

# Strengthening the Los Angeles Food Access Ecosystem

At the outset of the COVID-19 pandemic, service demand surged among food access organizations in Los Angeles. According to one recent study on Los Angeles County, food insecurity among low-income households has generally been on the rise over the last 5 years. In 2018, 27% of low-income households reported food insecurity, but that number rose to a high of 42% in 2020 and settled at 37% by December 2022.<sup>1</sup> Considering the increased attention and support for addressing food insecurity, Nonprofit Finance Fund (NFF) set out to understand key financial dynamics of and funding opportunities to strengthen the Los Angeles food access ecosystem, in partnership with the Los Angeles Food Policy Council (LAFPC) and with support from Cedars-Sinai. To do this, NFF conducted interviews to obtain diverse perspectives on the local food access landscape. The sample included executive leadership, program staff, researchers, and volunteers from LA area food banks, pantries, family-owned businesses, social enterprises, mutual aid efforts, and a community college.

These conversations revealed a deeply interconnected web of individuals and organizations tirelessly responding to the immense need for access to healthy, quality food in Los Angeles. The following is an overview of the context and overarching themes from NFF's interviews and research. Each of the four case studies in this series highlights a specific recommendation for funders to further strengthen the food access ecosystem in Los Angeles.



## The LA Food Access Ecosystem

In order to understand how best to strengthen the food access ecosystem in Los Angeles, it is important to see how it functions. Behind each successful food distribution event in the community is a network of organizations in which each plays a key role in moving food across the “food access chain” from field to plate. Given the perishability of food and vast geographic span of Los Angeles, effective food distribution demands a high degree of coordination, logistical finesse, and trust within communities and between partner organizations. Below is a summary of the main roles within the food access chain, as well as a diagram of the links between each organization. Note that, depending on the program, organizations might serve in multiple roles simultaneously.

**Funders and supporters** channel financial resources to other organizations in the food access chain. Funders can include government entities, private foundations, corporations, and individuals. Funding most often takes the form of grants, reimbursement-based contracts, and individual monetary donations. Individuals, corporations, and partner organizations can also provide significant in-kind support in the form of food or equipment.

**Coordinators** serve as the intermediary between funders and partner organizations in the food access chain. They can be responsible for fundraising, regranting funds, facilitating partnerships across the food access ecosystem, supporting program logistics, grant reporting, and building out the capacity of partner organizations.

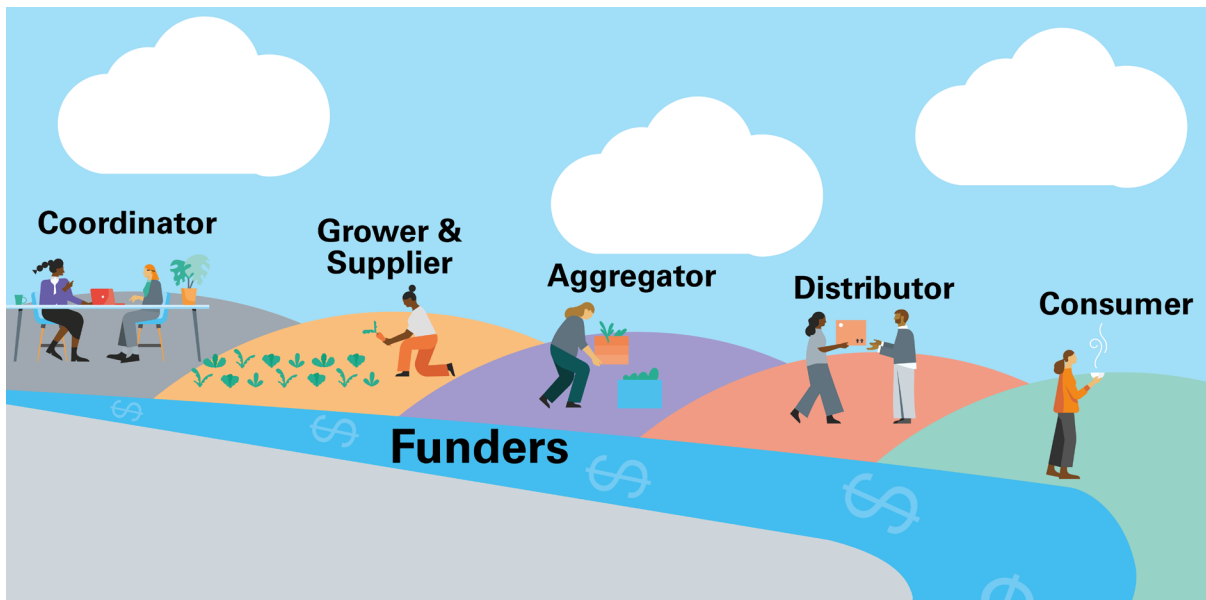
**Suppliers** are responsible for growing, sourcing, and/or collecting food for eventual distribution. They often include local farmers and produce growers, food recovery organizations, and food banks that receive donations of and purchase goods from food wholesalers and government agencies.

**Aggregators** receive food from suppliers and are primarily responsible for preparing food for distribution to end consumers. This includes sorting and (re)packing large volumes of food into smaller amounts in combinations more suitable for use by families or individuals. They often include independent nonprofits, social enterprises, small businesses, and food pantries.

**Distributors** are responsible for facilitating the final step of getting food directly into the hands of consumers. This includes organizing and communicating distribution events and can also entail additional sorting and (re)packing of food. They are often community-based nonprofits, small businesses, and mutual aid efforts.

**Consumers** access produce and grocery items at the distribution site. Many of the consumers served by the organizations NFF interviewed were CalFresh recipients, but leaders of these organizations emphasized that their clients do not fit neatly within any one category, being diverse across geography, race, socioeconomic status, age, and other measures.

Individual circumstances can require that suppliers, aggregators, and distributors all provide some degree of both dry and refrigerated storage and transportation of food from one stage of food distribution to the next.



## INCREASED NEED SPARKED BY THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC HAS NOT WANED

In response to the explosion in demand for low-cost or free food at the beginning of the pandemic, **LA food access organizations stepped up and expanded both the breadth and depth of their work to quickly distribute more food into the community.** All organizations that NFF interviewed reported dramatically increasing services over the last three years, with several reporting having regularly distributed almost double their pre-pandemic amounts of food. Simultaneously, informal mutual aid organizations and new, creative food distribution efforts proliferated, reaching new pockets of the county and providing additional, alternative ways for community members to access food. For instance, nonprofits began partnering with less conventional locations like corner stores to distribute food, mutual aid networks established community-run fridges, and organizations of varying sizes initiated new food distribution events. Despite these efforts, need has not waned. While food insecurity in LA County has declined from its peak, as of December 2022 **nearly 1 in 4 Angelenos remains food insecure.**<sup>2</sup> As one executive director put it, “It used to take two hours to give away all the food. Now it takes 30 minutes.”

## FOOD ACCESS ORGANIZATIONS HOLD DIFFERING VISIONS OF SUCCESS AND SUSTAINABILITY

Within the food access ecosystem, organizations held differing definitions of success and sustainability of their work. While effectiveness in food access has historically been equated with sheer volume of outputs (e.g., pounds of food), the **leaders NFF interviewed heavily weighed the consumer experience – consistency of food distributions, degree of consumer choice, and the quality and cultural appropriateness of food – in how they defined success.** As for sustainability, some leaders viewed it as the long-term continuation and/or growth of their organization and its own services, while others envisioned their long-term role as incubating and growing capacity in communities through other organizations, networks, and individuals – rather than the organization itself. Regardless, **organizations unanimously reported that the ability to remain responsive and adapt programs is essential to effectively meet consumers’ growing and evolving needs, and that this requires the support of flexible, unrestricted funding.** Less restricted COVID relief funds allowed organizations to deploy creative approaches quickly and forge new partnerships across the food access ecosystem. In one instance, a food pantry morphed into a local food hub to distribute additional food to smaller community organizations. In another, a mutual aid network joined forces with homeless services nonprofits and vaccination efforts.

## FOOD ACCESS ORGANIZATIONS FACE AN INCREASINGLY CHALLENGING FINANCIAL SITUATION WITH DECREASED FUNDING AND RISING COSTS

During the early days of the pandemic, organizations reported an upswell of support in the form of emergency philanthropic and government grants and individual donations. Despite this increased funding, demand for services in the community has consistently outpaced financial resources available for food access work. Three years from the start of the pandemic, **many organizations report that emergency funding has wound down and individual support has steeply declined, leaving significant amounts of food distribution work unfunded** and sustained by the commitment of intrinsically motivated individuals who view their work as a calling. **Organizations are also now contending with rising inflation and significant upticks in the cost of everything from food to supplies and gas.** Several leaders reported that they would soon or had already started to outgrow their facilities and faced looming costs, like upgrading to electric trucks to meet state fuel efficiency mandates and increasing cold storage capabilities. In addition to these physical infrastructure investments, **food access organizations noted that they, like most organizations across the nonprofit sector, were encountering widespread workforce strain, citing burnout, turnover, and inadequate pay as key factors.**

**Almost all organizations reported that the majority of their current funding is comprised of annual government and foundations grants that are heavily restricted and focused on paying for the “direct” cost of food over investing in the organizational capacity and structural change that leaders noted is sorely needed in food access.** Several leaders noted that the harmful and false dichotomy of funding direct “program” versus “overhead” costs is pervasive in food access and needs to be resolved. And at the sector level, the majority of funding flows to and through larger, more institutional food access organizations, such as food banks, leaving smaller organizations to manage increasing demand with fewer resources.

## Opportunities to strengthen the food access ecosystem

To ensure stability within the food access ecosystem, organizations must have their full cost needs met. Food access leaders raised the opportunity for funders to better support the health and well-being of LA residents by funding ongoing food distribution efforts while also investing in critical administrative costs, staffing, equipment, space, systems, and most importantly, partnerships to sustain their work over the long-term. Leaders recommended that funders explore the following funding opportunities, each of which will be explored in more detail in this series of case studies:

- Acknowledge and cover full costs, particularly the significant unfunded expenses incurred by food access organizations – especially dedicated staff and administrative capacity and other recurring costs of delivering services such as utilities and rent.
- Provide flexible, multi-year grants to reliably support food access and distribution services, enable organizations to adapt services to remain responsive to community needs, and position them to close budget gaps left by restricted funding and inflation.
- Recognize organizations that are expanding, reorienting, and redefining food access and distribution work, and provide support to sustain ongoing collaboration and partnership.
- Provide periodic capital investments to help food access organizations build infrastructure to improve the efficiency and stability of their operations and meet increased demand.

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With Love Market & Café

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**Los Angeles Food  
Policy Council**



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### Endnotes

1. Jim Key, "Rates of food insecurity in L.A. are spiking after sharp decline," USC Dornsife College of Letters, Arts and Sciences, October 17, 2022, <https://dornsife.usc.edu/news/stories/3774/food-insecurity-spiking-in-la/>.
2. de la Haye et al, Food Insecurity in Los Angeles County, December 2022, (USC Dornsife Public Exchange: 2023), 1, [https://publicexchange.usc.edu/wp-content/uploads/2023/02/USC-Food-Insecurity-in-LA-County\\_ResearchBrief\\_Feb2023.pdf](https://publicexchange.usc.edu/wp-content/uploads/2023/02/USC-Food-Insecurity-in-LA-County_ResearchBrief_Feb2023.pdf).