

# Food Recovery and Distribution in Los Angeles County

ANALYZING FOOD WASTE PREVENTION  
OPPORTUNITIES TO ADDRESS FOOD  
INSECURITY AND CLIMATE CHANGE

NOVEMBER 2019





# TABLE OF CONTENTS

<b>Background</b> .....	<b>1</b>
Food Insecurity and Food Waste Prevention in Los Angeles County During the Era of Climate Change .....	1
The Food Distribution and Redistribution System in Los Angeles .....	3
Legislation Related to Food Redistribution in California .....	5
Looking Toward the Future: The Expansion of Food Redistribution in Los Angeles as a CalFresh Healthy Living Program Strategy .....	6
<b>Methods</b> .....	<b>7</b>
<b>SWOT Analysis</b> .....	<b>8</b>
<b>Strengths</b> .....	<b>8</b>
Trusted Entities .....	8
Staff Capacity.....	8
Internal Assets.....	9
<b>Weaknesses</b> .....	<b>10</b>
Infrastructure.....	10
Liability Concerns.....	10
Organizational Culture.....	11
<b>Opportunities</b> .....	<b>12</b>
External Assets .....	12
Established Partners .....	13
Community Capacity.....	14
Supportive Policy .....	14
Leverage Points .....	15
<b>Threats</b> .....	<b>17</b>
Unknowns.....	17
Mission Drift.....	18
Policies .....	18
Funding Challenges .....	19
<b>Recommendations</b> .....	<b>20</b>
Support information sharing and communication to further the field .....	21
Infrastructure .....	21
Evaluation & Assessment.....	22
Training & Capacity Building.....	23
Partnership & Collaboration .....	24
Conduct a cost benefit analysis and return on investment analysis .....	24
Consciousness Raising .....	25
Funding.....	25
<b>Terms &amp; Definitions</b> .....	<b>26</b>



# Background

The mission of the Los Angeles County Department of Public Health (DPH)'s Nutrition and Physical Activity Program is to empower low-income communities to build and advance innovative ways to eat healthier and move more. DPH's Nutrition and Physical Activity Program implements Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program Education (SNAP-Ed), known in California as the CalFresh Healthy Living Program. Funded by the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA), and administered by the California Department of Social Services and the California Department of Public Health, the goal of the CalFresh Healthy Living Program is to improve the likelihood that persons eligible for Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) will make healthy food choices within a limited budget and choose physically active lifestyles consistent with the current Dietary Guidelines for Americans.

## Food Insecurity and Food Waste Prevention in Los Angeles County During the Era of Climate Change

DPH's Nutrition and Physical Activity Program implements the CalFresh Healthy Living Program by partnering with and providing funding to community-based organizations, healthcare clinics, nonprofit institutions, schools, and early childcare and education sites. These funded partners target individuals and families living in households with incomes less than or equal to 185% of the Federal Poverty Level (FPL) through nutrition education, and physical activity promotion, and community engagement to work towards

larger community changes that improve the food system and increase access to and consumption of healthy foods and beverages.

Many low-income families face barriers to purchasing healthy foods such as fruits, vegetables, lean meats, and food high in fiber. Barriers may include the perception and/or reality that fresh fruits and vegetables are more expensive than processed food items, families may live or work in communities with limited health food options, including grocery stores

# BACKGROUND

## Food Insecurity and Food Waste Prevention in Los Angeles County During the Era of Climate Change

(e.g. food desert), or families may feel that they do not have adequate time to prepare healthy meals due to other time demands such as childcare or work.

Food insecurity is a complex social condition that can negatively impact health. Because poverty and food insecurity are strongly correlated, families often must choose between housing, health care, and healthy foods for their families. In 2017, DPH released a report on the prevalence of food insecurity in Los Angeles County (LA County). Based on 2015 survey data, more than half a million households earning less than 300% of the federal poverty level (FPL) are food insecure and face barriers to purchasing nutritious foods during the year. Additionally, 11.3% of these households suffer very low food security, experiencing disrupted eating patterns and 67.4% of households suffering very low food security were Latino, followed by 14.7% of whites, 10.6% of African Americans, and 6.6% of Asians. The survey also indicated that the proportion of adults with chronic conditions such as obesity, diabetes, hypertension, and high cholesterol was higher for each condition among those living in food insecure households, when compared to those living in households with ample food. The report also provided several recommendations to address this issue, which include reducing food waste by feeding hungry people.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Los Angeles County Department of Public Health, Office of Health Assessment and Epidemiology, "Food Insecurity in Los Angeles County," September 2017.

Close to 30% of low-income families in LA County struggle with food insecurity, yet 1.7 million tons of food is wasted annually by Los Angeles schools, businesses, and households.<sup>2,3</sup> According to the California Environmental Protection Agency (CalEPA) and CalRecycle, food waste comprises nearly one fifth of the entire California waste stream. As outlined in the United States Environmental Protection Agency's Food Recovery Hierarchy, the second highest and best use for surplus food, following the prevention of surplus food, is to recover edible food for human consumption. Edible food can be recovered from any permitted food facility and donated to gleaning organizations, food banks, and other non-profit organizations and hunger relief agencies.

In addition to filling the hunger gap and supporting the emergency food system, edible food recovery, and organic waste diversion are essential climate mitigation strategies. When food and organic waste is broken down in a landfill, methane, a potent greenhouse gas, is released, contributing to global climate change. Studies show that climate change is causing increases in drought, extreme heat, and extreme weather, which simultaneously impacts agriculture and food, water, and housing systems, as well as the health of our communities. Climate change,

<sup>2</sup> Los Angeles County Department of Public Health, Office of Health Assessment and Epidemiology, "Food Insecurity in Los Angeles County," September 2017.

<sup>3</sup> Department of Public Works, "Roadmap to a Sustainable Waste Management Future - Report to the Board of Supervisors," October, 2018.

## Food Insecurity and Food Waste Prevention in Los Angeles County During the Era of Climate Change

like food insecurity, is a health equity issue. The impacts of climate change, including air pollution, drought, and extreme heat and storms, disproportionately impact low-income communities and communities of color, exacerbating existing health inequities.

In order to address existing health inequities related to food insecurity, chronic disease, and climate change, local, state, and federal government must address environmental injustice, institutional racism, income inequality, inequitable access to healthcare, and lack of affordable housing.

### THE FOOD DISTRIBUTION AND REDISTRIBUTION SYSTEM IN LOS ANGELES

As described in a recently published brief by the Los Angeles County Department of Public Health, in partnership with RAND Corporation, “Food Distribution Efforts in Los Angeles County, 2018,” the key players in the food distribution landscape can be categorized into four primary roles: (See Terms & Definitions for more information)

- » **Food Producers** – sources such as growers, suppliers, and/or factory processors
- » **Food Recovery** – large-scale recovery of fresh and processed foods (or gleaners)
- » **Distribution Hub** – warehousing and order fulfillment

- » **End Consumer Supplier** – delivering food to end consumer for consumption

LA County is continuing to lead the way in California to advance food waste reduction, edible food recovery, and food distribution. Since 2016, the County of Los Angeles has implemented several programs and initiatives to address the growing issue of food waste and food insecurity:

From 2016 through 2019, DPH, through its SNAP-Ed funded Champions for Change program, partnered with several community-based organizations to provide nutrition education in conjunction with food waste prevention, redistribution and distribution efforts. These efforts have been well received among the organizations and their clients.

In 2016, the DPH’s Environmental Health Division established the Los Angeles County Food Redistribution Initiative (LACFRI), a multi-sector initiative that brings together county departments, businesses, community members, and nonprofit organizations to “provide resources to the public about safe methods to prevent, donate, and recycle food, as well as support policies that divert food from landfills.”<sup>4</sup>

<sup>4</sup> County of Los Angeles Public Health, “Los Angeles County Food Redistribution Initiative,” County of Los Angeles Public Health, accessed September 1, 2019, <http://www.publichealth.lacounty.gov/eh/LACFRI/>

# BACKGROUND

## Food Insecurity and Food Waste Prevention in Los Angeles County During the Era of Climate Change

In January 2018, the County of Los Angeles Department of Public Works implemented the Food Donation & Recovery Outreach Program (Food DROP) “[t]o provide resources for businesses operating in the County Unincorporated Communities so that they may (1) safely donate their excess edible food to fight hunger, and (2) reduce food waste in Los Angeles County” with a vision that “[a]ll food service businesses operating in the Los Angeles County Unincorporated Communities safely donate their excess edible food to feed people in need in Los Angeles County.”<sup>5</sup>

In February 2019, the LA County Board of Supervisors adopted a motion titled, “Reducing Both Food Waste and Food Insecurity in Los Angeles County.” The motion instructed the Department of Public Health to collaborate with relevant stakeholders to “increase awareness of and participation in food recovery efforts

throughout Los Angeles County, focusing on schools and other potential food donors, including opportunities to further leverage systems and technology to increase the amount of food recovered across the County,” including the identification of “opportunities for food redistribution in community hubs, such as schools, colleges, clinics, and other settings.”<sup>6</sup>

In August 2019, Los Angeles County released the OurCounty Sustainability Plan, the County’s regional sustainability plan, that specifically seeks to increase edible food recovery and distribution in the County as a way to address food insecurity.<sup>7</sup>

*“Enhance and expand the County’s existing Food DROP food donation and redistribution program to divert edible food from landfills and make it available to food insecure communities.”<sup>7</sup>*

*(Action 128, Strategy 10A: Improve access to healthy food, Goal 10: A sustainable and just food system that enhances access to affordable, local, and healthy food)*

<sup>5</sup> County of Los Angeles Public Works, “The Los Angeles County Food DROP Program,” Smart Business Recycling, accessed August 10, 2019, <https://dpw.lacounty.gov/epd/sbr/food-drop.aspx>

<sup>6</sup> Department of Public Works, “Roadmap to a Sustainable Waste Management Future - Report to the Board of Supervisors,” October, 2018.

<sup>7</sup> Los Angeles County Sustainability Office, “Our County - Los Angeles Countywide Sustainability Plan,” August 2019.





## Legislation Related to Food Redistribution in California

Over the past several years, California has passed and implemented several important pieces of legislation related to climate change mitigation, organic waste diversion, and edible food recovery. In alignment with California's climate change plan and mitigation goals, the state passed AB 1826 – Mandatory Organics Recycling Law (2014) and SB 1383 – Short-Lived Climate Pollutants: Organic Waste Methane Emissions Reductions (2016). Both AB 1826 and SB 1383, while different in their specific goals and implementation, aim to divert organic and food waste from the landfill and channel it to higher and better uses, including composting operations and edible food recovery and distribution.

Additionally, SB 1383 includes a statewide target that “not less than 20% of currently disposed edible food be recovered for human

consumption by 2025.”<sup>8</sup> As policies and programs to advance climate mitigation efforts have advanced, so have policies to increase the donation of surplus wholesome food from food facilities and gleaning operations to food banks, food pantries and other hunger relief and social service nonprofit organizations. The passage of AB 1219 – California Good Samaritan Food Donation Act and AB 2178 – Limited Service Charitable Feeding Operations served to expand liability protection for donors of wholesome surplus food and increase best food safety practices among hunger relief agencies. The passage of these bills indicates a broader trend of understanding and addressing the interconnectedness of our food and agriculture systems, with global climate change, food security and socioeconomic status.

<sup>8</sup> CalRecycle, “Short-Lived Climate Pollutants (SLCP): Organic Waste Methane Emissions Reductions,” CA.gov, April 16, 2019, <https://www.calrecycle.ca.gov/climate/slcp>.

# BACKGROUND

## Looking Toward the Future: The Expansion of Food Redistribution in Los Angeles as a CalFresh Healthy Living Program Strategy

Every year, the USDA releases the SNAP-Ed Plan Guidance, which provides direction for State SNAP-Ed program planning and implementation. In 2019, the SNAP-Ed Plan Guidance included food waste prevention as an allowable policy, systems, and environmental change strategy to be integrated into other SNAP-Ed programming. This coincided with the California Department of Social Services' Integrated Work Plan Blueprint for federal fiscal years 2020-2022, which included "expanded/mobile produce distribution" and "capacity-building for food distribution" as allowable SNAP-Ed strategies. These strategies support the following three (out of five) overarching goals of SNAP-Ed for federal fiscal years 2020-2022:

1. Optimize and enhance the food system to support a healthy diet
2. Adopt, implement, maintain, and support programs and policies that increase access to and demand for healthy food
3. Adopt, implement, maintain, and support programs and policies that decrease access to and demand for unhealthy food

DPH's Nutrition and Physical Activity Program recognizes that their CalFresh Healthy Living Program funded partners have deep relationships with the communities they serve and are well-positioned to integrate food distribution into their SNAP-Ed work. The Nutrition and Physical Activity Program is also exploring how it can leverage the larger constellation of CalFresh Healthy

Living Program strategies to further integrate food waste prevention, food redistribution, and food distribution activities in settings that serve as community hubs, such as schools, healthcare clinics, and parks. If done successfully and integrated well with other CalFresh Healthy Living Program strategies -nutrition education, physical activity, and policy, systems, and environmental change, additional locations outside of the traditional emergency food system (e.g. food pantries, food banks etc.) will be established to create integrated and comprehensive approaches to increase access to and consumption of healthy foods for low-income individuals and families.

Given the current food redistribution and distribution landscape in LA County, CalFresh Healthy Living Program funded partners are already playing a critical role, with opportunities to increase their scale even further, in the distribution of wholesome food from Food Recovery and Distribution Hub partners as End Consumer Suppliers. Given the established role of CalFresh Healthy Living Program partners, such as schools and early childcare centers, as educational and service resources many have already expanded their services to include food distribution along with cooking demonstrations and nutrition education. Scaling up food distribution in alignment with existing CalFresh Healthy Living Program activities can increase the distribution of fresh produce and other healthy food products, while reducing edible food in the waste stream.

# Methods

During a two-month period in Summer 2019, DPH's Nutrition and Physical Activity Program partnered with the Public Health Alliance of Southern California (Alliance) to conduct a series of key informant interviews with diverse organizations and agencies involved in food recovery, distribution, and supply-to-consumer links of the food distribution system. These interviews were designed to provide information about the current state of the system—as well as assess the system for future implementation, expansion, and improvement as a key component of CalFresh Healthy Living Program strategies.

Key informant interviews were structured to gather information related to existing organizational and systems strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats (described below) as well as recommendations to improve the food distribution system from various vantage points.

The Alliance conducted key informant interviews with 15 individuals representing 14 different organizations operating across Los Angeles County and the greater Southern California region. The key informants represented organizations that are currently engaged in food distribution activities, those that were previously engaged, and those that have yet to implement food distribution activities for various reasons. Of the 14 organizations represented, three were school districts, four were health clinics and care providers, two were food recovery organizations, and five were other community based or service organizations.

# SWOT Analysis

Based on the key informant interviews conducted with the participants outlined, the Alliance compiled a Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, and Threats (SWOT) Analysis to assess certain aspects of the food redistribution and distribution system.

## Strengths

The strengths of a system or organization are generally defined as internal elements that are helpful or facilitate the desired activities. The following strengths were identified as consistent themes that arose from the interviews conducted.

### TRUSTED ENTITIES

One of the most significant current strengths of the food distribution system, including organizations that are currently engaged in food distribution and those that are interested in participating in food distribution, is that the organizations are already established and trusted sources of information and resources for their respective communities. Schools, health centers, early childcare centers, and community-based organizations, among others, have established relationships with families and community leaders and already provide critical services. Most of the interviewees indicated that the inclusion of food distribution into their current scope is

a natural expansion of their work given their existing goals of addressing poor health outcomes, health inequities, and the social determinants of health. Additionally, several interviewees stated that the inclusion of food distribution with other services eases the time and travel burden for families who need to access several services and resources.

### STAFF CAPACITY

A major asset identified by nearly all of the interviewees was the existence of supportive staff, who were highly motivated to participate in food distribution efforts even when these activities were not outlined in their job description. Interviewees described the

## Strengths

willingness of staff to participate in food distribution outside of normal work hours, even offering to transport food products in their personal vehicles. Many staff who currently help facilitate food distribution activities have also participated in food safety trainings or food handler trainings (e.g. ServSafe), therefore mitigating potential food safety issues.

### INTERNAL ASSETS

Even if not directly housed in the specific program engaging in nutrition education or food distribution, many participants identified other internal partners and assets that have enabled or would enable these activities to be more effective and accessible.

**Infrastructure:** Many entities, such as schools, universities, and health clinics have commercial kitchen space, cafeterias or cafes, refrigerated and dry storage space, equipment, such as a forklift, and infrastructure, like a loading dock, that can be used or repurposed for the use of food distribution. For example, an interviewee

based in a health clinic identified the existing clinic café as a clear asset to the food distribution given the benefits of a commercial kitchen and cafeteria dining space.

**Programs and Policies:** Given that many entities, including schools, health clinics, and social service agencies often have numerous programs operating semi-autonomously, there are often other internal programs that may be supportive allies in food distribution efforts or internal policies that align well with these activities. For example, an interviewee from a school district identified the district's Student Services department as a critical partner in any future distribution activities given their imperative to support the 'whole student.' Programs that provide food resources, housing, and other basic needs, health equity initiatives, and additional programs rooted in the social determinants of health all provide important opportunities to demonstrate alignment with and support of food distribution activities.

# SWOT ANALYSIS

## Weaknesses

Weaknesses in a system are generally defined as internal elements, policies, or practices that are harmful or are barriers to the desired activity. The following weaknesses emerged as issues when implementing food distribution and redistribution activities.

### INFRASTRUCTURE

#### **Storage and Transportation Infrastructure:**

As documented in a recently published brief by the DPH in partnership with RAND Corporation, "Food Distribution Efforts in Los Angeles County, 2018," and a key theme of the interviews, one of the main weaknesses of the current food redistribution and distribution system for both food redistribution and distribution agencies was the lack of infrastructure, including storage, refrigeration, and transportation. Interviewees noted that their organizations or agencies frequently did not have access to vehicles to transport food from warehouses or redistribution organizations to the distribution site and staff would offer to use their personal vehicles

to do so. Additionally, lack of storage and refrigeration significantly limited the types of food distribution agencies could accept to distribute to their clients.

#### **Information Technology & Evaluation**

**Infrastructure:** Other infrastructure limitations included the lack of standardized tracking systems, computers and other tools for tracking redistribution and distribution of food, as well as evaluation software to assess the outcomes and impact of their work. Without adequate resource for tracking tools and software, agencies encountered challenges in reporting program activities and demonstrating the impact and scope of food distribution to partners and funders. Nearly all interviewees stated that lack of standardized tracking tools impeded their ability to track, report, and collaborate.

### LIABILITY CONCERNS

As has also been described in earlier assessments, concerns about incurring liability due to illness or damages caused by distributed food products was a significant barrier for agencies considering engaging in food distribution. Several interviewees noted that despite the existence of the federal and California Good Samaritan Laws that protect food donors, gleaners, and other entities from

*"... in terms of refrigeration, a lot of times, these agencies don't have refrigeration. They would love to have milk, cheese, meats, and things like that to distribute, but they don't have refrigeration. So even if we do have that product, we can't leave it with them because they can't distribute that."*

*(Food redistribution organization)*

## Weakness

incurring liability, organizational leadership and program managers remained unsure about protected activities and were therefore reticent to engage in food distribution activities.

### ORGANIZATIONAL CULTURE

Several interviewees noted that they have yet to engage in food distribution activities or stopped food distribution activities due to perceived conflict with existing programmatic activities, institutional policies, or organizational culture. For example, several interviewees working within school districts noted that the practice of distributing food on campus for students and families to take home may seem in conflict with federal policies that mandate students consume any food distributed through the school meal program on campus. Additionally, interviewees stated that unless food distribution activities are explicitly included in existing contracts, they were often the first activities to be scaled back or terminated when staff and financial capacity became limited. Several interviewees working in healthcare agencies stated that despite staff support and positive feedback from recipients regarding food distribution activities, they would be unable to sustain these efforts without significant organizational and financial support.



# SWOT ANALYSIS

## Opportunities

Opportunities in a system are generally defined as external elements, policies, or practices that are helpful or facilitate a desired activity or outcome. The following opportunities to implement food distribution and redistribution activities were discussed by key informants.

### EXTERNAL ASSETS

**Ample Wholesome Food:** As is widely documented and accepted, 40% of food produced for consumption in the United States goes uneaten, resulting in billions of pounds of wholesome food being discarded in a landfill. Rescuing even a portion of this food could fill the meal gap for millions of food insecure Americans. Therefore, the availability of abundant wholesome food in California, and the LA County region more specifically, is a critical asset in the food redistribution and distribution system. Interviewees, both those who engage in redistribution and distribution, indicated that there was generally always an ample supply of surplus food from a variety of sources, including wholesale, retail, backyard orchards, etc.

**Shared-Use of Existing Infrastructure:** While many organizations and agencies may not have adequate infrastructure to operate at the scale that they would like to, as described above, interviewees did describe situations in which the infrastructure and assets of other agencies was made available for their needs. Several interviewees described formal arrangements with external partners in which organizations with the infrastructure to support edible food recovery, sorting, and redistribution provided the storage space, pallet jacks, loading docks, and other infrastructure, while those with the

staff capacity, knowledge of the network, and established relationships with food distribution agencies conducted the community outreach and hosted the distribution activity. Several of these arrangements have evolved into established regional hubs, which have allowed smaller agencies, with limited storage, refrigeration, and transportation to more consistently pick-up recovered food and host food distribution activities at their sites or events. This hub model simultaneously increased the amount of food being distributed and the number of agencies able to engage in food distribution activities, therefore likely increasing the number of people benefiting from distribution activities.

**Existing Programs:** One of the most prominent opportunities described during the interviews was the existence of established community facing programs, whether existing government programs like Parks After Dark (run by the Los Angeles County Department of Parks and Recreation), or established agency programs and public events. Interviewees stated that the opportunity to leverage an established event, existing program, or partner organization to conduct food distribution not only decreased the labor and staff time required to coordinate the event, but it also increased beneficiary participation in the food distribution activity. It also reduced the burden of transportation for the beneficiaries, as was described in the



## Opportunities

recently published brief by DPH, in partnership with RAND Corporation, "Food Distribution Efforts in Los Angeles County, 2018."

Interviewees also indicated that including food distribution in established events had a positive impact on building social cohesion and community trust, often noting that food 'brings people to the table,' and was a critical entry point to connect with other services (see below).

**Existing data:** While many organizations and agencies cited challenges with data collection, others indicated that they had ample data, but did not have the staff capacity or expertise to conduct a program evaluation or assess impact with available data. Food redistribution and distribution agencies indicated that they collect data related to program operations and outcomes, including pounds of edible food recovered and distribution, type of food distributed (e.g. fresh produce, bread products, canned goods, etc.), frequency of beneficiary engagement, and food insecurity, among other indicators, but better mechanisms and protocols for sharing data across agencies would help them better demonstrate their reach and impact to funders, as well as adjust internal processes and partnerships.

### ESTABLISHED PARTNERS

Agencies and organizations that have recently started or are planning to begin food distribution activities stated that the support from established partners was invaluable.

Interviewees described situations in which established food redistribution organizations provided critical guidance regarding the logistics of transferring food products between redistribution and distribution agencies. Additionally, established food distribution partners have a keen awareness of the dynamic barriers and facilitators associated with conducting food redistribution and distribution activities and are uniquely positioned to mentor agencies beginning to implement this work.

Interviewees also noted that a number of established partners, including regional food banks and other redistribution organizations, offer trainings for individuals and groups who run food pantries, as well as trainings for volunteers. Due to the limited capacity of small food distribution agencies, these activities enable the volunteers of smaller agencies to receive important food safety training that they may not otherwise receive.

As described in the Strengths - Trusted Entities section above, there is also the benefit of certain well-established organizations or institutions that can be invaluable partners in accessing the community and providing resources, whether or not they are specifically engaging in food distribution. Several interviewees described schools and faith-based organizations as essential partners when conducting outreach to families and the broader community to promote upcoming food distribution events.

# SWOT ANALYSIS

## Opportunities

### COMMUNITY CAPACITY

While most agencies participating in the food redistribution and distribution system noted that they often encounter staff time and capacity as a limitation to fully engage in certain activities, almost all stated that there was a wealth of volunteers eager to support food distribution activities. Interviewees shared that the volunteer pool is diverse, including community members, program participants, interns, members of faith-based organizations, community health workers and promotoras, among many others. Inclusion of community members and beneficiaries in the process of outreach, teaching, and distribution was critical in building community trust and engagement. Several interviewees noted that the 'volunteer pool' was one of the most significant untapped community resources regarding food distribution and nutrition education activities.

*“...a lot of volunteers are retired, and it gives them a sense of purpose. They know that every Tuesday or every Wednesday, or every Tuesday and Wednesday, they’ve got something that they need to do. They’re serving a purpose. They’re keeping food out of landfills and they’re feeding people in need. I think that model has been very successful for us.”*

*(Food redistribution organization)*

### SUPPORTIVE POLICY

As described in the introduction, there are a number of policies that have been passed in recent years related to organic waste diversion and edible food recovery that have further elevated food waste and food insecurity in the public and political sphere. Several interviewees cited the importance of the passage of AB 1826 – Mandatory Organics Recycling and SB 1383 – Short-Lived Climate Pollutants, which sets a statewide goal of “recovery of 20% of currently disposed of edible food,” in not only raising awareness about the challenges at hand, but has increased the volume of donated food, funder interest, and overall social awareness of the issue.

*“Well, I would say facilitators are AB 1826 and 1383 I believe, which is just coming in. Both were helpful and they basically mandate food recovery to be part of large corporate plans. They’ve moved the needle in a big way.”*

*(Food redistribution organization)*

## Opportunities

### LEVERAGE POINTS

Throughout the interviews, several prominent themes arose regarding opportunities to incorporate new and complementary activities within existing programs in order to more effectively serve program beneficiaries.

***Integration with CalFresh Healthy Living Program Nutrition Education*** - The majority of CalFresh Healthy Living Program funded partners interviewed stated that food distribution was a natural and beneficial extension of the existing nutrition education activities. Interviewees stated that coupling food distribution with taste tests, sampling, recipe demonstrations, and nutrition education increased interest in unfamiliar produce and likely increased consumption of fresh produce. Interviewees described anecdotal experiences of children expressing excitement about new fruits and vegetables to parents during food distribution events. Integrating food distribution with existing nutrition education activities as a complementary service was also highly beneficial to the clients as it mitigated the burden of seeking out an additional food distribution event or agency, directly addressing the issue of food access. While more data and evaluation is needed to assess the overall impact of integrating food distribution into nutrition education activities on clients, this is a commonsense strategy to ultimately increase consumption of fresh fruits and vegetables.

***Regional Hubs & Collaboration*** - As outlined in the External Infrastructure section above, interviewees described the benefits of establishing regional food redistribution hubs in partnership with large food redistribution organizations (e.g. Food Finders, Food Forward), mid-sized agencies, and smaller food distribution agencies. The regional hub model reduced the transportation, storage, and logistical burden on the smaller agencies and ultimately increased the geographical and community coverage of food distribution services. The regional partnerships also ensured greater compliance with food safety measures. For example, regional partnerships and collaboratives have facilitated more small agencies to enter the fold of larger regional food banks, therefore supporting their compliance with AB 2178 (Limited Service Charitable Feeding Operations), which established best practices for maintaining minimum food safety standards. Another interviewee described their organizational process of establishing Memoranda of Understandings (MOUs) with regional hub members, which include standards for safe food handling, transportation, and established pick-up frequency from the regional hub location.

# SWOT ANALYSIS

## Opportunities

*Food Distribution as an Anchor* - Another critical leverage point discussed with interviewees is that food distribution activities can serve as an important entry point for other services. Several agencies that conduct food distributions connected beneficiaries to other services offered by the agency or to partner agencies that offer other services, such as housing support, legal assistance, employment, MediCal enrollment, etc. Food distribution activities may increase the contact beneficiaries have with supportive services that address the social determinants of health in concert with providing food assistance.

*“It’s like food is this powerful connecting point, whether it’s through our serve a meal program which we provide for seniors and our homeless community every morning or it’s the food pantry program that then connects people to other resources.”*

*(Food redistribution organization)*

*“We also coordinate with DPSS, so CalFresh enrollments take place during food pantry. Medi-Cal takes place during that time. We’ve also had other partners come and provide information. We have neighborhood legal access come in and offer some services for people that maybe need some legal help, so that’s been really nice to have that space available so that people can honestly do almost like a one-stop shop. You’re not going all over town looking for services. We try to ask. “What is it that you would like to see, or what would be great? Something you can take care of at this time while you’re waiting to pick up your food.” That’s been some of those efforts that we’ve been trying to coordinate month to month is trying to see what we can offer while people are there waiting.”*

*(Food redistribution organization)*

## Threats

Threats in a system are generally defined as external elements, policies, or practices that are harmful or undermine a desired activity or outcome. The following threats emerged as obstacles to implementing food redistribution and distribution efforts.

### UNKNOWNNS

As stated earlier, there is an abundance of surplus wholesome food available to food redistribution organizations, however, organizations involved in food redistribution and distribution were often unaware of the types of food they will receive. This, for example, poses a challenge for agencies coupling food distribution with recipe demonstrations or taste tests, because they do not have the time to plan appropriate recipes that include food their clients will be receiving.

Some interviewees also cited concerns related to unknown numbers of beneficiaries potentially participating in a given distribution event and ensuring there was adequate food for all without generating excess waste at the end of an activity. An interviewee explained a related issue - one of the challenges with coordinating a regional hub was ensuring that there was equitable distribution to all participating agencies and communities.

*“It [food distribution] really gets overwhelming at times, especially with the unknown, like we don’t know what we’re getting. We don’t know how many people are going to show up, so sometimes some of those areas there, we are always trying to find ways to improve our process and our practice, but also making this available for our community”*

*(Food redistribution organization)*

# SWOT ANALYSIS

## Threats

### MISSION DRIFT

A common theme discussed throughout the interviews was the challenge of “mission drift,” specifically related to diverse agencies conducting their standard activities in addition to nutrition education and food distribution. While many agencies saw the inclusion of food distribution as a natural addition to current agency programs, others described this as outside of the scope and expertise of the organization. However, while describing concerns related to mission drift and the burden of coordinating logistics, several interviewees stated that this presented an opportunity for collaboration. For example, while some agencies are experts in the logistics of securing, transporting, and storing food, others have deeply rooted relationships with communities, or host community programs and events on a regular basis. One interviewee noted that they felt burdened by the logistics of coordinating the pick-up and distribution of food, given that they are more well suited to promotion, outreach, and referrals. Another interviewee noted the challenges associated with operating an informal food redistribution hub at a site that was not ideally suited for the task and had strict time constraints. Several interviewees stated that they were eager to “work smarter, not harder” through collaborative efforts, resource sharing, and increased coordination. Overall interviewees stated that without adequate funding and coordination support they were unable to fully integrate food distribution into their standard practice and overall mission.

### POLICIES

**State Policies** – While most interviewees indicated that a number of state level policies have been supportive of food redistribution and distribution efforts (described above), several noted that the California Cottage Food Law has been a challenge to utilizing surplus food. One food redistribution organization indicated that while the law is helpful in theory, there are a number of undefined elements that contribute to confusion about what they can do with surplus food that was not distributed to end recipients. This left some food that could potentially be prepared and distributed, such as jams, jellies, or other shelf-stable foods, to go to waste. In general, there seems to be a tension between passing policies that support innovation and regulating activities to ensure food safety and public health remain top priorities.

**Organizational Policies** – While none of the interviewees stated that there were organizational policies that specifically prohibited food distribution activities, several described that there were existing policies that presented certain barriers to engaging in food distribution. For example, one of the school district interviewees shared concerns that there might be perceived inconsistency between the school meal policy (e.g. all school meal program food must be consumed on campus) and a food distribution program (e.g. food taken home to be used by the student and family), despite that food from a distribution program comes from another source and is not from the school meal program. Several

## Threats

interviewees stated that the lack of clear organizational policies that explicitly support food distribution contributed to leadership hesitancy to engage in this work.

### FUNDING CHALLENGES

One of the barriers to engaging in food redistribution and distribution cited most frequently during the interviews and described in several other reports and briefs was limited funding to support the operational costs of such activities. Interviewees consistently described the challenges with identifying and receiving funding that will cover both the staff time and infrastructure costs associated with running a sustainable and scalable food distribution operation.

Interviewees described the challenges of finding funding that will cover the cost of overtime pay that often arises due to the dynamic nature of food recovery and redistribution. There are also inherent challenges associated with certain models of funding, including the cost-reimbursement model. Interviewees stated that the cost-reimbursement model was particularly prohibitive for smaller agencies that were working with limited capital and did not have the resources to support larger expenditures in advance of funding reimbursement. Another funding challenge cited by several interviewees working with health systems was that if food distribution was not directly funded by grants, such as the CalFresh Healthy Living Program, or other funding sources, they were reliant on the standard federal health clinic fee

for service funding model. This model may not pay for ancillary services, such as food distribution.

Interviewees also noted the challenges associated with managing multiple reporting and deliverable requirements for multiple grants.

*“I think the biggest thing is that we really, really need to find funding sources. Either governmental or foundations that understand that we need general operating support, not really targeted program support. And trust with our track record to use it, be accountable for that money without doubt, but use it in a way that is in keeping with our mission, yet innovative and allows us to expand and try new logistics operations.”*

*(Food redistribution organization)*

# Recommendations

Los Angeles County Department of Public Health, and LA County more broadly, are poised to further their leadership in the healthy and equitable food systems within California and the nation. Los Angeles County is home to many well-established, innovative, and effective organizations and agencies operating across the Southern California region to advance edible food recovery and food distribution efforts. LA County can also lead by example by supporting and investing in integrative and collaborative solutions addressing food insecurity and inequities, climate change and environmental degradation that are led and championed by community-based organizations and partners across sectors.

Based on the current food redistribution and distribution activities taking place throughout the county and the existing and emerging models for effective regional collaboration the following mid- and long-term recommendations have been drafted for DPH and other stakeholders. The recommendations are intended to provide guidance to increase integration of food recovery and distribution into existing Los Angeles County's health promotion programs and services, such as the CalFresh Living Program. Additionally, the following recommendations are intended to support the evolution of current food recovery and distribution efforts in the broader food system to address the root causes of food insecurity and advance strategies and policies that simultaneously address food insecurity, food waste, and climate change.





# RECOMMENDATIONS

## > Support information sharing and communication to further the field

- Convene annual county or regional food recovery summit to strengthen existing networks, build partnerships, and collectively address barriers
- Establish a learning collaborative of organizations and agencies engaging in this work to support peer-learning, mentorship, and additional collaboration. Consider hosting quarterly webinars or in-person meetings. Share related resources and information via an established listserv
- Communicate and collaborate with other Southern California local health departments and food policy councils to establish coordinated messaging and policies related to food redistribution and distribution activities, with the goal of reducing burden for organizations that operate across county lines. Consider engaging with the Alliance's Healthy Food Systems Workgroup to facilitate this process

## > Infrastructure

- Support further development and subsequent utilization of technology (e.g. mobile app) to connect businesses with surplus food available for donation to appropriate food redistribution or food distribution agencies
- Collaborate with SNAP-Ed funded partners to more specifically assess their infrastructure assets and needs (e.g. transportation, refrigeration, storage, etc.)
- In partnership with food recovery and distribution organizations, develop a centralized system of tracking and distributing recovered food for agencies that do not have the capacity to do so (e.g. local jurisdictions to purchase a fleet of vehicles to transport food products)

# RECOMMENDATIONS

## > Evaluation & Assessment

- Provide data collection and evaluation technical assistance and training on the use of qualitative and quantitative data in sharing impact with various audiences (e.g. community members, funders, etc.)
- Explicitly fund qualitative and quantitative collection and evaluation to support the time and capacity-intensive process of data collection and evaluation. This will allow agencies to demonstrate the impact of programs through clear quantitative data and qualitative narrative to partners, funders, and community members
- Share vetted evaluation tools and validated measures, specifically those related to food insecurity and fruit and vegetable consumption with food redistribution and distribution agencies in order to support robust and consistent tracking and evaluation
- Facilitate collaborative projects between food distribution agencies and local universities and colleges to engage students in program evaluation
- Facilitate sharing of data through use of common tools (data between redistribution agencies and distribution agencies)
- Elevate and facilitate the sharing of robust survey tools and evaluation efforts between funded partners to support peer-learning



## > Training & Capacity Building

### POLICY EDUCATION

- Review and modify existing educational materials for institutions and partner organizations on legal protections related to liability protections for donated foods (e.g. California Good Samaritan Food Donation Law & Federal Good Samaritan Law) and coordinate with other DPH and County programs and offices to issue educational materials.
- Modify existing, or develop additional standard educational materials for institutions and partner organizations on the Limited Service Charitable Feeding Operations Law (AB 2178)
  - » See existing educational materials on the California Conference of Directors of Environmental Health (CDEH) webpage:  
[https://www.ccdeh.com/documents/food-safety-guidelines-1/charitable-feeding-documents-1?sort=created\\_on](https://www.ccdeh.com/documents/food-safety-guidelines-1/charitable-feeding-documents-1?sort=created_on)
- Collaborate with CalRecycle to develop resources or educational materials to inform food donors of legal requirement to reduce food waste and opportunity to meet this requirement by partnering with food recovery organizations (e.g. AB 1826, SB 1383)

### LOGISTICAL TRAINING

- Support established organizations to expand their volunteer training program to additional agencies and agency volunteers through dedicated financial and technological support as needed. (Note- includes safe food handling and sorting processes)

### OTHER TRAINING

- Provide training to agency staff on trauma-informed care and how this relates to the emergency food system and food distribution activities
- Provide in-person or webinar-based training and technical assistance related to seeking additional funding support
- Develop training curriculum for agencies to conduct outreach via social media and other methods

# RECOMMENDATIONS

## > Partnership & Collaboration

- Support partnerships between food recovery/food distribution organizations and organizations not part of the traditional emergency food system (e.g. schools, healthcare clinics, early childcare and education, and social service agencies, etc.)
- Support established organizations to provide technical assistance to organizations interested in beginning food distribution activities
- Support peer-to-peer education to address questions and concerns and share best practices related to food distribution in school districts, specifically between Nutrition Services and Student Services
- Support agencies to conduct or host food redistribution organizations to provide 'produce pickup' or food distribution activity
- Facilitate MOUs between collaborating agencies to support robust regional collaboration between food redistribution organizations, distribution hubs, and smaller distribution agencies
- Facilitate partnerships between food recovery/distribution agencies and local or regional composting organizations to divert inedible food from the landfill
- Support partnerships between organizations with expertise in nutrition education and community engagement with food distribution agencies
- Support partnerships, coordination, and collaboration with existing initiatives focused on food waste prevention and distribution, such as the Los Angeles Food Policy Council Food Waste Prevention and Rescue Working Group, the LA County Food Redistribution Initiative (LACFRI), the LA County Department of Public Works Food DROP program, and the LA City recycLA program

## > Conduct a cost benefit analysis and return on investment analysis

- Determine the true cost and impact of food redistribution and distribution activities, including the hard logistical costs (e.g. miles traveled, personnel costs, etc.) and the true cost savings and community impact (e.g. chronic disease reduction, health care costs).
- Based on assessment, identify the most impactful points for infusion of capital, infrastructure support, and technical assistance

## > **Consciousness Raising**

- Elevate the mental, physical, and social health impacts of food insecurity and benefits of a healthy, adequate diet through social and traditional media
- Elevate the interconnections between food loss and waste, climate change, sustainability initiatives, local agriculture, food insecurity and equity through social and traditional media, public-facing informational materials, and internal DPH materials
- Draft and publish profiles of agencies successfully engaging in food distribution efforts to raise awareness and elevate the impact of food distribution in conjunction with nutrition education

## > **Funding**

- Explore opportunities to issue joint funding opportunities with the Department of Mental Health and the Department of Social Services, given shared focus on health equity and the social determinants of health
- Expand use of SNAP-Ed funds to partner with organizations that can transport produce to distribution sites
- Fund organizational operating costs (e.g. rent, staff wages) in order to support sustainable programs and organizations
- Facilitate process for businesses/private sector to sponsor distribution activities (e.g. develop materials packet, sample MOU forms, etc.)
- Collaborate with other funders to cover the cost of warehousing, storage, and refrigeration for food distribution work
- Fund outreach and marketing activities in order to elevate organizational activities and impact and promote food distribution programs
- Identify funding opportunities that allow use of funds for overtime pay often associated with the work involved in recovering edible food
- Identify possible alternatives to the funding model for agencies that do not have sufficient capital to front large expenditures

# Terms & Definitions

**California Cottage Food Law** – the Cottage Food Law, effective as of January 2013, allows individuals to prepare and/or package certain non-potentially hazardous foods in private-home kitchens referred to as Cottage Food Operations (CFOs).<sup>9</sup>

**End Consumer Supplier** – the final link in the food distribution supply chain that distributes food directly to the end consumer(s), (individuals, families), which takes many forms across the county. These sites are established in varied locations and institutions, including schools, health clinics, churches, parks, etc. Distribution from these sites, such as Produce Pickup (see below for definition), to the end consumer occurs at varied frequencies, provides varied food products, and serves diverse populations.

**Food Distribution** – the act of distributing rescued food to individuals and families in need.

**Food Distribution Hub** – following the process of food recovery, the surplus food must be stored prior to distribution to the end consumer. Large quantities of recovered food are often stored at some type of distribution hub that supports sorting, refrigeration and storage, and packing for delivery or pick-up by the end consumer supplier.

**Food Gleaning, Recovery, Rescue** – the act of collecting surplus fresh foods from farms, gardens, farmers markets, grocers, wholesalers, and any other sources in order to provide food to people in need.

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<sup>9</sup> California Department of Public Health, "Cottage Food Operations."

## **Food Insecurity (definitions from the US Department of Agriculture<sup>10</sup>)**

**Low food security** – reports of reduced quality, variety, or desirability of diet. Little or no indication of reduced food intake

**Very low food security** – reports or multiple indication of disrupted eating patterns and reduced food intake

**Food Producers** – food producers include a diverse array of wholesale and commercial food operators. Food producers across the county donate food items across the spectrum from shelf-stable food products to prepared food items. Food Producers across the county include wholesale produce markets, local farms, backyard orchards, grocery stores, restaurants, and many others.

**Food Recovery Organizations or Gleaners** – organizations that recover or rescue wholesome, edible food from food producers that would otherwise be destined for the landfill or another less preferred use.

**Food Redistribution** – the act of a food gleaning, recovery, or rescue organization redistributing recovered food to community-facing organizations or agencies

**Produce Pickup** – a fresh produce distribution event hosted at an agency or other community event

**Promotora/Promotores** – Promotores, also known as Community Health Workers or Peer Educators, are individuals that are vested in making an impact in their community and in most cases share cultural or linguistic commonalities with the target population. They are early adopters of desired healthy behavioral changes, have existing history within their community and are respected by their peers.

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<sup>10</sup> Coleman-Jensen, Gregory, and Rabbit, "Definitions of Food Security."

The Public Health Alliance of Southern California would like to thank the Los Angeles County Department of Public Health, Daniel Rizik–Baer, MSW and Dipa Shah–Patel, MPH, RD for their contributions to this report.

The Alliance would like to thank all of the interviewees and their respective agencies and organizations for their time and invaluable insights into the food redistribution and distribution system in Los Angeles County.

[phasocal.org](http://phasocal.org)

[publichealth.lacounty.gov/nutrition](http://publichealth.lacounty.gov/nutrition)

This material was produced by the Public Health Alliance of Southern California in coordination with the Nutrition and Physical Activity Program in the Division of Chronic Disease and Injury Prevention at the Los Angeles County Department of Public Health with funding from the United States Department of Agriculture's (USDA) Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program–Education (SNAP–Ed), known in California as the CalFresh Healthy Living Program. CalFresh Food provides assistance to low–income households to help buy nutritious food for better health. For CalFresh information, call 1–877–847–3663. For important nutrition information, visit [CalFreshHealthyLiving.org](http://CalFreshHealthyLiving.org).

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