

two days prior to his death had shown mild indications of feeling ill and began slurring his words. Testing from the medical examiner diagnosed influenza pneumonia and revealed a high level of opioids in his system.

In this instance, it was a common illness presenting uncommonly that raised the red flag for Hall and her colleagues. Pneumonia wouldn't ordinarily be fatal to an otherwise healthy man in his 40s, but Hall said it's likely his use of opioid painkillers made him more susceptible to the infection or allowed it to become more severe.

"By using this unexplained-deaths program we've been able to look at the opioid epidemic from the infectious disease standpoint," Hall said. "We know opioids can impact the immune system and have side effects that make it easier for something like pneumonia to set in. What we've seen is that even prescribed levels of these drugs can be deadly if combined with infectious disease.

"We've seen a good number of cases with such profound infectious disease it was the only thing written on the death certificate," Hall continued. "With no mention of the very high levels of morphine, these deaths don't get counted in opioid-related death surveillance, which means the problem could be underestimated."

Hall reports that more than half of the opioid-related fatalities identified through her work were not captured in the statewide opioid surveillance data. Because Minnesota is low on the list of severity when it comes to states facing an opioid crisis, it's possible the problem is much greater nationwide.

"Ninety-one Americans die each day from an opioid overdose and in 2015, there were over 33,000 deaths related to opioids, more than any year on record," Hall explained. "Opioids don't discriminate against the young or the old, men or women, rural or urban. We find it in all areas. With the number of opioids being prescribed quadrupling in the last decade, it makes for a very complex public health threat that we need to address from a lot of different angles."

## CALS Alumna Tackles Childhood Hunger in Mississippi

By Sarah Buckleitner

**W**HETHER IT'S FEEDING HER parents shepherd's pie at 11 years old or feeding thousands of children across Mississippi each month, CALS alumna Catherine Montgomery has found the recipe to success.

Mississippi has the highest food insecurity rate in the United States: 28.3 percent of the state's children do not have reliable access to affordable, nutritious food. But Montgomery is working to change that. In her position as programs manager at the Mississippi Food Network, an organization dedicated to fighting food insecurity in Mississippi, she runs several programs that put food in the bellies of both hungry children and adults.

"I oversee our summer feeding, backpack, and school pantry programs. For each of these, I'm involved from the beginning to the end—I plan menus, order food, plan logistics, and manage sites. This last year we were able to begin packing our own backpack meals for children in house," Montgomery explained.

These programs each help ensure that children have access to food even when school isn't in session. Each program addresses a different need and the summer program has provided an average of 48,000 meals over three years to kids over the summer months. The backpack program, which provides kids with a backpack stuffed with three pounds of shelf stable foods each weekend, has also been especially successful.

"The physical act of giving children a meal is really fulfilling, so we have some great supporters. Every Friday, we feed 1500 kids through that program," Montgomery said.

But Montgomery's favorite project is one that she has been involved with

since the beginning: the school pantry program.

"I got funding and implemented this program with the help of the team at Mississippi Food Network. For this program, we physically go in with a group of volunteers—the Junior League of Jackson—and set up a mobile food pantry once a month so that families in the community can pick up fresh produce and shelf stable foods. We supply an average of 60-65 families each with 18-20 pounds of food every month," Montgomery said.

Montgomery especially loves this program because she gets to know the families who regularly come.

"We have this one little girl who comes with her mom every single month. I've gotten to know them over the course of the year. And one time she spotted me from down the hallway, and just dove into my arms," Montgomery said.

Montgomery herself has always had a keen interest in food.

"I was always intrigued by what my mom was making in the kitchen, and when I turned eleven, I asked for a cookbook of my own. I made a shepherd's pie recipe from it, and that's what my family ate for dinner that night," Montgomery reminisced.

When it came time to pursue her college education and eventual career, Montgomery knew right where she belonged.

"We are multi-generational Bulldogs. We grew up coming to games, and we have Thanksgiving and Christmas in Starkville. I didn't really have an option as far as my family was concerned, but I didn't want an option," Montgomery said.

While it took her awhile to determine her eventual major, she finally settled on



nutrition. With the help of her mentors, Lynn Burney and Chiquita Briley, she quickly began to thrive in the field.

“Dr. Burney was always very supportive of me. I knew I could always stop by her office for a life chat. And it was Dr. Briley who first encouraged me to pursue a job at the Mississippi Food Network, even though jobs there were highly competitive,” Montgomery said.

Montgomery first uncovered her passion for addressing food issues by volunteering with the Mississippi Food Network for the field experience hours that are required for the nutrition major.

“Before volunteering with them I wasn’t

oblivious to the need, but it wasn’t in the forefront of my mind. But then I saw these children lined up at a church waiting for a hot meal, and I realized that might be all they get that day. That lit my fire,” Montgomery explained.

To this day, she still feels the influence of her MSU education.

“By requiring us to have dietetic internships, I was able to see how important a community dietitian was, and how one person could have a large impact on the health of an entire community,” Montgomery said.

When asked what she’d recommend for other people who want step in to help

end hunger in Mississippi, Montgomery had a slew of suggestions.

“People can volunteer to help pack boxes, host their own food drive, or donate money directly through the website or through Amazon Smile,” she said. For more opportunities to get involved, visit the Mississippi Food Network at [www.msfoodnet.org](http://www.msfoodnet.org).