

# Food Distribution Efforts in Los Angeles County, 2018



## Overview

The Los Angeles County Department of Public Health's Nutrition and Physical Activity Program partnered with community based organizations, hospitals, school districts, universities, and other agencies to improve nutrition and physical activity opportunities among low-income residents who are eligible for the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program-Education (SNAP-Ed). This brief describes the process of developing and expanding food distribution to increase access to fresh fruits and vegetables for SNAP-Ed eligible populations.

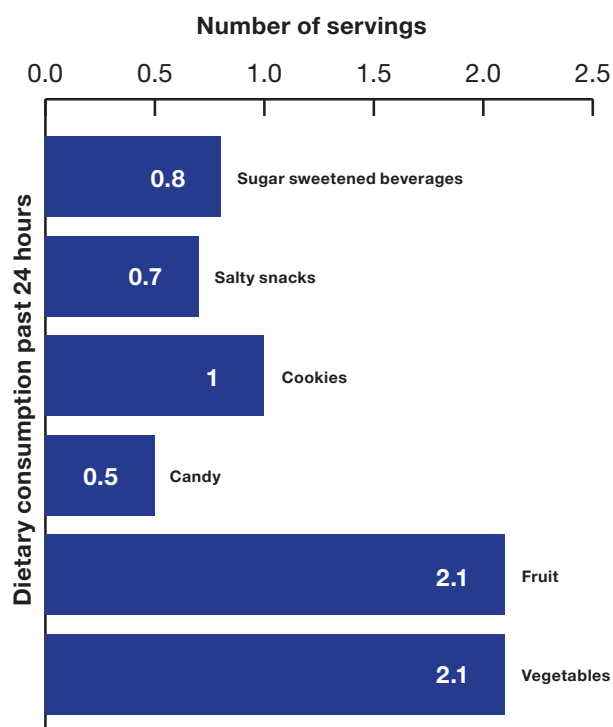
## Description of the Project

During a six-week time-period in 2018 the Los Angeles County Department of Public Health (DPH) and the RAND Corporation conducted an evaluation of a food distribution project. There were two parts to the project.

- Key informant interviews with 15 staff at 8 agencies. The goal was to establish lessons learned from agencies who are focused on increasing access to fresh fruits and vegetables by developing or expanding food distribution in low-income communities across the county.
- Intercept surveys with 428 participants across 5 food distribution sites. The goal of the surveys was to understand participant perceptions surrounding food insecurity and how well food distribution programs meet their needs.

## Participant Characteristics: Intercept Survey

Among the participants interviewed at the food distribution sites, a majority were female (78%) and the average age was 50. Half the respondents answered the survey in Spanish. The education level of respondents included 45% who did not complete high school and 21% with a high school diploma, while 13% had a bachelor's degree or higher. Thirty percent were enrolled in CalFresh-California's version of the federal Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program, 15% in Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC), and 53% in MediCal. When asked about dietary consumption participants reported consuming 0.5 to 1 servings on average each of candy, cookies, salty snacks, and sugary beverages in the previous day. Among participants, 35% were overweight, 22% obese, and 16% morbidly obese (BMI  $\geq$  35).



Among those who reported not being enrolled in CalFresh, 40% said they were not eligible for CalFresh, and 20% said they did not know how to apply. Six percent were worried that receiving CalFresh might negatively influence their chances for citizenship and 19% did not want to be dependent on the government. When asked about food insecurity, nearly 80% of participants often/sometimes worried that food would run out, and 75% said that in the past 12 months their food sometimes or often had not lasted and they did not have money to buy more.

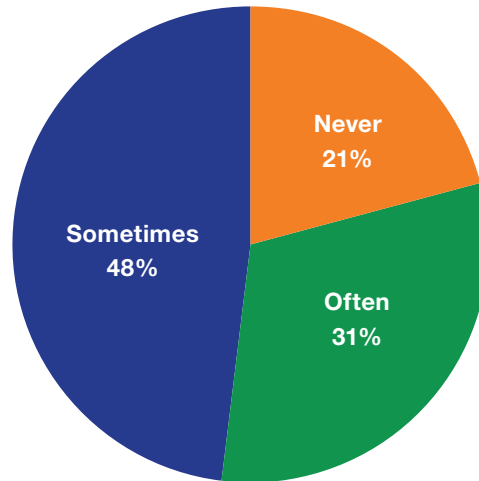
<b>Currently participate in CalFresh</b>	30%
<b>If not currently enrolled, why:</b>	
Don't know how to apply	20%
Am not eligible	40%
Don't want to be dependent on government	19%
Application too difficult	3%
Concerned what others will think	2%
Worried about citizenship	6%
Applied and waiting	4%
Other reason	14%

## Aspects of Food Distribution

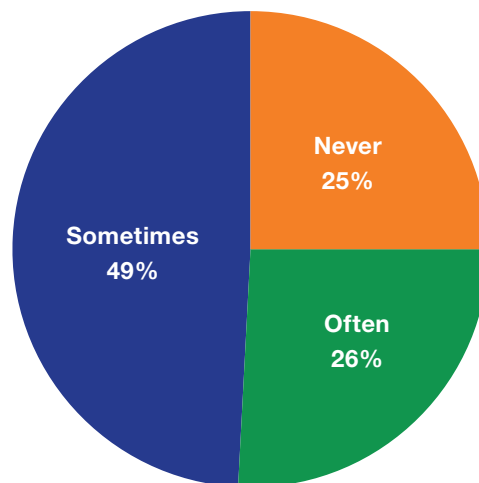
**Distribution Process:** Agency staff in the key informant interviews described four stages in the distribution process: (1) food production by farms (fresh fruits and vegetables) and food retailers (non-perishable goods); (2) food recovery by organizations that seek to rescue perishable and non-perishable food from farmers, retail outlets, and other donors; (3) food distribution from organizations that act as hubs; and (4) supply to consumers by community-based non-profit organizations (Figure 1 next page).

**Source of Food:** A majority of agency staff mentioned some level of engagement with Food Forward, while many others receive food from the Episcopal Diocese of Los Angeles, Seeds of Hope. Food Forward is an organization that conducts food recovery, i.e., gleaning, from farms and backyards across the county.

**Frequency of worrying that food would run out in past year**



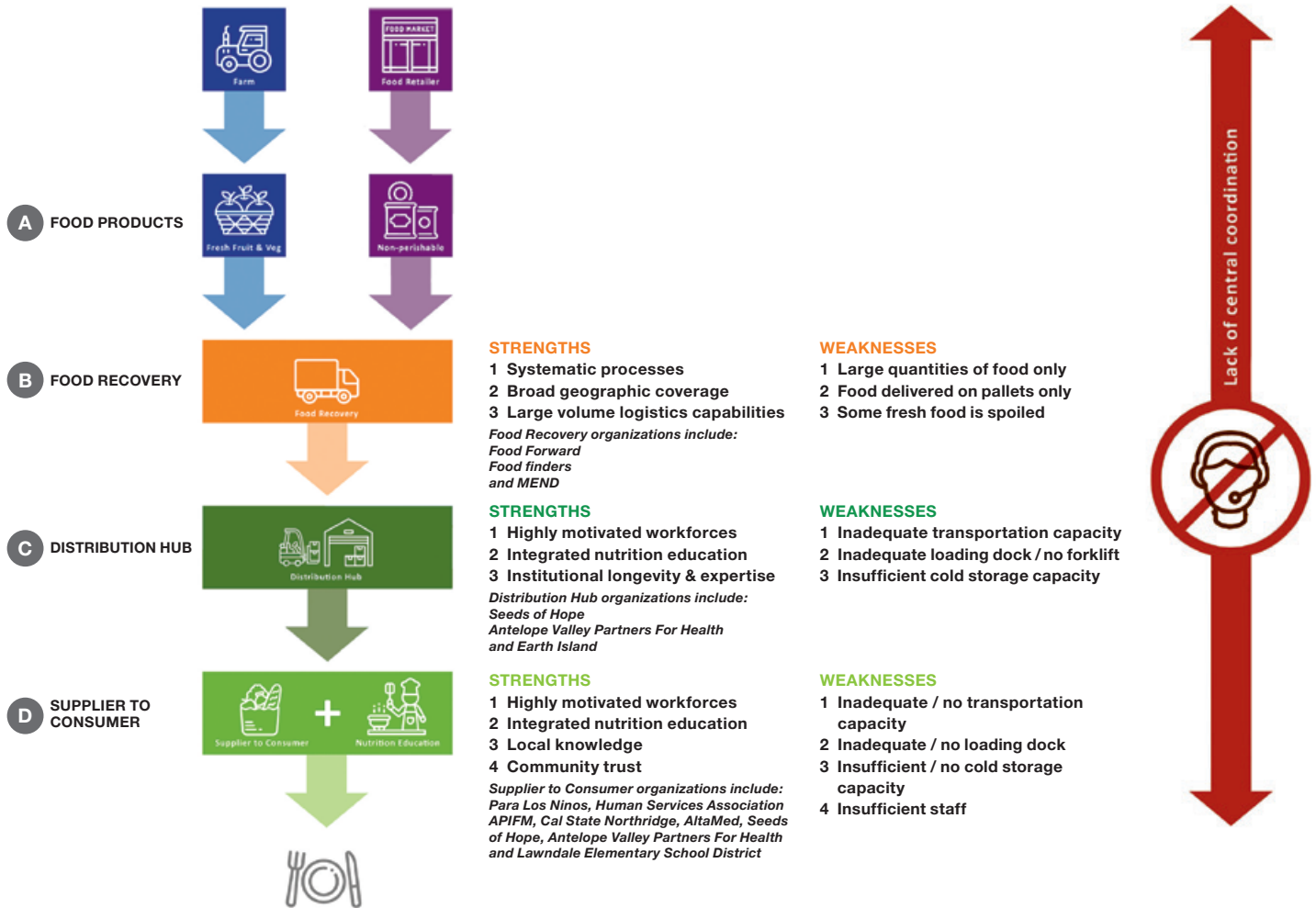
**Frequency that food did not last and did not have money for more in past year**



Seeds of Hope is a food justice ministry of the Episcopal Diocese of Los Angeles. It is a food distribution hub and a DPH funded agency featured in this study. Other organizations receive food directly from farmers or local gardeners, purchase food from produce wholesalers, or receive donations from local grocery stores. The remaining organizations receive their food from local food banks, or by receiving donations from individual citizens.

**Transportation:** The way food is transported to organizations depends largely on the volume of food being transported. Larger scale

## Food Distribution Flowchart



food providers have delivery trucks capable of delivering large pallets of food directly to distributors. In the absence of this capability, most food is picked-up from the provider with organization-owned pickup trucks or vans, and at two agencies, with volunteers' personal vehicles. Many agency staff cited transportation capabilities as limiting factors in their organizations' food distribution capabilities. Two staff members cited aging vehicles, and the majority cited limited access to refrigerated vehicles as food distribution hurdles. One participant noted:

“Once we have [cold storage] in place [...] we can move a lot more produce to more people with less

waste...The bottleneck is the facility: facility space, cold storage, loading dock, truck. [...] A lot of times, we just drive a pick-up to one of their facilities and take whatever we can fit. (Seeds of Hope, Episcopal Diocese Los Angeles)”

Participants described delivering food by selling produce at heavily discounted prices or some giving produce away free of charge. Distribution was often in coordination with their organization's weekly/monthly functions, community centers, affordable housing buildings, and food pantries. Organizations working intimately with schools often delivered the food directly to cafeterias.

	All	Spanish Language	English Language	P Value
<b>Minutes to travel to site</b>				NS
Less than 15 minutes	45%	47%	44%	
15-30 minutes	40%	35%	42%	
31-60 minutes	10%	11%	10%	
More than 60 minutes	5%	6%	4%	
<b>Frequency of getting food</b>				*
Every month	37%	41%	34%	
Several months during the year	22%	28%	16%	
1 or 2 times a year	9%	7%	10%	
Never, this is my first time getting food	32%	24%	39%	
<b>How many days food lasts</b>				*
1-3 days	31%	34%	28%	
4-6 days	34%	37%	30%	
7 days or more	14%	19%	12%	
This is my first time	21%	10%	30%	
<b>Percentage of food comes from any pantry</b>				NS
Very little (0-25%)	54%	57%	50%	
Some (26-50%)	28%	27%	30%	
A lot (51-75%)	11%	8%	14%	
Most (76-100%)	7%	8%	6%	

\*p < 0.05, NS non-significant

### Participant Experiences with Food Distribution

Most respondents participating in the food distribution events traveled up to 30 minutes to get to the food distribution site, and many reported that they came either every month or every several months during the year. Nearly one-third reported that this visit to the distribution site was their first. Food lasted for one to three days for 31% of the sample. Food from any distribution site represented less than 25% of all the food consumed by 54% of participants. Participants who took the survey in Spanish more frequently visit food pantry/food distribution sites than those who took the survey in English.

**Food Storage and Packaging:** The agency staff explained that inadequate food storage capabilities, particularly refrigerated storage, limit many agencies' storage and distribution efforts. Many agencies distributed all the food they received on the same day they received

it, motivated by a lack of confidence in storage capacity. About half of agencies reported having access to refrigerated storage, and many of those facilities were thought to be undersized.

**Allocation of resources and labor:** All sites noted that there is an underlying lack of central coordination county-wide across the four stages of distribution. The two distribution hubs take the view that, due to their longevity, expertise, and the networks they established, they understand the broader system and can identify the inefficient allocation of resources and labor. The smaller agencies discussed difficulties navigating the large food distribution system in the county. Many had not been involved in distribution before, and they now had to find their own suppliers and with inefficient logistical support.

**Produce Quality:** Agency staff emphasized general satisfaction with the quality of produce they received, with a few exceptions. Several agency staff described exclusively distributing



fresh fruit and vegetables, while others described distributing mostly fruits and vegetables supplemented with dry and canned goods. Most organizations employ in-house sorting procedures carried out by their own employees or volunteers. These organizations applied subjective quality standards to the food they distributed, governed by the principle of “would I serve this food in my own house?” Agencies generally expressed a desire for more robust food quality screening processes but cited insufficient staffing to do so.

Most agencies conduct nutrition education classes in conjunction with food delivery events. Nutrition education includes an emphasis on consuming fresh fruits and vegetables, guidance on understanding food labels, and cooking skills.

### **Participant Experiences with Produce Quality:**

On a scale of 1 to 5, adults in the participant survey said that food provided was rated about 3.8 for quality and variety, corresponding to “average” to “good.” Participants were mostly confident they could prepare nutritious meals with the food. Participants reported taking an average of 2.9 education classes at the sites.

**Workforce:** Teams dedicated to food distribution in this study were small, typically consisting of four to five full-time employees. Teams oversee part-time staff and volunteers, cultivate relationships with potential food suppliers and partner agencies, seek funds to support their activities, and are directly involved with distribution, including transporting food from suppliers, sorting food, transporting food to consumers, organizing events, conducting nutrition education, and collecting data.

### **Barriers to Food Distribution**

Across all the agencies, perceived barriers occur at three levels: population, organization, and system.

- **Population-specific factors** limit attendance and retention for distribution events, and include lack of time and transportation, competing family responsibilities such as



child care, cultural/linguistic issues, limited awareness of program existence, and fear of immigration raids.

“One of the bigger barriers that we’ve seen in general is that folks are struggling to meet their basic needs and might be working two jobs—three jobs—and not able to come to classes. Not able to pick up the food that we’re distributing. We see that across communities where it is hard for folks to take advantage of a service.” (Asian Pacific Islander Forward Movement)

- **Organizational barriers** exist primarily around logistics: inadequate or non-existent transportation vehicles, inadequate loading docks, and inadequate or non-existent cold storage space. Insufficient funding and staffing were also mentioned.

“The van alone is not sufficient for our needs. We’ve had the van for a long time, it’s getting old. We pick up almost 2000 pounds of food and bring it back up the mountain, it’s a lot of wear and tear [...] We figure out how to do our pickups pretty much week to week. We need something reliable..” (Antelope Valley Partners in Health)



- **At the system level**, lack of formal arrangements between agencies and suppliers is a barrier to a more consistent schedule of food pick-ups and drop-offs. To overcome this, some agencies are actively seeking to formalize their existing partnerships, standardize the food distribution practice, and ensure staff are ServSafe certified. Another system related barrier includes the poor quality of the food that agencies receive from other organizations, especially rotting food. Picking up spoiled produce adds to the workload of distributors and smaller agencies down the line, due to





additional hours needed to sort through the produce. To overcome this, some agencies shifted their supply chain to local farmers.

“Early on, we were getting a lot more spoiled produce, and it became a problem in terms of man hours to sort through everything. After much conversation with them, we get a lot better quality items than we used to. So it doesn’t require as much sorting.” (Seeds of Hope, Episcopal Diocese of Los Angeles)

### Facilitators of Food Distribution

All agency staff discussed factors that contribute to the success of their efforts. These include staff training, a motivated workforce, planning of distribution and nutrition education events around linguistic and cultural considerations,

community partnerships, coalitions, community engagement, and institutional longevity and expertise. Of these, three factors emerged as distinctly strong facilitators:

- **Community partnerships**, especially when agencies can locate partners that can complement certain aspects of the supply/distribution chain, such as transportation and large-scale storage. In addition, participants discussed partnerships with sites where they could implement gardening and nutrition education activities (schools), food gleaning (school/community gardens), or food distribution (church pantries, food banks, community centers).

“What’s been critical is having partners that are on board for what we are trying to do, and they see



the benefit of being able to serve the residents of their affordable housing units or their community centers [...] Also having support of larger institutions, such as Los Angeles County Department of Public Health, has been helpful.” (Asian Pacific Islander Forward Movement)

- **Local, regional, county-wide coalitions** that facilitate awareness of other stakeholders’ resources and collaborations in developing more efficient allocation of resources.
- **Institutional longevity and expertise**, especially seen in agencies that have been operating for many years and that have developed staff expertise, ties and trust across communities, county-wide partner networks, and an infrastructure for distribution and nutrition education.

“I think that one of the things that has helped us is our partnerships, and the fact that we’ve been in this community for years. Our agency has been here for quite a while [...] A lot of our partners already know us. And because of that, they allow us to go into their sites again and provide the same thing.” (Human Services Association)

The ability to recruit and retrain volunteers helps agencies sustain activities with consistency and good population reach. Recruiting volunteers who themselves benefit from food services helps address cultural-based stigma.

“[Volunteers who have received food] understand what this program is all about. They understand where we’re coming from. They understand about nutrition [...] It’s a plus that they have knowledge about these things, compared to other volunteers.” (Antelope Valley Partners in Health)



## Looking Forward

The participant surveys indicate that the food distribution services are filling an important need, up to 75% of participants report experiencing food insecurity, and most take advantage of the services several months per year or monthly. Participants rated the quality of the food as average to good. Most participants reported almost reaching the national recommendations for fruit and vegetable consumption. Most participants also reported taking nutrition classes at the site and were confident about preparing nutritious meals with the food they receive.

## Sustainability

All agency staff discussed the resources they need and strategies to sustain or expand activities in the long term. Funding is the most crucial factor, with implications for staffing and training, logistical support, scope of food distribution and nutrition education, and population reach. Most agencies talked about the need to acquire or expand their cold storage capacity, as well as to acquire refrigerated vans.

Forming collaborations and coalitions across the county was another frequently mentioned sustainability strategy. Some coalitions occur

among neighborhood organizations, others among organizations at the local municipality level. Others are formed at the county level, such as the Los Angeles Food Policy Council. These collaborations are perceived as the proper way for organizations to be aware of all stakeholders' capacity and assets, pool resources, and distribute food more efficiently.

Finally, agencies expressed the need for better coordination of resources at the county level, particularly across the service planning areas and stages of distribution. This could ensure an efficient allocation of labor that accounts for each organization's mission, capacity, food needs, and geographic scope.

“Right now, we are very disparate agencies that go to a partner and pick up whatever. It's not entirely coordinated, and I don't know how sustainable that is [...] I keep going one layer deeper; for now, this is great because we have these resources, but how does this address a larger systemic issue. If there is food available, how can it just go directly to people and not have to go through all these layers and waste other resources or take up other resources and time.. [...] We have connections to the people, but we don't have connections with trying to navigate this giant system of food” (Para Los Ninos).

Overall, several recommendations emerged from the agency staff interviews:

- Provide ongoing training on implementation of policy, systems and environmental change strategies, including information related to food safety. To make this more cost-effective, county departments of public health can invest in short



videos that can be administered repeatedly to local agencies, supplemented by face-to-face training as needed. Face-to-face sessions were seen as optimal for asking clarifying questions.

- Provide more training on how to formally collect and monitor program data.
- Create a clearinghouse system that would help coordinate distribution efforts across levels of distribution and across the county.

### Proposed Clearinghouse Model

The RAND Corporation recommended DPH create a clearinghouse system that would help coordinate distribution efforts across levels of distribution and across the county. This proposed model provides a step-by-step explanation of how such a system would work.

### Main Roles in the Food Chain

There are four main roles in the food chain from source to consumer:

- A – Food Producer: Sources such as growers, suppliers, and/or factory processors.
- B – Food Recovery: Large-scale recovery of fresh and processed foods (or gleaners).
- C – Distribution Hub: Warehousing and order fulfillment.
- D – End Consumer Supplier: Delivering food to the end consumer for consumption.

Participants in this food chain are diverse in scale, establishment, coverage, and capability, so they may fulfill one or more of the above roles, such as recovery (B) and distribution (C), or distribution (B) and consumer supply (D).

### Maximizing Efficiency in Provision

Given the diversity of stakeholders in this process, participants' roles can be better categorized in the overall supply chain, such as the main A, B, C, D roles identified above.

The nature of food supply through recovery and gleaning is different from commercial food provision models of supply and demand. In this case, the end Consumer Suppliers (D) will know what they need, food type and volume-wise, and what they can realistically handle given their resources, such as storage, manpower, and transport, along with their logistical limitations, such as lack of cold storage, lack of goods handling equipment (e.g., fork lift trucks). As such, they should be provided with a platform to submit and adjust their demand profiles as needed.

### Evaluating Needs and Targeting Resources

We propose that each individual supplier be funded according to identified strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats (SWOT). Threats are practical issues or things that threaten the organization's ability to deliver (such as a lack of reliable transport or cold storage), while opportunities indicate where a targeted intervention (such as grant funding) might positively impact a specific provider's ability to deliver food to the end consumer (such as by upgrading their transport).

Because each provider has different capabilities and needs, a task-adapted SWOT analysis instrument should be customized to this process to help focus resources in a cost-effective and timely manner.

### Funding

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[CalFreshHealthyLiving.org](http://CalFreshHealthyLiving.org)  
[publichealth.lacounty.gov/nut](http://publichealth.lacounty.gov/nut)

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