

Sustain collaborations and partnerships that expand food access

NFF examined Los Angeles’s food access ecosystem to understand the connectivity, financial dynamics, and funding needs of movements and organizations that provide fresh, healthy food for Angelenos. Our findings are organized into an overview of the landscape and a series of four specific recommendations for funders. The following case study explores the importance of sustaining collaborations and partnerships.

“The intentionality of food distribution is displayed when you honor the voices of mutual aid ... Mutual aid groups are on the ground and they know best, because they are the people in need of food.”

Nina Angelo, Program Director, Polo’s Pantry

While volunteering as a community organizer on Skid Row, Melissa Acedera saw that organizations addressing houselessness were burning through their funds on food distribution. With more than a decade of experience in the corporate food and beverage industry, she realized that she could bridge both of her worlds – food and activism – to upend this dynamic. She founded Polo’s Pantry in 2018 as a mobile food pantry. A grassroots organization, Polo’s Pantry serves as a connector, strengthening relationships across people and movements addressing houselessness, food distribution, and food recovery. Polo’s Pantry steps in to help wherever is most impactful, from sourcing equipment to fundraising.

Polo’s Pantry is also an incubator within the communities where it works, helping local residents from downtown LA to the Coachella Valley leverage local know-how and share resources to establish or expand food distribution events. A prime example of this is their work with J-Town Action and Solidarity, a grassroots collaborative that builds community power in Little Tokyo. J-Town started partnering with Polo’s Pantry to source food for hot meal distribution at Dodger Stadium. This partnership allowed Polo’s Pantry to focus their efforts on coordinating sustained funding for the event while J-Town took over sourcing by purchasing excess food from local restaurants in Little Tokyo. “Now there’s so much support, it’s beautiful,” Melissa shared. “It’s base



building, it's power building." Crucially, food distribution events supported by Polo's Pantry are never labeled as Polo's Pantry events. "I start the partnership and build the resources and relationship between point of distribution and source, and then Polo's steps away. This is the goal," said Melissa.

Especially during the COVID-19 pandemic, partnerships between informal, frontline mutual aid networks and more established organizations helped provide fresh, healthy food in innovative, accessible ways. The story of Polo's Pantry is just one of many about smaller, grassroots, community-driven and -centered food distribution efforts that have proliferated in LA.

Founded in 2020, Los Angeles Community Fridges is a network of decentralized, independent refrigerators and pantries providing food and vital supplies to communities through mutual aid. In addition to its network of up to 15 active community fridges, they have also run food distribution events across Los Angeles. As a horizontally structured, volunteer-run organization, time is the most important currency. Los Angeles Community Fridges relies almost wholly on in-kind support – either food donations or volunteer hours – which is supplemented by occasional online donations through peer-to-peer payment services, such as Venmo.

Even with its informal structure, Los Angeles Community Fridges forged partnerships with a host of local nonprofit food recovery organizations, restaurants, and retail grocers to meet the increased need during the pandemic. Los Angeles Community Fridges shared that it could still benefit from additional support, citing transportation of fridges, gas mileage, and supplemental food storage as key challenges. Even with the continual turnover of food in the fridges and pantries, "There's more need than we can meet," said Julie Hare, Los Angeles Community Fridge volunteer.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, as food scarcity intensified and media focused on mutual aid efforts, Polo's Pantry saw an upswelling of financial support – often through a mix of small foundation grants and individual donations. But as the pandemic wore on, that support diminished. "I feel like Polo's is reaching a cliff very quickly," said Melissa.

Similarly, Hollywood Food Coalition (HoFoCo) is dedicated to feeding and serving the immediate needs of the hungry through a nightly dinner program, food recovery work, and wellness programs. "As excited as I am about our programs, I am constantly thinking about how we're going to maintain



sustainability over time,” shared Arnali Ray, Executive Director of HoFoCo. Historically a volunteer-run organization, in 2017 HoFoCo transitioned to hiring paid staff as a way to sustain growth in its programs. During the early days of the COVID-19 pandemic, HoFoCo started the Community Exchange program, a free, concierge service providing food for redistribution to small and medium-sized nonprofits that couldn’t otherwise purchase or access it via the traditional food bank model. With this formalized program, they went from managing 240,000 pounds of food to more than 2 million pounds per year. The challenge is that much like the organizations HoFoCo is supplying food to, the organization is also balancing delivering services while vying for funding.

Despite filling a critical role in the food distribution ecosystem of Los Angeles, **grassroots organizations and mutual aid networks are continually challenged with finding the funding necessary to continue their essential work.** Other mutual aid movements and grassroots organizations that NFF interviewed reported similar challenges with funding, not only because of waning public support post-pandemic, but also because of highly stratified funding in the food access ecosystem that funnels most dollars to or through larger, more institutionalized organizations.

Grassroots organizations and mutual aid networks are closest to the frontlines of food scarcity. They are acutely aware of and continually orienting around the specific needs of their community and their neighbors. **By recognizing their efforts, supporters are “putting deep trust in the community to know what their needs are,”** as one food access organization leader stated.

Funders must acknowledge the emergent, grassroots food access organizations that are expanding and redefining food access and distribution work, and provide support to sustain ongoing collaboration and partnerships between organizations. When reflecting on the future of Polo’s Pantry, Melissa couldn’t see it any other way. “I center what the community needs and am dedicated always to that being our mission. Even if we got \$10 million, the first thing I’d figure out is how to get it out into the community.”

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