

Feeding Angelenos During COVID-19

#LetsFeedLACounty Food Voucher Program

In the Midst of Global Pandemic, Novel Voucher Program Fills Critical Need Among Los Angeles County's Food Insecure



Background

The COVID-19 pandemic, and its economic shut-down, placed millions of Americans in financial crisis. In Los Angeles County, where 27% of lower income households experienced food insecurity, resulting job layoffs exacerbated an already critical situation. As a result, food insecurity skyrocketed, adding a huge new population of food insecure to the county's ranks, many of whom did not qualify or use federal food assistance programs.

In this context, a cross-sector group of partners established the #LetsFeedLACounty Food Voucher Program to aid County residents, including immigrant households and college students, who were at risk of hunger and exclusion from other forms of assistance. Further complicating the situation were the stark racial and ethnic disparities. Where only 21% of non-Hispanic white county residents reported food insecurity, 40% of Latino/Hispanic, 39% of Black/African American and 28% of Asian residents struggled with food security ([USC Dornsife Public Exchange](#)). This accelerated the need to get nourishment to these communities quickly through an innovative public, private and non-profit partnership.

But how do you serve the hardest to reach members of an extremely diverse community in which 185 languages are spoken across 4,753 square miles? The answer is intense and effective collaboration and engagement among many partners.

The Los Angeles County Food Security Branch (LACFSB) partnered with the Public Health Institute (PHI), to administer the program. PHI, with their primary partner, Wholesome Wave,



built a multi-faceted team of experts to deliver nearly \$22 million in nutrition benefits in just nine weeks using the federal Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security Act (CARES) Act funding. The program enrolled nearly 30,000 families, reaching over 95,000 individuals impacted by COVID-19 and nutrition insecurity during the most dangerous pandemic in over a hundred years. This project is an example

"A multi-faceted team of experts delivered nearly \$22 million in nutrition benefits in just nine weeks"

of the unique ability of committed partners scaling a large food voucher program to reach vulnerable communities who are typically very hard to reach in a very short amount of time. This capacity is increasingly critical to emergency response as California and the country face more and more challenges brought on by pandemics, climate change, and natural disasters.

Vision and funding for these ambitious efforts was provided by the LACFSB, which engaged several organizations to discuss best practices and challenges in implementing emergency food programs during the pandemic and to help identify community-based organizations (CBOs) that would be well-positioned to provide outreach to vulnerable communities.

COMMUNITY-BASED ORGANIZATIONS

Antelope Valley Partners for Health

Central American Resource Center

Chinatown Service Center

Clinica Romero

Coalition for Humane Immigrant Rights

Comunidades Indígenas en Liderazgo

International Institute of Los Angeles

Koreatown Immigrant Workers Alliance

One Generation

Our Savior Center

Pars Equality Center

Pilipino Workers Center

Project Joy

Proyecto Pastoral

Salvadoran American Leadership & Ed. Fund

Seeds of Hope

South Asian Network

Thai Community Development Center

United Parents & Students

By teaming up with PHI and Wholesome Wave, LACFSB tapped into more than 50 years of experience and expertise in addressing large-scale public health efforts. PHI's significant capacity, as well as its contracting and legal services, allowed the #LetsFeedLACounty program to expedite the organizational challenges that typically plague start-ups while ensuring that the project was implemented quickly, efficiently and in compliance with federal, state, and local requirements. Two programs of PHI provided the leadership, program expertise, evaluation services, and fiscal management for this project: the Center for Wellness and Nutrition and Roots of Change.

Wholesome Wave (WW), a national nonprofit that addresses nutrition insecurity by making healthy produce available and affordable for people who need it most, provided tailored program support to the CBOs, elevating issues, and problem-solving. Their experience managing food voucher programs aided in the daily management of this rapidly changing program.

About the #LetsFeedLACounty Food Voucher Program

- Program Enrollment Criteria: Low-income, impacted by COVID-19, and LA County resident
- Outreach conducted by 19 CBOs serving the most vulnerable residents of LA County and self-enrollment for low resourced college students
- Nine-week enrollment timeframe: November 2020-January 2021
- Food benefits ranged from \$600 for families of one to three people to \$900 for families of four or more
- Designed with choice in mind, participants could choose one of three food benefit options:
 - » Home delivery of 14 pre-set food boxes via the Tangelo App
 - » Northgate Gonzalez Market food vouchers for in-store shopping
 - » Albertsons/Vons Heart Card for in-store shopping



Without the dedication of the 19 CBOs, the program would not have been successful. As trusted messengers in the community, through skillful engagement and commitment to serving their clients, they worked long hours under unique pandemic isolation restrictions to invite, enroll and support tens of thousands of beneficiaries. Their flexibility and ongoing feedback supported a continuous quality improvement process during program implementation. The diverse CBOs effectively used every dollar of the \$1 million in CARES Act funding to support employment and staff development and reach the most vulnerable populations in their preferred language throughout Los Angeles County.

Tangelo, the program’s digital food vendor, provided home-delivered food boxes through their app ordering system. They were responsible for food box selection,

food procurement, food delivery, monitoring of electronic wallets and customer service. Tangelo worked with California-based vendors to maximize the number of California-grown food items in the boxes — 68 out of 85 farmers were from California. Tangelo also built the online registration portal for the program.

The program also had two supermarket partners to provide in-store shopping options. Northgate Gonzalez Markets (Northgate), a family-owned Latino market with 19 stores in Los Angeles County, acted as the project’s Latino grocery partner. They developed food-only voucher cards with a \$100 value per card for the program. Albertsons Companies was the mainstream supermarket option rolling out their new grocery-only “Heart Card” in November 2020, just in time for the #LetsFeedLACounty Food Voucher Program.

LA County Food Security Branch

FUNDER, PROGRAM VISION



Public Health Institute

PROGRAM ADMINISTRATION & PUBLIC HEALTH & NUTRITION EXPERTISE

- Fiscal capacity
- Contract & fiscal management
- Legal review
- Program leadership
- Program design
- Daily communication & support to CBOs
- Evaluation services



Wholesome Wave

PROGRAM EXPERT

- Program design
- Daily communication & support to CBOs



Tangelo, Northgate & Albertsons

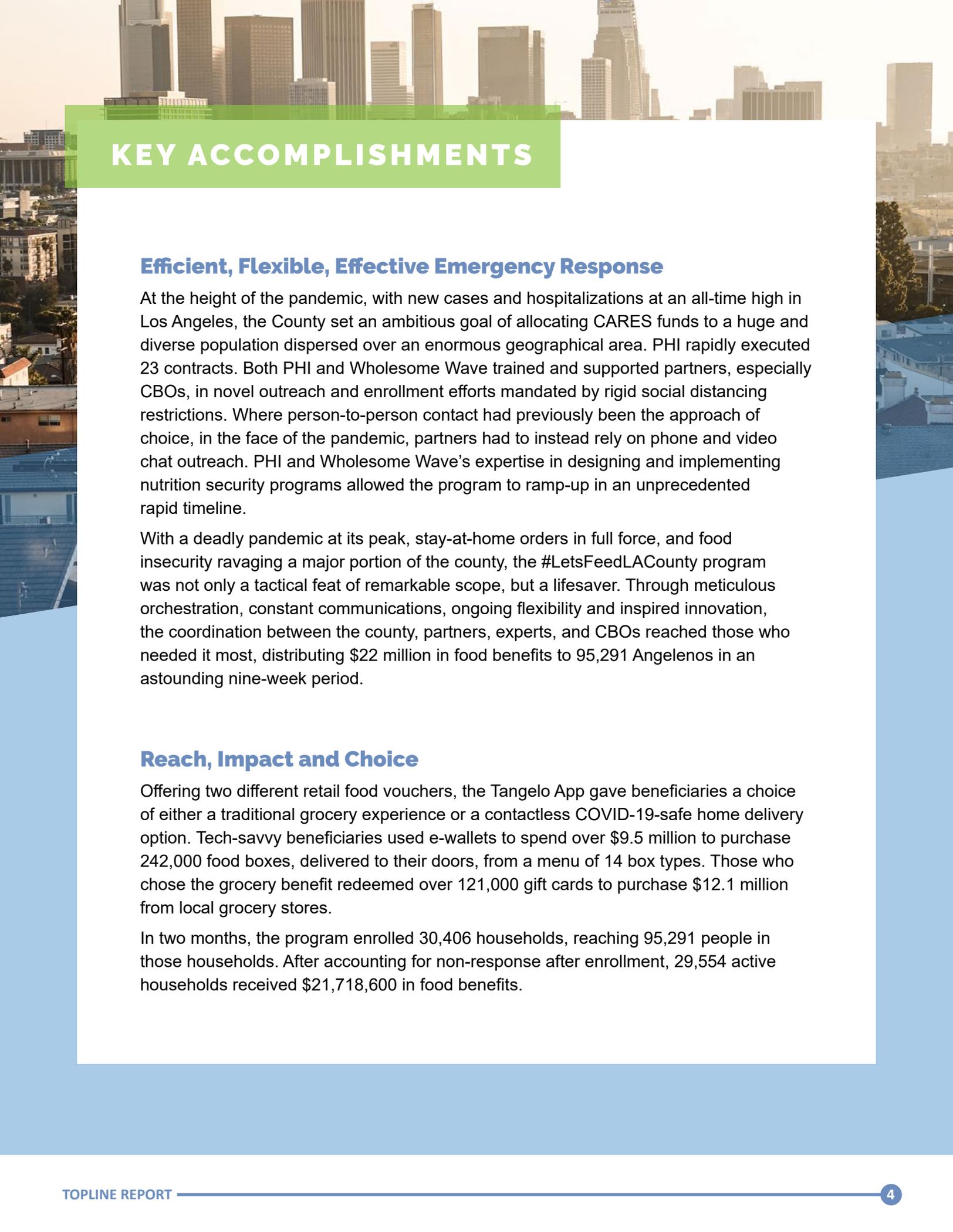
FOOD PARTNERS

- Food procurement & delivery
- Monitoring of electronic wallets & customer service
- In-store shopping
- Development of food-only voucher cards

19 Community-based Organizations Serving LA County’s Most Vulnerable Residents

PROGRAM ENROLLMENT

- Efficient outreach through an established network of clients
- Trusted by the community
- In-language support

A background image of a city skyline with various skyscrapers under a clear sky. The image is partially obscured by a green banner at the top and a blue banner at the bottom.

KEY ACCOMPLISHMENTS

Efficient, Flexible, Effective Emergency Response

At the height of the pandemic, with new cases and hospitalizations at an all-time high in Los Angeles, the County set an ambitious goal of allocating CARES funds to a huge and diverse population dispersed over an enormous geographical area. PHI rapidly executed 23 contracts. Both PHI and Wholesome Wave trained and supported partners, especially CBOs, in novel outreach and enrollment efforts mandated by rigid social distancing restrictions. Where person-to-person contact had previously been the approach of choice, in the face of the pandemic, partners had to instead rely on phone and video chat outreach. PHI and Wholesome Wave's expertise in designing and implementing nutrition security programs allowed the program to ramp-up in an unprecedented rapid timeline.

With a deadly pandemic at its peak, stay-at-home orders in full force, and food insecurity ravaging a major portion of the county, the #LetsFeedLACounty program was not only a tactical feat of remarkable scope, but a lifesaver. Through meticulous orchestration, constant communications, ongoing flexibility and inspired innovation, the coordination between the county, partners, experts, and CBOs reached those who needed it most, distributing \$22 million in food benefits to 95,291 Angelenos in an astounding nine-week period.

Reach, Impact and Choice

Offering two different retail food vouchers, the Tangelo App gave beneficiaries a choice of either a traditional grocery experience or a contactless COVID-19-safe home delivery option. Tech-savvy beneficiaries used e-wallets to spend over \$9.5 million to purchase 242,000 food boxes, delivered to their doors, from a menu of 14 box types. Those who chose the grocery benefit redeemed over 121,000 gift cards to purchase \$12.1 million from local grocery stores.

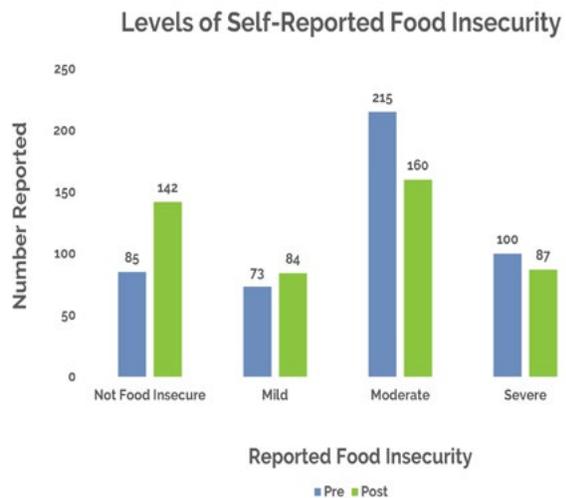
In two months, the program enrolled 30,406 households, reaching 95,291 people in those households. After accounting for non-response after enrollment, 29,554 active households received \$21,718,600 in food benefits.

KEY ACCOMPLISHMENTS

Reduced Food Insecurity

The #LetsFeedLACounty Food Voucher Program aimed to mitigate food insecurity (and its health impacts) on COVID-19-impacted families, and it did! A brief evaluation study was conducted using questions adapted from the Food Insecurity Experience Scale (FIES). Families completed pre-surveys at the time of enrollment and received a text message with a post-survey link after food benefits had been broadly distributed. 473 participants responded to both the pre- and post-survey.

The results of a rank test showed a 14.7% reduction in self-reports of food insecurity following receipt of the food vouchers ($z = -5.44$, $p < .001$, $r = 0.18$). To examine the data further, the responses were analyzed by household size. The results showed an 11.4% reduction for households with 1 to 3 people ($z = -3.56$, $p < .001$, $r = 0.15$) (Figure 2) and a 38.0% reduction for households with 4 to 8 people ($z = -4.29$, $p < .001$, $r = 0.20$) in self-reports of food insecurity following receipt of the food vouchers.



Increased Access with Choice and Dignity

The food benefit options were designed with choice in mind so participants struggling during the pandemic could buy food at the store they wanted (either at a Latino market or a mainstream supermarket), or via app-based ordering with home delivery – a COVID-19-safe option for those sheltering from the virus in their homes. With over 80% of the participants stating that they lost their job or had their work hours reduced due to COVID-19, and 25% staying home with schoolchildren, participants were grateful to purchase healthy foods for their families with choice and dignity.



Conclusions

California’s low-income residents and immigrant communities continue to face barriers in accessing healthy food during COVID-19. Even after vaccines have been, and continue to be, widely distributed, the economic and food insecurity consequences of the pandemic will continue to linger. Nonetheless, there can be no denying that Los Angeles County’s swift action in recognizing the need, significant funding, and support of a tailored model to work with public and private partners and trusted CBOs alleviated the most severe suffering. It allowed benefits to reach the county’s most low-income residents during the darkest days of the pandemic. Innovative emergency actions like the #LetsFeedLACounty Food Voucher Program, supported by a team of seasoned and passionate experts, were vital and effective in safeguarding the County’s most vulnerable from hunger.

“Innovative emergency actions like the #LetsFeedLACounty Food Voucher Program were vital and effective”

Well-executed projects like the #LetsFeedLACounty Food Voucher Program can influence policies that shape long-term solutions. For example, states can develop programs that mirror federal nutrition programs to permanently extend food benefits to families that are income qualifying and food insecure but left out of federal food assistance programs due to a variety of reasons. Investment in food assistance promotes both food security and nutrition security. Additionally, increasing access to healthier food options can also reduce diet-related chronic diseases in disproportionately impacted communities.

Recommendations

Whether reaching people in need during a crisis (pandemic, economic downturn or natural disaster like floods, fires and hurricanes) or expanding efforts to increase food and nutrition security in vulnerable populations in communities across the country, innovative voucher programs can be a solution. Access to healthy, culturally relevant food should be a right for all. Below is a list of recommendations that can strengthen and expand emergency food and food for all programs.

- During an emergency response, local jurisdictions should establish an infrastructure to coordinate government food assistance programs, emergency/charitable feeding, mutual aid organizations, etc. to address food insecurity and build community resilience. This infrastructure can be leveraged to identify needs and disseminate federal, state and/or local funds to implement programs quickly and effectively.





- Partner with, and fairly compensate, trusted local CBOs to ensure geographical, cultural and linguistic needs of the populations are met.
- Extend food choices and delivery options. Ensure culturally appropriate foods and vegetarian/vegan options are always available and “build your own box” experiences are staples of any program.
- Incentivize healthy food selections that double fruit and vegetable allowances to expand beyond just food security and focus on nutrition security and diet quality to have long term impacts on reducing diet related illnesses.
- Collect health behavior and other metrics in addition to food insecurity data to show impacts on nutrition security and diet quality.
- Offer food and nutrition assistance programs in tandem with other services. This may include combining program enrollment with other social services, enrichment opportunities, as well as food and nutrition program referrals, and connections to food sovereignty by providing plants and seeds to clients. By connecting clients to other services beyond emergency food relief, more sustainable solutions to address nutrition security among these vulnerable populations will be more effective.



Ready to Help

We're ready to help feed families to stay healthy. Whether big or small, emergency or prevention - we can help communities deploy strategies to access healthy foods. Our multi-faceted team has national experience with a variety of program strategies, can work with private & public funding, and reach people in a culturally relevant and effective way through trusted community partners.

For more information, contact:

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