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Establishing Plans for Long-Term, Cross-Sector Coordination in Support of a Sustainable and Just Food System

The infrastructure that feeds Los Angeles County residents is a kaleidoscope of public, private, and nonprofit services, goods, and facilities. There is a high degree of interdependence across the different sectors of this food system, which means that any efforts aimed at making the food system more resilient, equitable, or sustainable will necessitate extensive collaboration. There is an urgent need to develop and share comprehensive data, coordinate across the county and among cities and nonprofit organizations, and fund a collective effort aimed at addressing food-related inequities.

Food insecurity, defined as the lack of reliable access to a sufficient quantity of affordable, nutritious food, has skyrocketed due to the economic fallout of the pandemic. In Los Angeles County, the governmental safety net programs designed to reduce food insecurity have experienced challenges in reaching and enrolling participants quickly due to overwhelming demand. This has caused greater reliance and significant strain on charitable feeding operations, which have in the past functioned as a last-resort option for the most vulnerable individuals.

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Moreover, dozens of new charitable efforts have sprung up to provide food during the pandemic; community-based organizations, municipalities and school districts providing other vital services have pivoted to become food pantries, Grab & Go sites and food delivery services. However, there are limited means for collecting and compiling information about these various responses to food insecurity – which therefore limits stakeholders’ collective understanding of which needs are or are not being met, and what additional initiatives or changes within the food system would best address the remaining unmet need.

A few weeks after the start of the pandemic, the County’s Emergency Operations Center established the Food Security Branch (Branch) within the Department of Public Social Services (DPSS) Department Operations Center (DOC), and named the County’s Chief Sustainability Officer (CSO) to lead this effort. The Branch then created a Food Security Taskforce (Taskforce) to coordinate among food assistance programs and address the growing levels of food insecurity caused by the public health crisis and its economic impact. The Branch has taken action to facilitate expansion of public food assistance programs, supported the distribution of food to thousands of households, and developed new approaches for meeting the food-related needs of vulnerable populations.

In response to the COVID-19 pandemic, philanthropy also identified food insecurity as a major concern, and has supported the LA Regional Food Bank as well as other community-based organizations and food pantries. Several local philanthropic leaders have committed to focusing on the issue of food security, food access, and the food supply chain by hosting briefings and sharing information to raise awareness on this issue for their colleagues. These philanthropic leaders, along with leadership in Los Angeles County, the City of Los Angeles and other cities within the county, know that the goal of food security is not easily achievable and will require long-term and ongoing commitment.

It will also require a variety of strategies to raise awareness, sustain momentum, strive for continuous improvement, and find innovative solutions to eradicate food insecurity.

In the long-term, optimizing the food system's impact on health and well-being in Los Angeles County amid dynamic needs will require coordination, collaboration, and responsiveness across the diverse mix of food system stakeholders. Ongoing coordination will help ensure that gaps and weaknesses in the food system are identified more quickly, and stronger collaboration can support faster development of a range of policy and programmatic solutions.

Coordination and collaboration across the many sectors of the food system – including public sector programs such as DPSS's CalFresh program and other aligned programs, such as the Women, Infants, and Children (WIC) program, which are part of the County's social safety net – will also be crucial to the County's economic recovery and long-term resilience. Studies have shown that safety net programs are among the most effective governmental tools for addressing poverty and inequality. They reduce the severity of recessions and act as a buffer to absorb future shocks, whether those come in the form of an economic downturn or a natural disaster. Regular coordination among DPSS, the agencies that administer these programs and their cross-sector partners can help food system stakeholders better prepare for future disasters and would help Los Angeles County build the equitable and sustainable food system that it deserves.

The County's CSO, which leads the Food Security Branch within the DPSS DOC and which chairs the Food Security Taskforce, has facilitated multiple partnerships and collaborations between county agencies and cross-sector stakeholders since the beginning of the pandemic. The CSO has also outlined a vision for a sustainable and just food system within the County's long-term sustainability plan that the Board adopted in August 2019.

WE, THEREFORE MOVE that the Board of Supervisors direct the Chief Sustainability Officer (CSO), as director of the Food Security Branch – in consultation with food system stakeholders and members of the Food Security Taskforce, including but not limited to Los Angeles County’s: Department of Public Health, Department of Health Services, Department of Public Social Services, Workforce Development, Aging and Community Services, Office of Education, the Center for Strategic Partnerships, other cities and municipal agencies, and representatives from the non-profit/philanthropic sector – to debrief from lessons learned during COVID-19, and develop a plan for ensuring ongoing and effective cross-sector food system coordination and collaboration that drives improvements in outcomes towards the eradication of food insecurity. This report back should be developed within 90 days or within 30 days of the deactivation of the Food Security Branch, whichever is sooner, with a strategy that will include the following:

1. Explore existing best practices, elevate current efforts, and include recommendations to ensure ongoing cross-sector food system coordination and collaboration that will continue to address food insecurity while preparing for future disasters or economic shocks that will increase food system resiliency. This report back should be developed with a philanthropic co-lead and outline:
 - a. A plan that includes a cross-sector and a regional coordinating committee consisting of representatives from major cities (working with Los Angeles County’s Disaster Management Area Coordinators to help coordinate and identify representatives), foundations, non-profits and community-based organizations – and proposed activities aimed at addressing food insecurity both immediately and in the long-term;
 - b. A strategy of coordination and engagement with food system stakeholders, which also captures the existing work that has taken place within Los

Angeles County;

- c. A list of shared short-term goals that food system stakeholders will work toward during the County's/region's economic recovery period; and
2. Develop proposed frequency and types of activities for engaging cross-sector food system stakeholders on an ongoing basis after the County/region has recovered from the current health and economic crisis;
3. Identify shared long-term goals, potentially including but not limited to elimination of food insecurity, and for developing data-driven methods to achieve those goals, such as changes in practice and/or in policy; and
4. Help determine the long-term placement of this food security work within Los Angeles County.

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