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## NORTH HOLLYWOOD

# Food Forward is a fruitful endeavor

Nonprofit agency is honored nationally for efforts to help and feed those in need

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One of the largest social sector awards in the nonprofit world went to a North Hollywood agency for its innovative business model in 2020, resulting in the distribution of fresh fruits

and vegetables to thousands of additional Southern California residents with food insecurities.

Food Forward rescued 62 million pounds of edible fruits and vegetables in 2020, while also nearly doubling its network of agency partners despite setbacks from the deadly coronavirus

pandemic.

The organization was one of 10 winners out of 1,400 applicants nationwide that completed a vetting process to gain accolades from San Diego-based Classy, a giving platform that helps nonprofits raise money online.

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Food Forward, a sustainable agriculture nonprofit agency, provides food for regional food pantries from its facility in Bell.

PHOTO BY KEITH DURLINGER

## Nonprofit

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The software company has served 6,000-plus nonprofits that include the largest organizations down to grassroots operators for the past 10 years. More than \$3.5 million has been raised during that time, according to a company spokesman.

"It was the first time we applied and won and we were very humble to be chosen amongst the group of winners," said Rick Nahmias, founder and chief executive officer of Food Forward. "It is an innovation award, which we feel particularly proud of because in the last year and a half with the pandemic we have innovated to reach many more individuals. We more than doubled the amount of produce that we moved in this time, but we also innovated systems to reach neighborhoods and regions including Native American land where people have been underserved chronically. So, the (social) innovation award felt like a really wonderful validation of the staff's ability to create a new workflow that did not exist two years ago."

Prize money is not part of the award, but it does create a trophy, two roundtrip Southwest Airlines tickets and bragging rights.

"So many nonprofits work tirelessly and really have little recognition, so this is a way to elevate those who are doing some amazingly impactful work for our world and giving them a little moment in the sun," said Krista Lamp, director of brand, events and communication at Classy. "Organizations are able to tout the notoriety of having won this award to their board members, to their supporters, to showcase the fact that they are an organization deemed innovative. There's the buzz, worthiness that goes along with it. Organizations can use it to leverage (during the giving season) that they in fact are truly making an impact in the world."



PHOTO BY KEITH DURLINGER

Leonel Paz, the wholesale recovery manager for Food Forward, examines produce in Bell that's ready to be delivered to food pantries and nonprofits on Oct. 5. Food Forward was among 10 agencies cited for social innovation in the 2020 Classy Awards competition.

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Nahmias, who started Food Forward in 2009, was raised in the San Fernando Valley and knew there was an abundance of fruit rotting away while lines at food pantries were growing.

"I saw an opportunity to connect the two with a pretty simple action, which was getting volunteers to harvest the fruit and get it to food pantries," he said. "The

first food pantry was just two miles from my house in Lake Balboa. Over the next year we gathered volunteers and produce, and by the end 2009 we had harvested about 100,000 pounds of backyard fruit including oranges, lemons, grapefruits, avocados, pomegranates but mostly run of the mill backyard fruit trees."

Produce in the backyard harvest can come from large public and private orchards. Orange and persimmon trees, for example, are picked at The Huntington Library and Gardens in San Marino.

A few years into harvesting backyard fruit, the focus centered on a farmer's market recovery program. Volunteers harvest the surplus produce at the end of every market session.

Prior to the coronavirus there were 25 markets they worked with, but now it's down to 14 in the greater Los Angeles area.

There are about 35 paid staff and, in normal years, they coordinate about 4,100 volunteers at all of these events. The organization is slowly building back to where it was pre-pandemic. They supply the produce to the agencies that get it in the last mile to the hands of the individuals who are food insecure. Food Forward focuses only on fresh produce and nothing else.

"It's important to note, the backyard harvest and the farmer's markets were our first programs and all we did for a few years," Nahmias said. "In 2014, we add the wholesale recovery pro-

gram, which is large pallets and loads of produce."

Produce in that program comes from all over the world, but the majority from Mexico and California. Recovered produce also comes from Chile, Ecuador and as far east as China.

"The wholesale recovery program is by far our largest source of produce now," Nahmias said. "On an average we (we move) about a quarter of a million pounds. In the first year of the backyard harvest program, 100,000 pounds were moved. It gives you an idea of how much we have grown."

Nahmias added that Food Forward still moves many thousands of pounds of backyard fruits and farmer's market products, but it's somewhat eclipsed by the size of the wholesale program, which also allows them to reach eight counties in Southern California including native tribal lands.

On an average day, Food Forward recovers and distributes enough produce to meet the five-a-day fruit and vegetable needs of 150,000 to 160,000 people.

"We just reached 200 million pounds of fresh produce cumulatively that we have recovered and donated completely free of charge over the last 12 years," Nahmias added. "That's a milestone reached just a few weeks ago."

That was made possible in part by the relationship built with distributors.

"Let's say there is a celery grower around Thanksgiving and they're fields of celery that they can't use," Nahmias said. "They're not going to get that to a small pantry. They need someone who can take truckloads of celery and turn that around

in a few hours and that is exactly what we focus on."

South Los Angeles-based A Place Called Home, a transformational youth and community center with a food pantry aspect of its operations, has been in a partnership with Food Forward for a number of years.

"The agency relies on feeding those from the surrounding community with fresh recovered food," said Gilbert Radillo, senior director of special initiatives and external relations.

Prior to the pandemic, about 40 families who picked up their children took fresh produce home, but the agency now feeds 250 to 300 families each week.

"About 2,000 pounds of food comes weekly from Food Forward," Radillo said. "If we want (food), we just have to ask and they'll have it for us. The partners that provide the food to them are angels. For us it is very easy. We just have to pick up the phone and say we need more food. They have never turned us away."

Since March 2020, A Place Called Home has served 650,000 meals sorted and packed every Wednesday. The very same produce is delivered to households by paid drivers.

Radillo can't imagine what it would be like without Food Forward.

"Quite frankly, I don't (want to think about that)," he said. "If we are able to help them with the groceries so they are least saving money on that, it's the snowball effect, so no one gets evicted, so no one gets their utilities shut off. It would be more dire."