THINKING OUTSIDE THE (FARM) BOX: CHC'S CASE STUDY TO ADDRESS COMMUNITY FOOD NEEDS

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Overview

Since 2018 Community Health Councils (CHC) has been serving as the organizational backbone for the Region 2 Best Start Community (a First 5 LA investment\(^1\)). One of the principal tenets of this place-based initiative is to create the type of equitable environments that promote collaboration with and between key stakeholders and community leaders, to improve the lives of children and strengthen communities within South Los Angeles and Compton. Included in Region 2 are four communities located in South Los Angeles and Compton: Broadway/Manschester, Compton/East Compton, Watts/Willowbrook, and West Athens.

At the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, Best Start leaders expressed a strong desire to find ways to support their communities during a time of unexpected crisis. To quickly understand how to translate this desire into action, a survey was disseminated across the Best Communities that revealed fears about food security as one of the top concerns voiced by community residents.

To address food insecurity, CHC partnered with Best Start Region 2 residents and Sustainable Economic Enterprises of LA (SEE-LA) to establish a Farm Box Grab and Go to distribute over 17,000 farm boxes to residents. A network of community-based organizations, faith-based entities, and dozens of volunteers across the 4 communities worked together to distribute a week’s worth of fresh, locally grown produce and eggs for a family of four along with other essential resources, weekly for 10 weeks.

This brief offers an overview of the Farm Box Grab and Go, including its challenges, impact, and implications for addressing access to healthy fresh food through a systems change approach.

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Key Outcomes:

1. Over 17,000 boxes of fresh produce distributed
2. Established hyper-local food network that was 100% community led
3. Increased visibility of the Best Start initiative
4. Provided a revenue stream and new business opportunities for local farmers impacted by COVID-19
5. The food network was able to quickly ramp up for an additional 6 weeks of distribution adding an extra 9,525 boxes (total for both efforts was 26,875 boxes distributed)

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\(^1\) “First 5 LA was created by voters in 1998 to invest L.A. County’s allocation of funds from California’s voter-approved Proposition 10 tax revenues.” The agency’s goal is “to support the safe and healthy development of young children so that by 2028, all children in L.A. County will enter kindergarten ready to succeed in school and life.” [https://www.first5la.org/](https://www.first5la.org/)
Community Health Councils & Region 2 Best Start

Community Health Councils (CHC) is a South Los Angeles based public health policy, research, and systems change organization that was borne in response to the 1992 uprising. For nearly 30 years, CHC has been at the forefront of systems change efforts to eliminate disparities in health and well-being. Working with thousands of multi-sector stakeholders, CHC works to collectively build equitable systems.

Since 2018, CHC has served as the Regional Network Grantee for the First 5 LA Region 2 Best Start Communities. In this role, CHC has been working to build an infrastructure and ensure that each community is positioned to advance collective community change strategies. Best Start is a First 5 LA “signature investment for engaging communities in a common vision and intention for children and families to thrive”.i

Food Insecurity

Los Angeles County
According to the LA Food Policy Council, LA County is home to the largest population of food-insecure people in the United States.ii Almost 30% of low-income households in the County are food insecure, which means these households struggle to purchase nutritious foods, like vegetables, lean meats, fruits, and food rich in fiber.iii Food insecurity disproportionately impacts low-income communities of color. Among low-income households in LA County’s Service Planning Area 6, which encompasses South LA and Compton communities, about 32% or 71,000 households are food insecure, and about 13% or 28,000 households are very food insecure.iv

The COVID-19 pandemic has exposed and expanded the challenges in our food systemv. LA County seniors and low-income families, especially those who lost income due to the pandemic, faced the greatest challenges to accessing fresh, healthy food. Amidst health concerns due to COVID-19, community health centers, and health care providers have also had to simultaneously address the growing need for food among patients and community members.vi

Region 2 Best Start
In March 2020, after growing concerns about the COVID-19 pandemic, CHC reached out to residents to understand how to best support immediate needs. A survey was disseminated to Best Start resident leaders to understand the pandemic’s potential impact on Best Start Region 2 communities.2 The survey results revealed that general financial uncertainty, job instability, and limited access to fresh food ranked among the top concerns as a result of the pandemic.

2 The Best Start Region 2 Leader COVID-19 Concerns and Resources Survey was distributed to Best Start Resident Leaders in March 2020. A total of 46 leaders participated in the survey: (12) Broadway/Manchester, (11) Compton/East Compton, (15) Watts Willowbrook, and (8) West Athens.
Given this revealing information, resident leaders decided to address access to fresh food by taking immediate action. Several of the communities had already been strategizing on how to best address this systemic issue so everyone was ready to engage. The Best Start Leaders have been trained in systems change work and were eager to do something to help their communities. There was a unanimous vote to allocate funds to address food insecurity during the COVID-19 pandemic and that’s how the Region 2 Farm Box Grab and Go partnership was formed.

The Systems Change Approach to Food Insecurity

I. The Partnership

CHC created a network between SEE-LA and local partners to distribute thousands of farm boxes to families in communities across South LA and Compton. As part of this network, CHC handled the 1) financial activities inclusive of paying for the farm boxes, ordering of masks and gloves, reimbursements for food and supplies, and providing an honorarium for site partners (all of which was paid by First 5 LA Funds); and 2) overall logistics, such as coordination with SEE-LA, internal and external communications, and identification and coordination with partners to provide additional resources. To learn more about the role of each partner see Appendix A.

Sustainable Economic Enterprises of Los Angeles (SEE-LA) and the Farmers: SEE-LA works to build sustainable food systems and promotes social and cultural activities that benefit both low-to-moderate income residents of Los Angeles while also supporting California small- and mid-sized farms and local small businesses. They brought in 5 local farmers (6 for the second iteration) to support the effort.

Distribution Sites: Sites were chosen with input from the Best Start communities and the Local Network Coordinators, which included the following criteria:

1. Local, mission-oriented organization that could help expand the Best Start Network
2. Had a brick-and-mortar facility with the capacity to receive at least 250 farm boxes once a week, for a 10-week period
3. Had access to necessary personal protective equipment (PPP) and equipped to follow necessary protocols to prevent the spread of COVID-19
4. Were already engaged in food distribution efforts

For more on how the community defines systems change go to [https://www.beststartcommunities.com/policy-and-systems-change](https://www.beststartcommunities.com/policy-and-systems-change)

First 5 LA allocated funds to advance each Community Partnerships’ community change agenda which is a plan created by the community to address specific, identified, community issues impacting the health and well-being of a community.
**Pick-Up and Support Partners:** Pick-up partners consisted of local CBOs and community residents who were already engaged in food distribution efforts. These partners distributed multiple boxes to other sites, besides at the main location, or delivered directly to residents unable to come to one of the sites. Additional pick-up partners were recommended to CHC by the Best Start network. SBCC-Thrive served as a major support to all communities.

**Regional 2 Local Network Contractors (LNC):** Each Region 2 community had a contracted organization or consultant team that supported the facilitation of local meetings and strategic planning for the resident leaders. During the Farm Box grab and Go, the LNCs coordinated with the Best Start leaders, volunteers, and other groups, to support the on-the-ground operations, and handle reservations for the farm boxes. They worked closely with the sites to coordinate directly with SEE-LA for deliveries, oversee the day of logistics, and serve as the primary liaison between CHC and the sites.

II. The Process

*Farm Boxes and Deliveries:* During week one, each community distributed 250 farm boxes, for a total of 1,000 boxes. As the demand grew the number of boxes were increased until week four when they were set (See appendix B). Every week, two local farms picked, washed, and boxed the fresh produce a day or two before distribution day which were delivered by SEE-LA to the designated pick up sites in each Region 2 Best Start Community.

The produce selection of each farm box varied. On average, the farm boxes included leafy green vegetables like kale and spinach, carrots, berries, cabbage, sweet potatoes, a carton of eggs, and 10lb bags of oranges. Each box was designed to feed a family a four for a week. LNC partners communicated directly with SEE-LA and the farmers to coordinate logistics and share challenges in order to mitigate solutions.

*Registration and Outreach:* Each LNC collected registrations from residents and pick up partners on a weekly basis. LNC team members outreached through the Best Start community partnerships lists and on the BS Facebook. The day of, with support of the site staff and volunteers they set aside the boxes for those who registered.

*Day of Logistics:* The farmers, site partners, and volunteers worked together to unload the trucks. The farm boxes, oranges, and other items were sorted and organized for distribution by on-site volunteers. Distribution times varied by community, however, on average, opened to the community by 9 am and ended by noon; although each community stayed open until the last box was distributed. All but three sites instituted a drive-up process which allowed cars to drive up and boxes to be placed in their trunks, however, an option was provided for those who did not have a car. This walk-up approach was used for the one site that did not offer the drive-up option because of concerns about blocking street traffic.
Addressing Challenges

Even with the success of reaching a substantive number of residents, the distribution was not without challenges. LNCs met with CHC weekly to discuss challenges and identify solutions and these are some of the findings:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>1) <strong>Scale of operations required more volunteers than originally planned:</strong> Unloading and sorting hundreds of farm boxes during a pandemic was more of an effort than had been planned, causing each site to seek out additional volunteers especially during the unloading time.</th>
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<tr>
<td>2) <strong>Challenges with registrations vs. walk-ups caused some slowdowns in the distribution:</strong> In the early weeks, many residents were arriving without registering, which meant the on-site partner had to juggle Best Start reservations with walk-ups. This confused, and sometimes slowed the flow of distribution. It was also challenging when those who registered did not pick up their boxes. As the weeks progressed, each site required that those who registered were asked to arrive up to an hour before the distribution officially opened and told that their box would be given away if they were not picked up by a certain time.</td>
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<td>3) <strong>Enforcing public safety rules:</strong> Adhering to social distancing requirements was challenging since some residents did not respect the 6-feet apart rule or the signs that reinforced it. All staff and volunteers were reminded not to be combative, but to inform individuals why everyone needed to follow the necessary guidelines to prevent the spread of COVID-19. If challenges continued, individuals were told that their food would be set aside away from others where they could pick it up once the staff/volunteer moved aside.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4) <strong>Heat affected the produce as well as made it challenging for staff and volunteers:</strong> The heat played an adversarial role for some distribution days. Hot, sunny weather made some produce wilt, and working conditions more difficult. To address this, sites used canopies they had on hand from the Best Start community or set out to rent them.</td>
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<tr>
<td>5) <strong>Unanticipated expenses related to challenges such as weather, additional workers and supplies:</strong> Some sites were challenged with the need to purchase the supplies needed to ensure the produce was kept cool and to keep volunteers and residents comfortable throughout the day. To resolve this issue, partners were reimbursed for their expenses to rent tents, purchase supplies, and/or provide refreshments to volunteers. Additionally, each site was provided a $2,000 honorarium for their support in hosting the distribution.</td>
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**Key Outcomes**

1. **Over 17,000 boxes of fresh produce distributed.**

The Farm Box Grab and Go played an important role in addressing food insecurity by increasing access to healthy food in South LA and Compton. Over 17,000 farm boxes were distributed over ten weeks with the support of our network of partners. In addition to fresh, locally grown produce and eggs, residents received masks, cookbooks, children’s books, and other essential resources.

We serve areas that it is nearly impossible to purchase or to even think about [fresh, organic] food being accessible in the community. It was impactful for me to know that quality food was going to families. ~ Local Network contractor

For some residents, there was an introduction to new vegetables which meant uncertainty on how to prepare them, such as kale. To help residents become more familiarized with these items, CHC partnered with the LA Trust for Children’s Health and provided thousands of culturally appropriate cookbooks to accompany the boxes. The feedback was overwhelmingly positive, and residents consistently shared how they were using their farm
boxes to create smoothies, orange juice, and other healthy meals. Overall, residents were appreciative and satisfied. They commented that the boxes were fresh, healthy, and high quality.

As the stay at home order continued and COVID cases increased, families were also facing other issues. Hence, CHC collaborated with First 5 LA to provide diapers and children’s books. During this time there was also a national shortage of PPP and this was critical to ensuring community safety. Consequently, CHC established a relationship with an international vendor to purchase 5,000 masks. This was certainly a new experience for CHC as we had to deal with customs and mitigating the successful delivery without interception from another higher bidder.

2. Established a 100% community led - hyper-local food network

The Grab and Go revealed a network of community-based organizations, initiatives, churches, and residents within the Best Start Communities, and allowed for improved collaboration. For example:

- in West Athens, GCLA strengthened its network and collaborated with other community stakeholders, such as gang interventionalist, to connect residents with appropriate service providers.
- Childcare providers became more engaged with Best Start Compton East Compton.
- In Broadway Manchester, the onsite partner connected with organizations across the region and leveraged the Farm Box Grab and Go to activate volunteers and procure additional essential items for the community, such as hand sanitizer and masks.

Residents were connected with community resources that they may not have known existed before, including Peace Chapel Church’s Supper Grab and Go, Macedonia Church’s food giveaway, the Girls Clubs educational programming for youth, and SHIELDS’ services for families. Families also received information about food access policy and systems change, nutrition; and had access to a list of community resources through the Region 2 Best Start website⁵ and printed materials.

In a debrief session, after the end of distribution, LNCs noted that both residents and CBO volunteers, worked diligently to distribute boxes, and were passionate about increasing access to healthy food. Many Best Start parents and partners stepped up to serve as a pick-up partner for their neighbors and several communities engaged local organizations to support with deliveries. In the end, The Grab and Go provided communities with hope during the COVID-19 crisis. The farm boxes represented something tangible that could be given to those in need and a space where residents could come together to help and be in community. In fact, they repeatedly mentioned that being part of the Farm Box Grab and Go allowed them to be connected and supported.

During the debrief, residents became visibly emotional when they talked about the ways they were able to contribute. At a moment when, fundamentally, everything has changed, residents found purpose. Community based organizations spoke about their experience helping with this effort and how that experience further helped strengthen their relationships with the Best Start Communities.

...it’s easy to get wrapped up in your own personal stuff. But when you are out volunteering and 450 people are going to benefit from it, [the farm box distribution] got me out of my own head and woes and sorrows to focus on people outside of me. ~ Local Network contractor

⁵ Region 2 Best Start Website: https://www.beststartcommunities.com/
3. **Increased Visibility for Best Start initiative**

The Grab and Go brought more awareness to the Region 2 Best Start Communities.
- Some sites received media attention and local policymakers showed up to help with distribution (see Appendix B).
- As noted above, new partnerships were created to support the local Best Start networks.
- There was an increase in visits to the Region 2 website which went up 88% from April 27 – August 30, 2020. Of which 71.50% were new visitors.
- Overall Facebook analytics summarized a total of, 5,391 audiences reached with 1,594 post engagements.

Go to Appendix B for a list of media engagements.

4. **Provided revenue stream and new business opportunities for farmers impacted by COVID-19**

The Farm Box Grab and Go was more than just a benefit to residents, it also supported some of SEE-LA’s local farmers that lost business during the pandemic due to the closing of the hospitality industry. When the pandemic started, farmers faced significant hurdles, particularly with the closure of Farmers Markets, which limited or closed their distribution channels altogether. For some farmers their only sales channels are Farmers Market or restaurants, both of which closed during the onset of the pandemic. This would have meant destruction of already harvested fruits and vegetables because of lack of cold storage, which did take place across California, and the release of employees due to lack of work/revenue.

Fortunately, farmers that provided fresh produce and eggs for the Best Start Farm Box Grab and Go found a new source of revenue through the distribution. Instead of destroying, wasting crops, or letting go of employees, Best Start Farm Box Grab and Go farmers found themselves hiring new people to meet the increased demand for their products.

5. **The food network was able to quickly ramp up for an additional 6 weeks**

The original effort was supposed to be 8 weeks with First 5 LA Funds, however, additional funds were allocated to for a 9th week based on the demand that was building. Before the initial effort ended, CHC received a grant from Cedars Sinai to extend the effort to 10 weeks. This funding was a direct result of the partnership with SEE-LA and the food network.

Additionally, shortly after the end of the initial 10 weeks, SEE-LA received funding from the Oprah Foundation to support a second round of Farm Box Distribution efforts. By this time, the sites were able to quickly mobilize and organize around distribution dates, quantities to be delivered, and promotional materials to be created. This effort lasted 6 weeks for all but one site that started later, and only went for 3 weeks. With very little
direction or support from CHC, the sites were able to coordinate with SEE-LA and conduct their Grab and Go
days with minimal challenges. In this last round more partnerships were created, and additional items included
for an additional 9,525 boxes being distributed.

The community has appreciated these food boxes and we saw many of the same families from
week to week. We saw many new families and never turned away anyone. We were able to
distribute diapers, books and we also shared information on the census. We were able to support
a few other organizations with boxes such as Kaiser, South LA Café, Sobriety Home in Watts,
Housing Projects. We partnered with a health mobile that offered free health exams. 450 Bags of
patties were distributed for 6 weeks. Bread was distributed in every food distribution. We had a
great team of committed volunteers. – SBCC

Conclusion

Even though the Farm Box Grab and Go was successful, it was only a temporary solution in a time
of heightened need. CHC coordinated a debrief session with the site partners and LNCs to discus challenges and
success which have been presented in the previous sections. Participants were asked how they envisioned
sustaining the Grab and Go efforts not just in Region 2 but beyond. While this was not an easy question to
answer some provided recommendations that are worth considering:

- Working with other established food distribution partners, like food banks, to ease the challenges of
  logistics and infrastructure that the Best Start distributions sites faced
- Building out the network and increasing access by creating a grab and go program within grocery stores
  and local markets. Within such a system, farmers could drop off farm boxes to participating locations
  where residents could reserve and pick up a box
- Establishing a voucher program for folks who do not receive CalFresh benefits but still struggle to find
  or purchase fresh produce and food. This may increase the resiliency of our local food system by
  supporting farmers post-pandemic, making fresh food more accessible, and by strengthening smaller
  local markets.
- Urging grocery stores and markets to purchase food from local farmers especially BIPOC (Black, Immigrant,
  and People of Color)
- Establishing programming at farmers markets, grocery stores, and other popular food destinations that
  highlight BIPOC farmers, and teaches folks about the nutritional value of food, and how to incorporate
  healthier foods in everyday cooking. While this does occur now the instances are haphazard and not
  consistent.

Ultimately, food insecurity in communities like South LA and Compton must be addressed through a lens of
economic depression and other harmful conditions caused by deeply rooted structural and environmental
racism. Strategies need to be comprehensive including, but not limited to:

- offering economic incentives to support healthy food businesses in South LA and Compton, like the
  Good Food Zone Policy
- increased funding for building and maintaining community gardens and other urban food growing tech
  innovations
- supporting community-led efforts focused on increased enrollment in CalFresh/SNAP benefits
  for eligible households
- promoting Healthy Neighborhood Market conversions to ensure that local markets have the technical
  expertise and infrastructure needed to supply fresh food
• building a food system with a more direct connection to local farmers and food producers. This not only creates fewer carbon emissions (e.g. fewer miles driven to transport food) but is a potentially more sustainable financial support as consumer dollars can go directly to the farmer\textsuperscript{ix}.

These are just a few examples within the plethora of strategies that can quell food insecurity, some of which have been outlined in both the LA County and City sustainability plans\textsuperscript{6}. CHC is working with the Region 2 Best Start and other stakeholders to ensure that City and County officials are held accountable for the outcomes outlined in those plans.

The Region 2 Best Start is committed to working with community partners to accelerate real change in South LA and Compton with the aim of increased wellbeing of children and families. CHC in collaboration with the LA Food Policy Council has launched a Region 2 Food Equity Initiative to build up a cadre of Food Ambassadors who will work with local food justice advocates to identify strategies to eradicate food insecurity.

To get involved and learn more about the work of the Region 2 Best Start Communities, please visit https://www.beststartcommunities.com/.

Endnotes


iv. ibid


vii. Los Angeles Food Policy Council; “A Good Food Zones Policy for the City of Los Angeles: Investing in Food Equity” Revised November 14, 2019 https://static1.squarespace.com/static/5bc50618ab1a624d324ecd81/t/5dcf54b7d6b11713fd3d5c9f/157386733946/GoodFoodZone_Policy_Brief_FINAL.pdf

viii. Los Angeles Food Policy Council; “Healthy Neighborhood Market” downloaded October 23, 2020, https://www.goodfoodla.org/healthyneighborhoodmarketnetwork


\textsuperscript{6}LA County Sustainability Plan “Our County” https://ourcountyla.lacounty.gov/ and LA City Sustainability Plan “LA’s Green New Deal” https://plan.lamayor.org/
Appendix A – Partners

Distribution Partners

Broadway Manchester: Peace Chapel Church is a church located slightly outside of the official First 5 LA Broadway/Manchester boundaries, but has been servicing the Broadway/Manchester community for years. The Church, in conjunction with its corresponding community development corporation, Rebuild California Alliance, have committed itself to be a community development church with an outward focus for upliftment and empowerment. Through its “Compassion Initiative amid the COVID-19 Pandemic,” the Church was already engaged in food distribution since the beginning of COVID-19 shut down, and had been named by the Mayor Garcetti as an example of an CBO doing extraordinary efforts to support the community.

Compton-East Compton: Shields for Families is a nonprofit community-based organization located in South Los Angeles that serves individuals, children, and families through comprehensive and collaborative social services.

Watts/Willowbrook: Macedonia Church is a church located in Watts. The church along with its community development corporation is committed to transforming the Watts community from the fringes of marginalization into a vibrant, healthy community of productive citizens. The church had been supporting residents through weekly food distribution, among other services.

West Athens: Girls Club of Los Angeles (GCLA) is a nonprofit community-based organization that meets the needs of underprivileged and at-risk children, youth, and their families living in South Los Angeles. GCLA was the Local Network Coordinator for West Athens and very familiar with the needs of the community. GCLA was already coordinating weekly food distribution before the pandemic.

Pick up partners

SBCC Thrive LA (SBCC) is a community-based organization that is dedicated to empowering individuals, families, and communities through innovation and co-creation. The SBCC organizers involved in the Best Start are well connected to the communities and support overall outreach efforts. There was a designated SBCC organizer for each Region 2 Best Start Community. During the Farm Box Grab and Go they supported each site the day of the distribution, helped with outreach, and coordinated pick-ups and deliveries at every site.

Other pick up partners included:

Compton
- Welcome Baby - St. Francis
- South Los Angeles Health Projects
- Head Start - Children’s Institute
- Crystal Stairs
- Compton Unified School District
- WIC

Broadway Manchester:
- True Love Missionary Baptist Church
- MLK Community Medical Group Broadway Manchester

Watts Willowbrook: Sister of Watts

West Athens: Phenomenal Angels

Active Best Start Leaders in all communities also supported their neighbors with deliveries.

Local Network Contractors

- Alford Consulting (Compton/East Compton)
- Girls Club of Los Angeles (West Athens)
- Poder Consulting (Broadway Manchester and Watts/Willowbrook)

Farmers

- Don Betos
- C&L
- Divine Harvest
- Finca Bonita
- Castellanos
- Rancho de Trinidad - joined the distribution in August

7 During the first week of distribution, the Compton/East Compton Farm Box Grab and Go was located at the Compton Chamber of Commerce. However, the distribution was moved to SHIELDS for the remainder of the distribution because the site is more accessible and familiar to Best Start Compton/East Compton residents.
## Appendix B – Distributions Amounts and Media Links

### Distribution Efforts

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### Second Round

(Week of July 13 – Week of August 24th)

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<th>Location</th>
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<tr>
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<td><strong>TOTAL</strong></td>
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### Media Links

The following is a CHC Blog Article which includes various media promotions of the initial efforts: [https://chc-inc.org/best-start-farm-grab-and-go/](https://chc-inc.org/best-start-farm-grab-and-go/)

The Following is an article by the LA Sentinel [https://lasentinel.net/farm-box-grab-and-go-distributed-over-3000-boxes-to-residents-in-compton.html](https://lasentinel.net/farm-box-grab-and-go-distributed-over-3000-boxes-to-residents-in-compton.html)

The following is a CHC Blog Article about the Farm Box Grab and Go Effort [https://chc-inc.org/addressing-food-insecurity-when-communities-come-together/](https://chc-inc.org/addressing-food-insecurity-when-communities-come-together/)