



Community Services Unlimited, Inc.

Equitable Neighborhood
Development Action Plan

Los Angeles, CA

Developed in partnership with



Mission

To foster the creation of communities actively working to address the inequalities and systemic barriers that make sustainable communities and self-reliant life-styles unattainable.

We are committed to supporting and creating justice-driven community-based programs and educational initiatives, which seek to foster dialogue, and create awareness and critical consciousness.

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Equitable Neighborhood Development Action Plan

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01 | Introduction

Community Services Unlimited's (CSU) mission is to foster the creation of communities actively working to address the inequalities and systemic barriers that make sustainable communities and self-reliant life-styles unattainable. We are committed to supporting and creating justice-driven community-based programs and educational initiatives, which seek to foster dialogue, and create awareness and critical consciousness. We envision equitable, healthful and sustainable communities that are self-reliant, inter-relating and where every individual has the support and resources needed to develop to their fullest capacity.

This current mission and vision was written around the beginning of the new millennium by the recently re-formed board of directors under the developing leadership of Neelam Sharma and the founding Executive Director B. Kwaku Duren. At the time CSU was a fully volunteer powered organization with deep roots in community organizing in Los Angeles. The organization was founded in 1977 as the non-profit arm of the Southern California Chapter of the Black Panther Party (BPP) by Kwaku Duren and other party members and sympathizers. With the demise of the BPP and the shutting down of the last chapter in Southern California organizers decided to keep the non-profit structure intact to continue to serve the people, which it did in a number of ways that changed according to the perceived needs of the community.

The Board that came together at the end of the 1990's was made up of diverse Angelenos of color and included an experienced teacher, a legal rights professional, a food justice activist and an accountant, in addition to former Panthers. Conversations about what needed to shift in the stated goals and the culture of the organization were deeply informed by a recognition that while Los Angeles had changed dramatically since the formation of CSU, the objective conditions of most people of color had in fact worsened. It was understood that a different way of bringing about change was needed than that our founders had imagined. The problems and issues we saw in our community were deep rooted, complicated and multi-faceted, and we knew that a committed long term and multi-dimensional approach was needed. The mission created was purposely broad, to encompass numerous potential activities, but specific in centralizing community residents and their engagement in imagining and implementing actions to bring about desired change.

As an organization founded by radical revolutionaries, CSU was created to serve the most oppressed and disenfranchised community residents. Historically South Central Los Angeles (SCLA) was mostly African American, and this was the population we served. However, demographic changes in SCLA have recast the local population and CSU now serves Mexican/Central American (the majority) and African American/Black




(now a minority) low and moderate-income residents of SCLA. However, we noted that with the shifting demographics many community organizations changed their language and orientation to aim at the growing Brown population, at the expense of the receding Black community. We saw this also reflected in the stance of local politicians and the way that resources were allocated and saw that it caused a lot of anger and resentment amongst the long standing Black residents and unnecessarily created more divisions amongst Black and Brown folks. While noting and responding to the demographic changes, at CSU we have been vocal about continuing to serve the local Black population regardless of its smaller numbers, and intentional about emphasizing historical community and organizing connections between the Black and Brown populations in order to build greater understanding and common political interests.

At the time that CSU was having this broader conversation about our role as change agents and re-envisioning our guiding mission, we were engaged in two areas of activity that deeply impacted how we moved forward. We were implementing our very successful, “Education In Our Interest” after school program in several local schools, and, we were actively involved in policy work at the school board, city and state level to improve access to

healthy, fresh affordable food for residents of SCLA. We literally experienced the connections between these areas of work, for example, we saw that too many students were living all day on some form of sugar and therefore unable to sit still, let alone participate in educational activities and we saw over several years the epidemic of childhood obesity taking shape around us. Alarmed, we began to do research and our lived experience was confirmed by the statistics of diet related illnesses and their devastating impact on our community.

We decided that we had to do something about this issue that was silently maiming and killing our community members. With our new Board of Directors and our new mission and vision, we leveraged the partnerships we had been building via the two areas of work mentioned above and created a Planning Committee made up of local residents and relevant partners across the City. In 2003 this Committee planned and carried out the ACTION — Active Community to Improve Our Nutrition — Community Food Assessment. The assessment was powered by local middle and high school interns, who alongside local residents and food justice activists created participatory research tools designed to learn about the issues residents faced accessing healthy food and the solutions they wanted to see to tackle these problems. ACTION, was supported



by local businesses who for example, donated lunches for participants and printed materials for surveying. Part of the assessment was a mapping project which created a detailed inventory of food availability in a 20 by 10 block area¹ This participatory, community driven research was the spring board to the work that CSU has been carrying out ever since.

What emerged almost immediately from ACTION were requests for programming in local schools and from community partners. The publishing of the 40 page ACTION assessment report² resulted in a funder contacting CSU to invite us to apply for our first grant. What developed over time was the Community Food Village (CFV), a multi-layered project with a number of programs designed to offer engagement for diverse community members at different points in the food system. We seek to create a sustainable local food system where food is grown, distributed, and bought within our community in order to increase the health and well-being of residents, the local economy, and the environment. The project includes urban farming, nutrition and agricultural education, job training and youth leadership, and economic enterprise development.

Since 2003, the community based grass roots work of CSU has built public awareness about, and an increased interest in, all things related to food in and around SCLA. This is reflected in an ever increasing demand for access to healthy food as the knowledge of its connections to better health has grown. Thus we have seen the steady growth of our social enterprise the Village Market Place (VMP) from one weekly Produce Stand to a brick and mortar Food Hub and Market³, which shows the increase in sales of local food via the VMP. We have also experienced consistent and growing interest from local residents in learning how to grow, harvest and prepare their own food as can be seen in the popularity of our fruit tree distributions and our growing, harvesting and nutrition education programs.

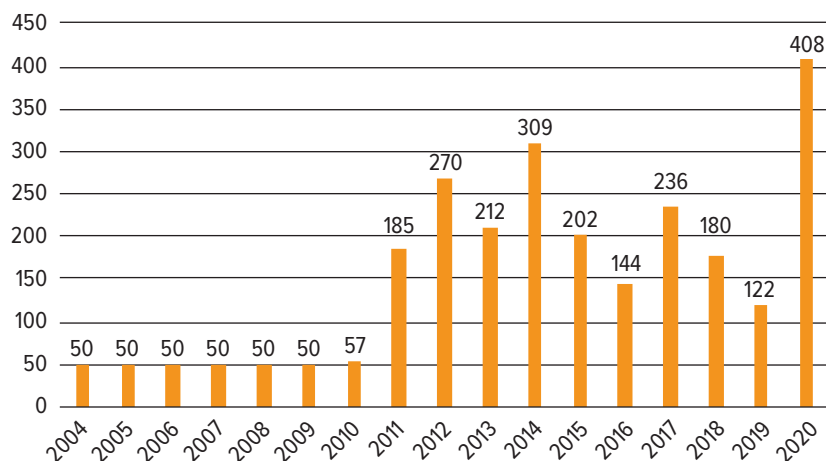
The very visible failure of the mainstream food system at the advent of the COVID19 pandemic lock down and the ability of the VMP (and others like us around the country) to continue to function effectively due to our uber local connections, has seen the interest in local food systems increase exponentially and go beyond consuming, growing and preparing food. There is a deeper interest in food as a business activity, and as a creative and potentially income earning tool for local entrepreneurs.

¹ ACTION – Active Community to Improve Our Nutrition – Community Food Assessment Report. <http://csuinc.org/csuinc/wp-content/uploads/2021/05/action-Report-1.pdf> page 9.

² ACTION – Active Community to Improve Our Nutrition – Community Food Assessment Report. <http://csuinc.org/csuinc/wp-content/uploads/2021/05/action-Report-1.pdf>

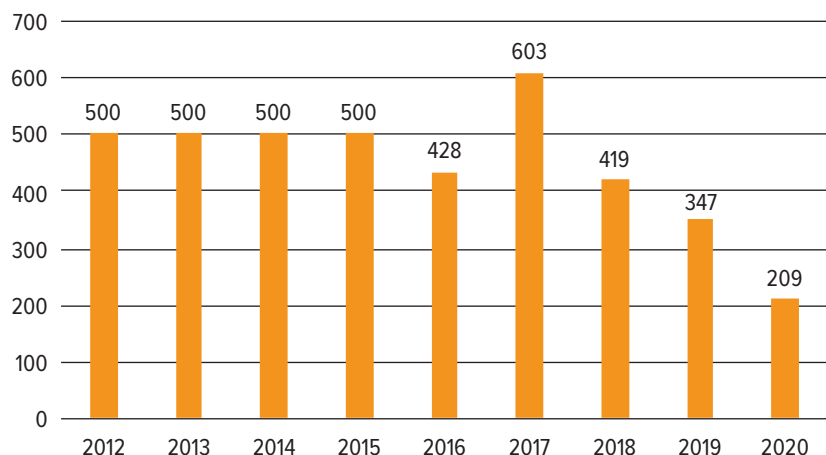
³ <http://csuinc.org/village-market-place/>

Garden Gateway Free Nutrition/Gardening Class Attendees



In 2020, there was a marked spike in citizens seeking guidance in nutrition and gardening.

Farm Volunteers at the CSU/EXPO Urban Mini Farm



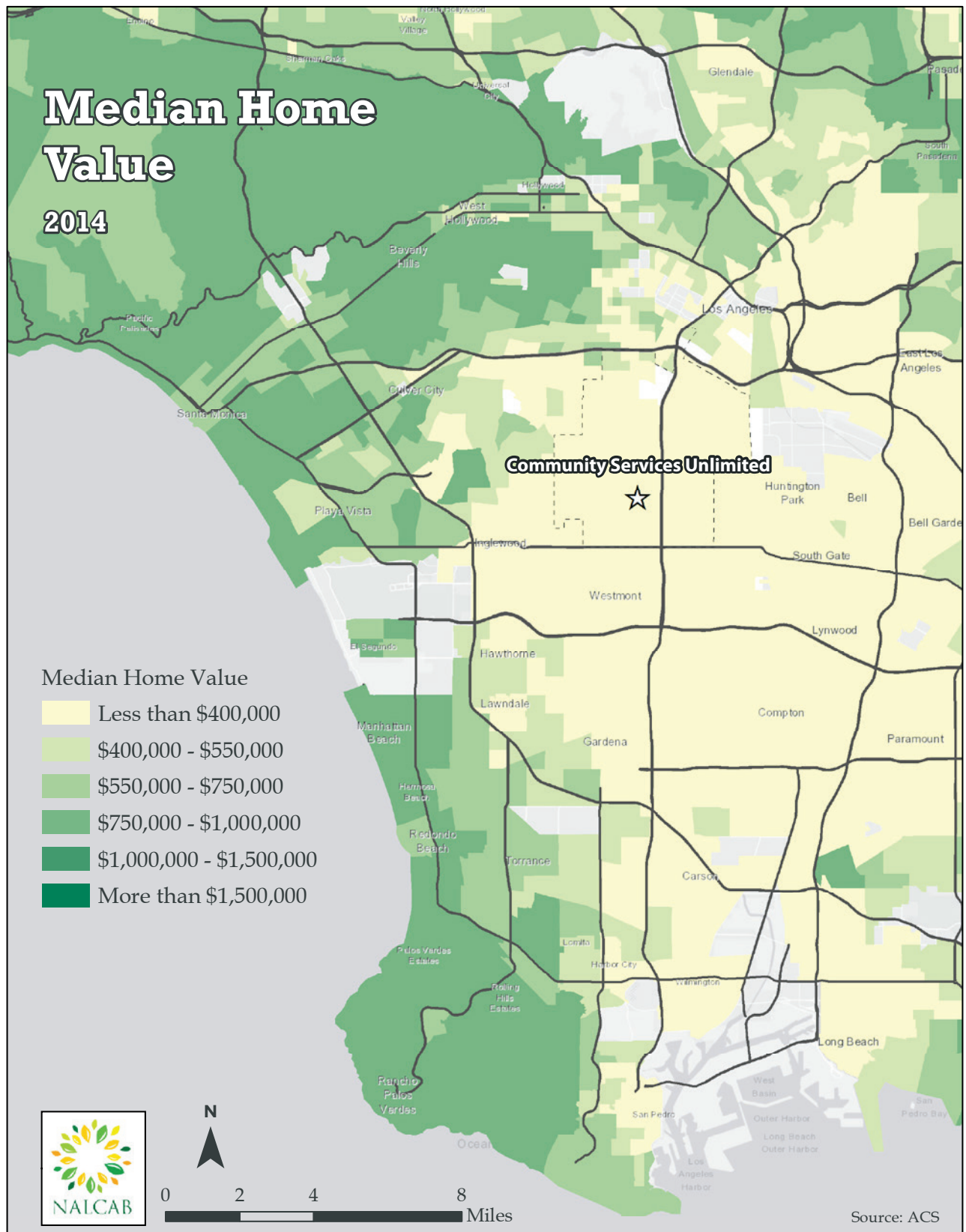
Even in the face of 2020's health crisis, CSU volunteers continued to support the Urban Mini Farm.

One of the reasons CSU created the VMP Food Hub, with its commercial kitchen, was precisely to show case a model for a successful local food business and to have the space and resources to help other food based businesses develop and grow in our community. We have been seeing warning signs of gentrification in SCLA, and we want the opportunities opening up in local food systems to benefit long term traditional SCLA residents and provide a means for economic mobility for those that need it most and it not be yet another business opportunity for already well to do outsiders as we have seen in too many other gentrifying neighborhoods.

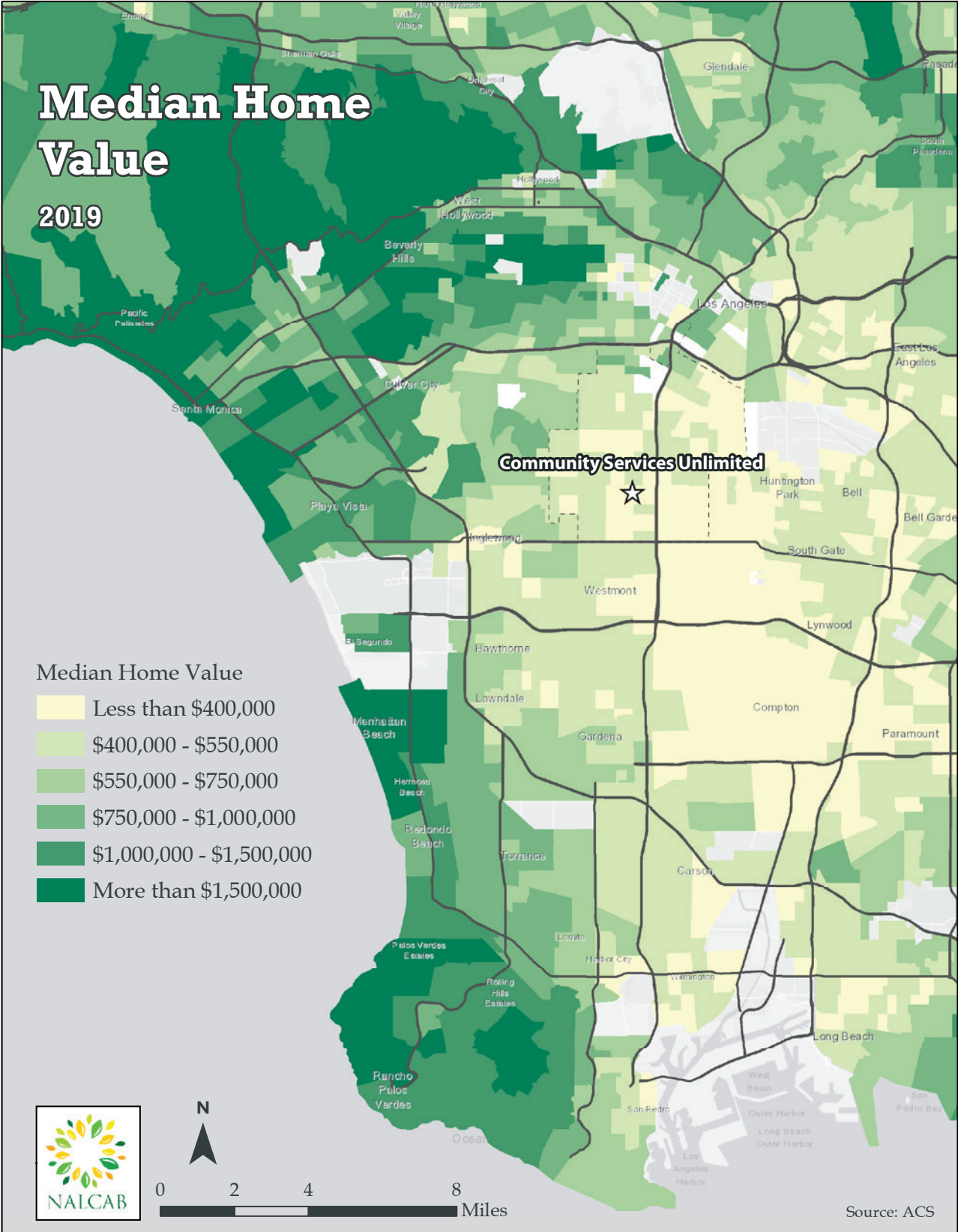
We have always understood that our food justice work is not only about impacting the health of our community, but is also a potentially incredibly powerful economic driver to build the wealth of community residents, to keep our dollars circulating in our neighborhood and to prevent economic leakage.

In addition to the work already discussed, there are several initiatives we have been undertaking to assist the economic opportunities offered by the increased demand for truly local and healthy food. Nationally, the creation and development of the Equitable Food Oriented Development (EFOD) Collaborative, see www.efod.org a

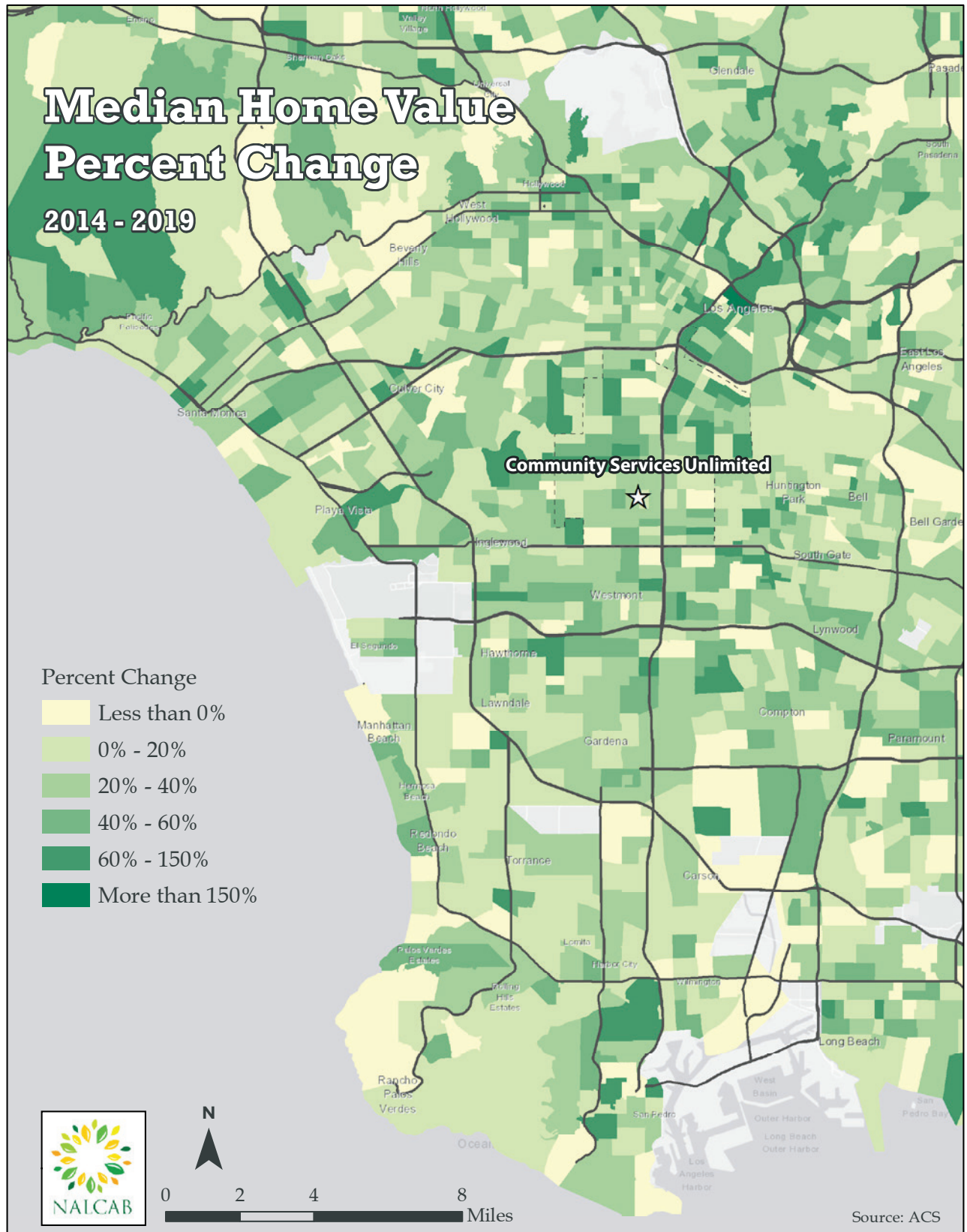
Median Home Value 2014



Median Home Value 2019



Median Home Value Percent Change 2014 - 2019



national strategy to place community driven food based economic activity at the center of health and wealth building initiatives. Locally, establishing the South Central Growers and Harvesters Network (SCGHN); a collaborative of home based urban agricultural micro-enterprises that coordinate production and distribution to serve customers in SCLA.

Just as EFOD is a next step and logical growth in the building of the VMP Food Hub in SCLA, the SCGHN is a further development of our long standing and successful growing and harvesting training programs, Garden Gateway and Tree Of Life. It does not replace these programs, but complements them by offering a space for those who want to take their growing and harvesting skills to the next level and earn an income by selling what they grow and/or harvest to businesses like the VMP, in addition to encouraging an increase in the availability of very locally grown food. We are currently unaware of a similar program or network existing anywhere else, the impetus for SCGHN emerged

from more than ten years of building and networking local growing and harvesting skills and from the deepened awareness of the importance of a sustainable and local food supply.

Our vision is a self-sustaining network of growers and harvesters spread out across South Central committed to making good food accessible for the greater community and empowered to build micro-enterprises that uplift their household. Growers can be anyone, from community members with grand backyards to people growing on their apartment stairway. Being a grower opens the door for community members to make extra income from their bounty. In a neighborhood where so many people already grow produce in their own space, this opportunity offers multiple returns with little added labor. Within a neighborhood where community members struggle with access to fresh, high quality produce the SCGHN hopes to meet that need while empowering residents every step of the way with increased skills and economic earning power.



02 | About the Neighborhood

According to Los Angeles County Dept. of Public Health's most recent Key Indicators of Health Report⁴ completed in 2017, SCLA is home to some of the most significant health, socioeconomic, and housing disparities across all of Los Angeles County. The area has the highest poverty rate in the city of LA, with 36% of households reporting income below the federal poverty level,⁵ and 34% participating in the SNAP program.⁶ CSU serves and directly engages with residents from across SCLA and we have no formal cut off for our service areas, such as a specific street or zip code. However, for the purposes of reports much of our data is defined by Council District 8 & 9 (CD8 & CD9) and the 90044 where CSU's headquarters, the Paul Robeson Community Wellness Center is situated and where the Village Market Place Food-Hub operates

on the ground floor, and when data at this level isn't available, Service Planning Area 6 of Los Angeles County (SPA 6).

The 90044 zip code sits in CD8 and stretches 5 square miles from 54th Street to 108th Street going north to south respectively and from Western Ave to east of the 110 Harbor freeway going east to west respectively. According to the U.S. Census in 2014 the population of this area was approximately 88,412 people, which at 17,500 per square mile ranks amongst Los Angeles City's and County's highest densities of people per square mile. 90044. Throughout CD8, there are a disproportionately high number of liquor stores, fast-food chains, and corner/convenience stores, which comprise 94% of food retail outlets.⁷

⁴ http://publichealth.lacounty.gov/ha/docs/2015LACHS/KeyIndicator/Correction/KIH_020617-sec.pdf

⁵ Ibid. page 8.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Statistics generated through California Department of Public Health GIS Open Data. <https://data-cdphdata.opendata.arcgis.com/>

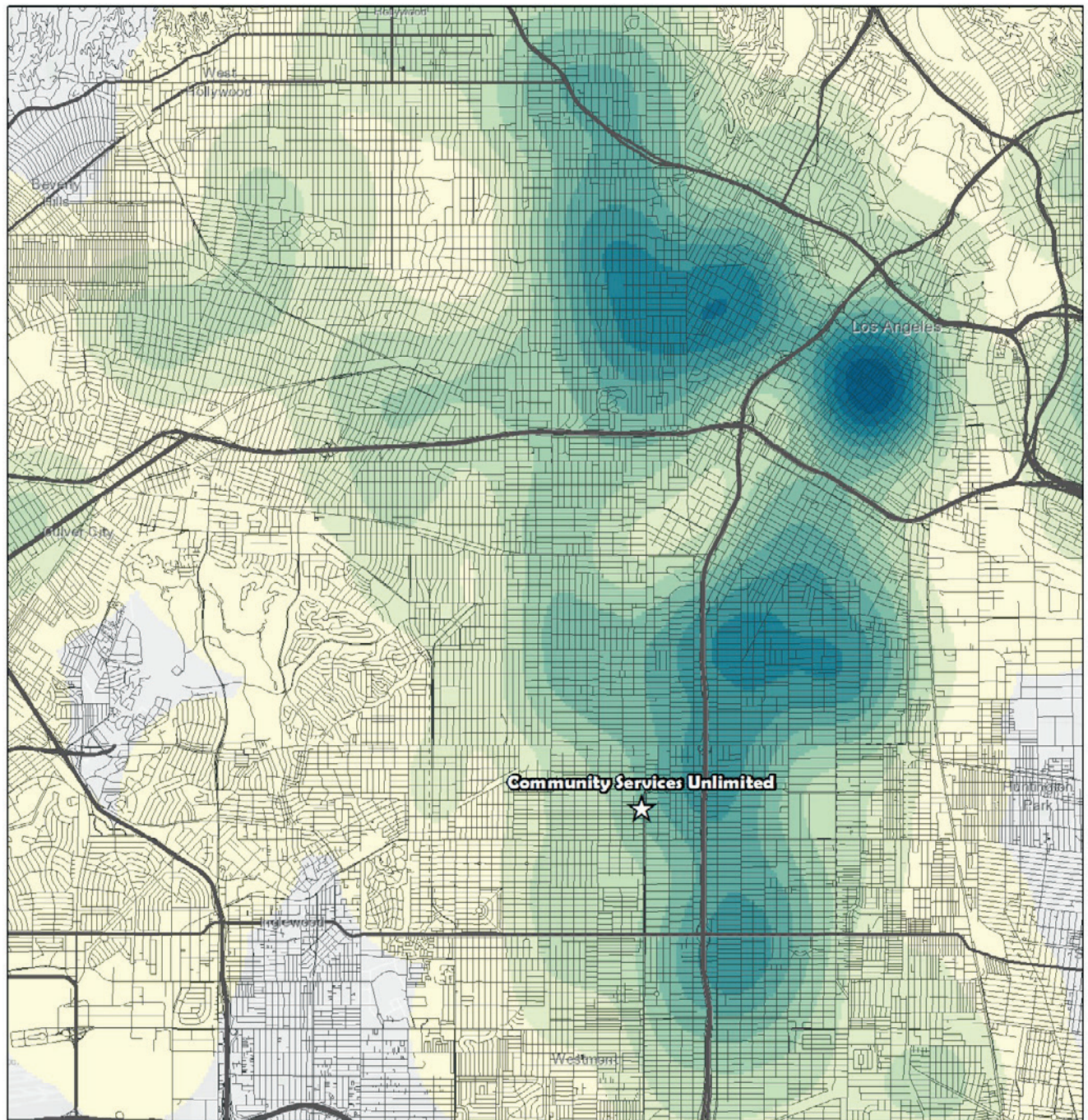


Only **58%**

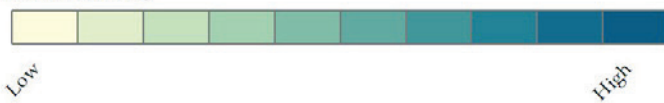
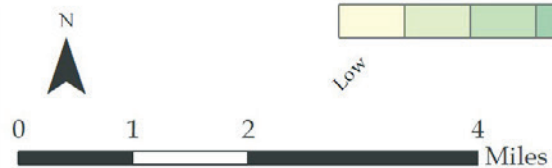
of residents in CD8 live within close proximity to a grocery store.⁸

⁸ <http://publichealth.lacounty.gov/ohae/docs/cchp/pdf/2018/LosAngelesCityCouncilDistrict8.pdf> page 8.

Grocery Market Density



Market Density



Source: data.lacity


South Los Angeles is grossly underserved by healthy food retail of any kind, from grocery stores to healthy restaurants. Food outlets in South Los Angeles are less likely to provide healthy options that enable individuals to meet dietary recommendations, let alone offer organic or local ingredients. In pursuit of healthier food many South L.A. residents who have vehicles or the time to spend hours on buses, spend a great deal of money and time accessing groceries outside of our community, an economic phenomenon known as “leakage”, and one of the mechanisms through which poor neighborhoods, stay poor. Furthermore, several studies have found that the lack of transportation options to supermarkets is one of the biggest issues for residents in South L.A. Nation-wide data shows that a quarter of low-income households lack access to a vehicle, and this percentage may be even higher in South L.A.

These disparities have had devastating impacts during the current COVID-19 pandemic, as record numbers of SCLA residents are unemployed and experiencing

hunger. During the first three months of the pandemic lock down, the numbers of local residents accessing CSU’s Cal Fresh Outreach Program, wherein we assist residents to apply for EBT benefits, increased 9 times!

The 1992 rebellion in SCLA ignited a great deal of public commentary about the lack of basic grocery stores and certainly of healthy food outlets in SCLA. Since then many articles have been written about this issue and many studies have been done showing that even the food that is available in the stores that do exist is of a much poorer quality than in other wealthier neighborhoods of LA9. Sadly, almost three decades later, none of this has improved the situation. In fact, Ralphs markets, and Fresh and Easy stores that were opened with much aplomb around SCLA have closed in the last few years. The global and emergency food systems that people rely on for food are pushed beyond their capacity, and the need for a reliable and robust local food system and supporting infrastructure is more pronounced than ever.

⁹ Los Angeles County Department of Public Health. *Key Indicators of Health by Service Planning Area Report*, published March 2013, <http://publichealth.lacounty.gov/docs/keyindicators.pdf>



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03 | Vision for the Neighborhood

In the face of these long standing challenges we often hear from residents who engage in our programs about their desires to create their own businesses with the goal of improving the quality of life and health in their community.

Innovative ideas, unique local businesses, and motivated community-driven residents make up the foundation of SCLA. Although many of our neighborhoods are referred to as “food deserts,” families have been growing food here for generations, and hold much of the skill and cultural knowledge needed to meet the demand for fresh and healthy produce in our community.

As we have shared, the reality of everyday life in SCLA is not easy and the area is represented and popularly perceived as a grim place to live. However, we are incredibly wealthy in our abundance of hard skills, passion, history, and knowledge among other things, that can all be translated into opportunities for economic mobility and communal wellness. Investing in the building of a network of local growers and harvesters will support the work already being done to build the resiliency our community needs. The challenges that

have been exposed by the pandemic are a forerunner of those that are coming as a result of climate change. The devastation that is being anticipated will hit communities like SCLA with households already on the edge of survival the hardest. Building local food resiliency is no longer simply a cool thing to do, but is a necessary survival activity.

Our vision for the South Central Growers and Harvesters Network (SCGHN) is that residents of SCLA will be able to utilize the land they have access to and skills to coordinate urban agriculture micro-enterprises that increase their own economic security and mobility, and enhance access to high quality, organic, and culturally appropriate produce grown in and for SCLA neighborhoods. Through our collective efforts our neighborhood will be a place of bounty that is shared and accessible by local residents. The mindset is to feed many tables with one seed; by focusing on increasing residents’ growing capacity and knowledge they will in turn reap a profit as well as providing produce for their families and neighbors.

These goals and strategies directly align with the challenges we've identified in our community; namely in developing solutions that build community resiliency in response to long term neglect of local economic development designed to benefit and serve current residents, the coming challenges of climate change and increasing economic disparities. By further activating our collective assets and capacity in food production, we seek to push back against these and other ever-growing pressures that leave SCLA residents vulnerable and families and businesses displaced. This form of resiliency is the ultimate goal we seek for our community. Healthy diets have proven to be one of the most effective preventative solutions to maintaining good health and, with time, decreasing the cost of health care; one of the largest expenses SCLA families are often faced with. By approaching issues of economic disparities and displacement along the intersection of SCLA's persistent public health crisis, our strategy tackles more than just food inequities or surface level development but empowers and employs residents with the tools and means to begin supporting themselves in new inspiring ways.



Gateway Garden Workshop Attendees



04 | Action Plan

Goals, Strategies, and Actions

By facilitating critical thinking about what we eat and why, and the multitudinous effects of our choices, CSU's food justice work has focused on how food impacts the individual and the community in numerous ways.

Food relates to every single aspect of our lives, how it is grown, where it is grown, who it is grown by, how it is transported, how it is stored, how it is sold how it is marketed, how it is prepared, how its by-products are used, how food waste is managed, these are all critical issues in a world where our relationship with food and how we as a society have thus far managed our responses to these questions, is a main contributor to increased carbon in the atmosphere, a trigger of global climate change.

We feel an urgency to deepen and strengthen our work to build food resilience. The COVID-19 pandemic has made blatant the need for increased community self-sufficiency. Closing farmers' markets and grocery stores, and fewer of the latter per capita than wealthier areas of Los Angeles, leave SCLA residents at risk of

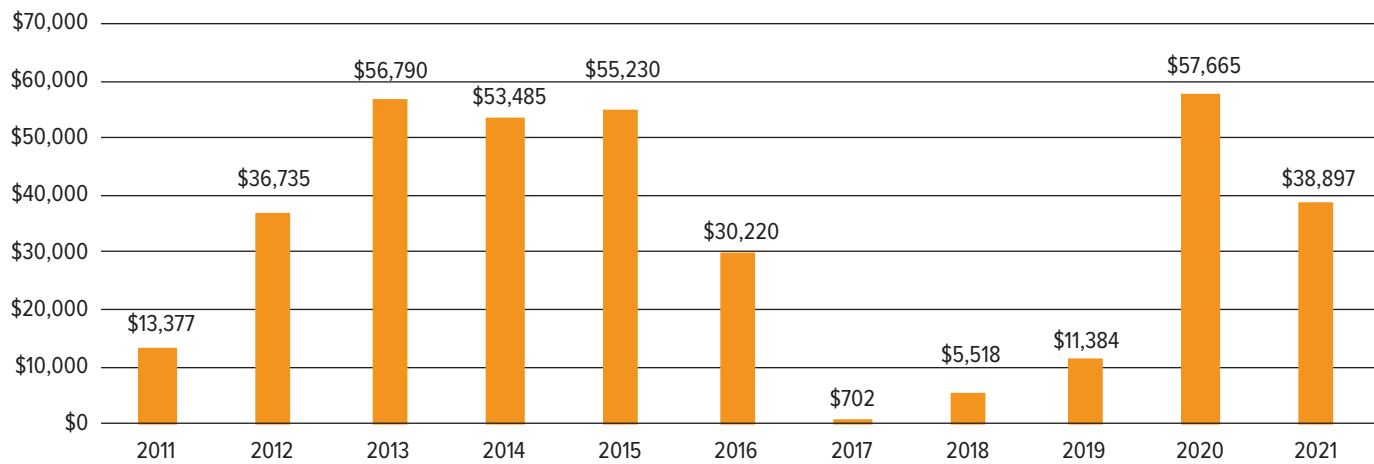
once again finding empty grocery shelves in more crowded, health threatening environments. But there is an alternative. What if neighbors would help feed neighbors? What if there was a network that was accountable and accessible to the community, created by the community, to grow food for the community, that built wealth in the community?

CSU's social enterprise the Village Market Place (VMP) has purchased nearly \$200,000 in fresh produce from small farmers between 2015 and 2021 and purchases are projected to grow by 25% each year for the coming 3-5 years as our social enterprise continues to expand.

Our goal is to direct a significant portion of these purchases to South Central Growers and Harvesters. Through engaging directly with the VMP the project will create a multiplier effect where the enterprise's success supports the increased economic and health well-being of community residents. The projects sustainability will be ensured through its alignment with CSU's existing on-going core activities. CSU will offer coordination and technical



Value of Produce Purchases from Small Farmers



support to the GHN, in addition to CSU’s VMP serving as a primary customer of GHN members, purchasing product to sell in our market, and use in our food processing, café and catering services. The VMP also offers wholesale to food-based businesses and will be able act as a conduit for urban growers to sell to local businesses.

During this planning phase we worked closely with a group of long time participants in our existing programs to begin testing models of purchasing from home gardeners interested in growing their efforts into an urban agriculture micro-enterprise. Through these efforts we purchased \$700 worth of produce from 8



urban growers, but most importantly, process identified the specific challenges individuals faced in the areas of harvesting, communication, transportation, and pricing. This group will form the core organizing group that will engage others, and their firsthand experience will help inform how the Network will function to provide members with the support they need to develop successful micro-enterprises. We have been collecting names of other interested individuals through our events and activities who will be invited to focused events to generate further interest and as venues to gather input about the form and function of the network.

To realize our vision CSU has developed the following action plan for the SCGHN:

Goal 1: Develop a framework for a robust network of urban homebased producers across SCLA that can coordinate production and distribution activities to support the creation of family operated urban agriculture micro-enterprises.

- Host outreach events to build understanding of both the vision and needs for the Network.
- Host skill building and sharing events to develop capacity to realize the growth of the Network through developing its mission and tools for operation.
- Identify the training needs of interested residents to support their micro enterprise development.
- Continue purchasing from urban growers to continue to test models and identify needs while the Network grows.

Goal 2: Identify a community of local food-based businesses interested in purchasing locally & naturally grown, seasonal, culturally appropriate fresh produce.

- Outreach to CSU's existing network for small food based businesses and new businesses who would be interested in learning more about the Network.

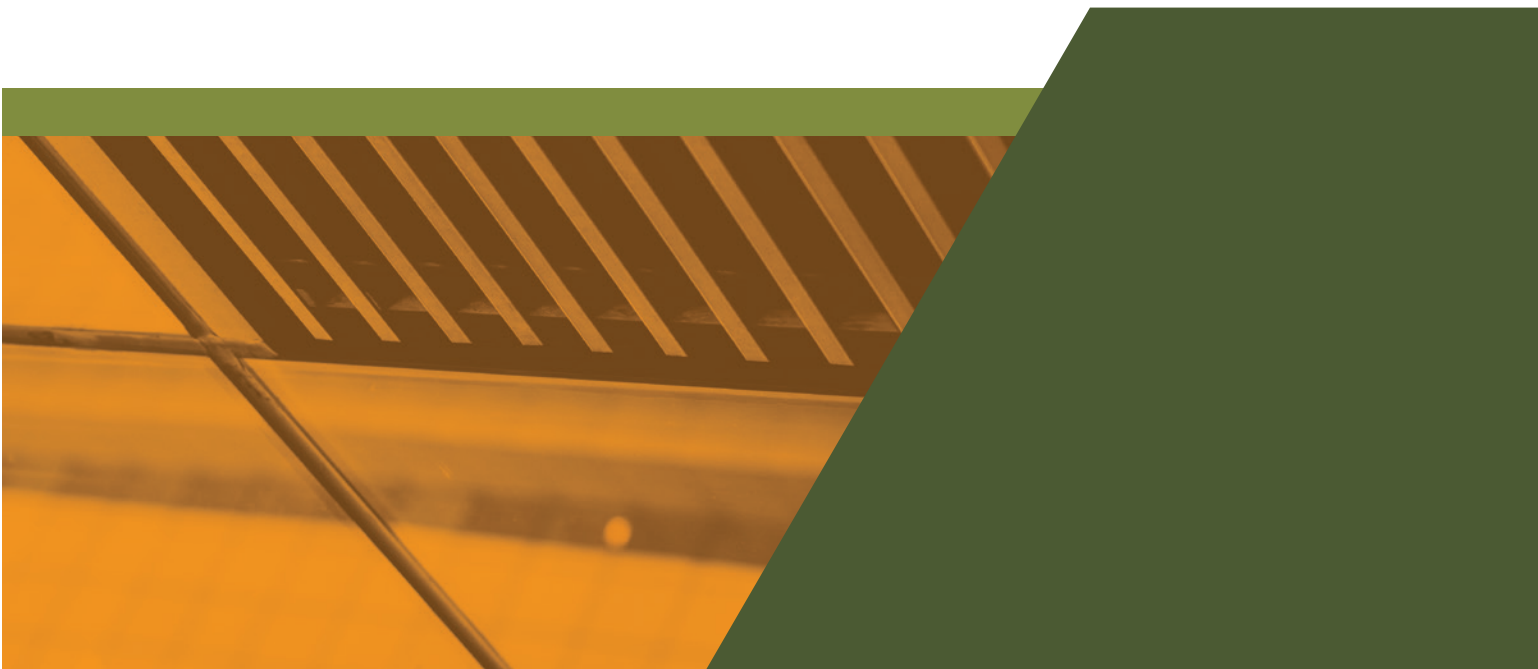
- Host listening sessions to understand the needs of food-based business customers and
- Develop and test methods for supplying South Central grown produce to business customers.
- Develop branding and marketing strategy to promote South Central grown produce available through partnering businesses.
- To support the transformation of SCLA urban hardscapes into productive, environmentally responsible, and resilient green spaces.
- Provide training in sustainable food production methods to beginning urban gardeners.
- Provide advanced training to experience gardeners so they can expand their production on a scale to have greater impact on our community.
- Develop partnerships to leverage resources to support expanded urban food production, i.e. LADWP free fruit tree, lawn removal rebate, and rain water collection programs, LA Department of Sanitation Composting resources, and others.

The approaches detailed above will closely follow the Equitable Food Oriented Development (EFOD) strategy — a nationally recognized strategy cofounded by CSU with more than a dozen collaborating food systems and community develop organizations, that uses

food and agriculture to create economic opportunities, healthy neighborhoods, and explicitly seeks to build community assets, pride, and power by and with historically marginalized communities. To ensure equitable impacts and program direction, this proposal's strategy will follow EFOD's criteria, which includes;

1. prioritizing equity and justice first,
2. place-based work,
3. use of market-based/business strategies,
4. community leadership development/organizing, and
5. community ownership.

These goals and strategies directly align with the challenges we've identified in our community. The need for increased community self-sufficiency has become even more apparent during the current COVID-19 crisis. With closing farmers' markets and fewer grocery stores per capita than wealthier areas, residents of SCLA are more frequently finding empty shelves in more crowded, health-threatening environments. But what if there was an alternative? What if neighbors could help feed neighbors? What if there was a structure that was transparent, accountable, and accessible to the community — created by the community — to feed the community — that built wealth in the community?



05 | Metrics of Success


Building up our community's self-sufficiency and growing capacity is a long-term project, of which this is just the beginning. The building up of an active, flourishing network has many steps which we will measure along the way. Within the first 6 months an analysis of existing neighborhood capacities and interest in urban agriculture micro-enterprises will have been documented by one-on-one phone calls with neighborhood residents and a series of meetings organized to adhere to COVID-19 conditions while still meeting project goals. Key data will be measured through pre and post surveys given to community participants and through key documentation by staff. From those conversations the network will have identified needs (such as crop planning, business planning, or technical skills to support business operations) and held at least 3 trainings over Zoom or distanced (depending on size).

Within one-year SCGHN would:

- Have a defined mission and operating structure and an emerging group of community leaders building their capacity to take over coordination of the Network in the future.
- Have at least 20 each active growers and harvesters. Most of the participants at this point will be through already established community connections.
- Within one-year growers will be actively selling to local businesses, including but not limited to the VMP.

Within five years, SCGHN will:

- A skilled group of community leaders who are responsible for Network coordination.
- Have expanded to include at least 50 each active growers and harvesters.
- Participants will be able to report increased supplemental income.

The background features a large, dark green geometric shape on the left side, which overlaps with a bright orange area. The orange area contains a blurred image of a building's facade with diagonal lines. A horizontal green bar separates the top orange section from the bottom orange section. The text is centered within a large green rectangular area in the lower half of the page.

Through the process outlined at left, community members will articulate their own metrics of success, particularly those related rate of business growth, skills and knowledge acquired, impact and benefits of network relationships and interactions.

This Equitable Neighborhood Action Plan is supported by:

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