant closures and the increasing prevalence of food insecurity at the onset of the pandemic in March of 2020. In leading HCHP, Dr. Carter secured funding to keep restaurant doors open and began delivering meals to those in need. The immediate impact on the struggling restaurant industry and underserved areas was evident. However, long-term, sustainable solutions post-COVID that addressed resilient, healthy communities were unavailable through the current HCHP model for hunger relief. Pulling from her decades-long background in community and applied health research, she developed the Coalition for Food and Health



Ujamaa Café™ is a practice of community care and economics through supporting neighborhood revitalization at the intersection of health and food equity.

Equity in December 2020. Dr. Carter’s vision was clear: disrupt the systemic and structural inequalities in the food and health system to build resilient, healthy communities as a nonprofit.



Ujamaa Café™ are cashless, de-surveilled food access points and locations that cater to the diverse needs of its patrons and the surrounding community.

Innovative Programs in Action

At the Coalition for Food and Health Equity, transformative concepts come to life through innovative, technology-integrated yet practical, on-the-ground initiatives. HCHP delivers culturally and medically tailored meals to clients’ doorsteps. Ujamaa Café™ is ‘smart’ community refrigerators deployed in food desert locations across New Jersey and Philadelphia to combat food insecurity and increase access to healthy meal options, all sourced from local businesses. The first

Ujamaa Café™ was launched in the county at the Hudson Pride Center, with a second fridge at the Kismet of Kings in Jersey City. The Eating Better Together program addresses the importance of nutritional health and oral hygiene in children. Darice Toon, Director, Hudson County Department of Health and Human Services shared, “Dr. Carter’s impactful work and the success of these programs are great examples of how Hudson County’s Department of Health and Human Services collaborates with residents and businesses to tackle some of our community’s biggest challenges. We remain committed to supporting the health, well-being, and overall quality of life here by providing an array of inclusive and accessible services, education, and resources with dignity, compassion, and respect. As we look to the future, we see great opportunities to continue this important work with various local, state, federal, and private agencies.”

Community Engagement and Partnerships

CFHE’s programs provide a synergistic foundation for the community’s quality of life. Ilir Mani, owner of Cafe Peanut and CFHE Restaurant Affiliate, shared, “We’ve been working alongside Dr. Carter since 2020. For small business owners like me, these critical programs were a huge help in our efforts to survive the pandemic,” he continued, “more than just keeping our doors open – It served our community in profound and lasting ways.”



HCHP is a community meal program supporting local restaurants and food-insecure residents in Hudson County.

Unique Approach and Inclusivity

“What sets the Coalition for Food and Health Equity apart is our focus on providing long-term access to healthful nutrition through a model of care and dignity,” shared Dr. Carter. Coalition for Food and Health Equity partnered with the Hudson Pride Center, ensuring that everyone, regardless of their background or identity, can access food in affirming, safe, and culturally inclusive spaces. “For 30 years, Hudson Pride Center has battled food insecurity in the LGBTQ+ community. Our partnership with the Coalition for Food and Health Equity brings crucial awareness and resources. Clients express genuine gratitude for the chance to enjoy a nourishing meal in a safe environment. We're committed to creating healthier living experiences in Hudson County, driven by visionary leaders uniting for resilient communities,” stated Elizabeth Schedl, Executive Director, Hudson Pride Center.

Why Hudson?

“... building resilient, healthy communities.”

Building Healthier Communities - The Future of Hudson County

Dr. Leeja Carter and the Coalition for Food and Health Equity represent transformational progress in Hudson County and embody the can-do, collaborative approach that drives New Jersey’s fastest-growing county forward. These innovative strategies, unwavering commitment to health equity, and dedicated partnerships address the critical issue of food insecurity today and build a resilient, healthier, and more equitable future for residents and businesses in Hudson County. “At Hudson County Economic Development Corporation, we know it is important to leave no one behind in the goal to achieve a thriving Hudson County economy. We, therefore, set out, with intentionality, to engage our nonprofit entrepreneurs, providing guidance, support, and encouragement to address the impediments that prevent our residents from full participation in the Hudson County economy,” said Michelle Richardson, Executive Director of the Hudson County Economic Development Corporation.

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