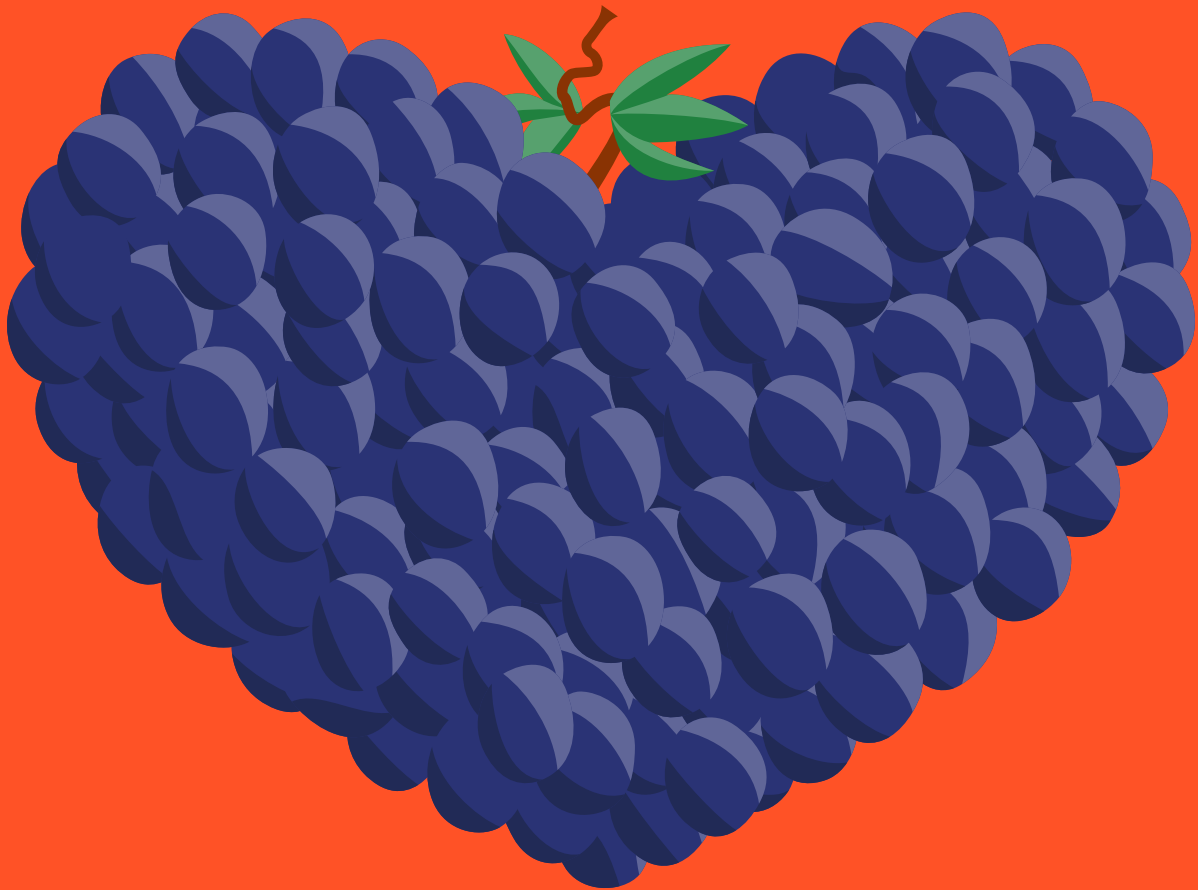


Advancing Health Equity Through Nutrition



Spring 2022



By breaking down barriers that limit access to nutritious food, **Food Forward** promotes wellness to help shorten the health equity gap in numerous communities that are historically underserved. Research reports from both government agencies and major foundations have supported this conclusion.

Public support for efforts to provide more access to fruits and vegetables would rise if more people understood the scope of the nutrition-health connection, and if more were aware of the systemic barriers to fresh produce. Food Forward—through its recovery and donation of tens of millions of pounds of fresh, free produce to food insecure communities annually—is breaking more and more of those barriers to help advance health equity.

Health equity, says the Centers for Disease Control (**CDC**), is achieved “when everyone has the opportunity to attain their full health potential and no one is disadvantaged from achieving this potential because of their social position or other socially determined circumstances. **These circumstances are known as social determinants of health.**

The **social determinants of health** category includes the following: poverty, access to health care, education levels, geographic location, racism, and food insecurity such as the lack of access to nutritious food. It has been documented that people who have little access to fresh fruits and vegetables are, for example, more likely to become obese or develop high blood pressure, conditions that lead to chronic illnesses such as diabetes, cardiovascular disease, and certain cancers.

Food Forward focuses on expanding access to fresh fruits and vegetables while also addressing food waste.

The U.S. Department of Agriculture **estimates that 53.6 million Americans live in low-income areas with poor access to healthy food.** For those living in low-income areas in major cities, this means they are more than half a mile from the nearest supermarket. This is a health equity issue because a substantial portion of the nation’s population has little or no access to fresh produce.



Helping Advance Health Equity

Food Forward is among the organizations leading the effort to address this need. Since 2009, the Los Angeles-based nonprofit has provided regular donations of fresh, free produce to hundreds of direct-service agencies across **twelve** Southern California counties, and more recently, six additional states and tribal lands. Unlike food banks—or other food distribution programs, Food Forward is one of a few organizations whose mission is dedicated to only recovering and distributing fresh produce.

According to data collected prior to the pandemic, one in nine Californians experienced food insecurity in 2019—a level of hunger already unacceptable in a world with more than enough resources to feed everyone. The pandemic exacerbated hunger rates and brought the flaws present within the food system to stark light.



During the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020, food insecurity spiked to 25% in the state of California and throughout Los Angeles County—and levels have not yet dropped to the pre-pandemic baseline. At the same time, 35% of the food produced in the U.S. is unsold or uneaten. Just one third of the food thrown away could feed every food insecure person in the country—an unimaginable waste!

Food Forward addresses both the problems of **access** and the food waste in its service areas. Dedicated team members and volunteers recover fruits and vegetables that would have been wasted from backyard fruit trees and public orchards. The organization also obtain fresh produce from farmers markets, small family farms, wholesale produce vendors, commercial distributors, and even direct from large commercial growers. **Food Forward provides a receipt for food donations, which can be used for tax purposes.**

Food Forward then swiftly relays that fresh produce to community-based hunger relief agencies that distribute the food directly to food insecure individuals, families, and neighborhoods—a vital service that has earned many **awards**.

Barriers To Nutrition

The needs are clear. **Food insecurity can be a key social determinant of health in low-income communities that have little or no access to fresh fruits and vegetables.**

Concern about access to nutrition has also grown during the COVID-19 pandemic. A recent **study** published in the Journal of the American Heart Association suggests a majority of adult COVID-19 hospitalizations nationwide were attributable to at least one of four pre-existing conditions: obesity, hypertension, diabetes, and heart failure—in that order.



The CDC funded **research** on the impact of COVID-19 on food insecurity. It is among the tax-funded agencies trying to cope with nutritional gaps that were actually created by the U.S. government over past decades.

For more than eighty years, government urban planning has been **advancing** white communities by dividing U.S. cities along racial lines. The federal government “**redlined**” poorer communities of color—designating them as high-risk investment areas for government and business—a policy that helped created a dearth of supermarkets and other businesses that offer a wide array of fresh produce in those communities.

Specifically, the Federal Housing Administration (FHA), which was established in 1934, furthered segregation efforts by refusing to insure mortgages in and near **African-American** neighborhoods. At the same time, the FHA was subsidizing builders who were mass-producing entire subdivisions of the homes to be sold to **African-Americans**.

Private industry redlining continues to this **day**, according to the U.S. Department of Justice. Recent **studies** show that supermarket chains continue to avoid investments in predominantly Black and Brown communities.



Bridging The Nutrition-Health Divide

Food Forward helped bridge the nutrition-health divide by recovering and distributing **67 million** pounds of fresh produce in 2021 alone—nearly two and a half times more than the organization delivered to hundreds of food insecure communities in 2019. This is equivalent to supplying more than **150,000 individuals** their USDA-recommended daily allowance of five servings of fruits and vegetables on a daily basis. **Working with its partners, Food Forward is distributing produce that nourishes early life, extends senior life, and promotes wellness in between.**



One of its partners—Venice Family Clinic, a group of nonprofit community health centers—has been distributing Food Forward-sourced produce to people of all ages at its Santa Monica site since November 2019. In August 2020, it expanded its distribution to health centers in Culver City.

In a statement on the expansion into offering patients Food Forward-sourced produce, Rigoberto A. Garcia II, Venice Family Clinic's Director of Health Education says: "Food is medicine and that is why Venice Family Clinic committed itself to providing fresh and healthy food to our patients – and with the COVID-19 outbreak, to the broader community."



The Venice Family Clinic is now beginning to document the nutrition-health connection. For example, it has been monitoring the health of diabetics who have been eating more fresh produce—a study group involving 60 patients. From August through December 2020—and for some, through January 2021—nearly two-thirds of the patients had decreases in blood sugar levels.

Food As Medicine

The concept of food as medicine is gaining more and more support in the medical community. The 2021 report by The Center for Health Law and Policy Innovation of Harvard Law School (CHLPI) —"Mainstreaming Produce Prescriptions"—says a **growing number of medical practitioners are using food to treat diet-related illnesses** and conditions such as diabetes and hypertension. The study says many of these practitioners are using the expression, "produce prescription."

That report—produced by Harvard's Center for Health Law and Policy Innovation, and funded by the Rockefeller Foundation—also extensively documents the nutrition-health connection, content based on peer-reviewed research reports.

According to their research, "Poor diet, especially one low in fruits and vegetables, is a leading contributor to morbidity, mortality, and health care costs in the United States".

In addition, fresh produce can improve blood pressure and shows the following:

- Eating fruits and vegetables is associated with a lower risk of chronic diseases such as cardiovascular disease, obesity, diabetes, and some cancers;
- 22.4% of all adult deaths from coronary heart disease are associated with low fruit intake and 21.9% with low vegetable intake; and
- Diet-affected chronic health conditions cost our nation over a trillion dollars in direct medical expenses each year.

For groups such as low-income populations in communities of color, obtaining adequate amounts of fruits and vegetables is “challenging due to structural inequities and systemic racism,” the report says.

Childhood Development: Providing Food For Body And Thought

Children in food insecure communities are especially vulnerable because they need proper nutrients for their body and **brain health**. Lack of access to fresh produce can also lead to poor eating habits that create obesity and **behavioral development** problems. **Good eating habits during childhood pave the way for better health later in life.**



Food Forward provides fresh produce to thousands of children in Southern California and will continue to do so under its latest partnership with Brighter Bites, a Houston-based nonprofit that has expanded its operations to Southern California. **Brighter Bites** creates communities of health by providing fresh food and health education programs for children and their families to prevent obesity and achieve long-term health.

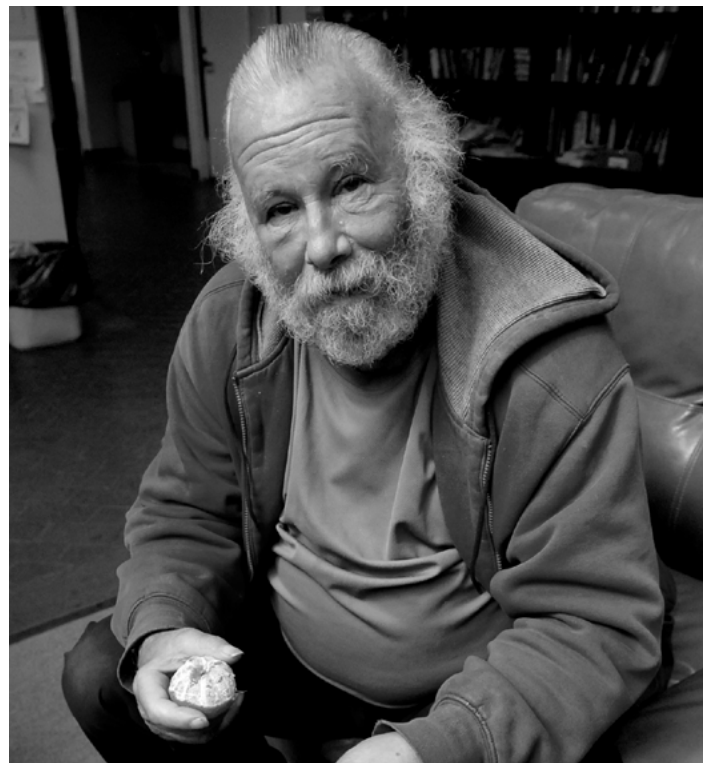
Brighter Bites works with schools by providing nutritious produce and educational materials on food and health at school sites. It currently serves communities in Houston, Dallas, Austin, New York City, the Washington, D.C. metropolitan area, and Southwest Florida, and Salinas, California.

In this new partnership, Food Forward is supplying Brighter Bites with 100% of their produce needs to improve programs as they roll out in the LA area. Since 2019, through its partnership with the

American Heart Association's national **Teaching Gardens** program, Food Forward's produce have been reaching many food insecure children in Southern California.

Locally, the Teaching Gardens program provides community members with fresh produce at free farmers markets throughout South and East LA, fruits and vegetables rescued by Food Forward's **Wholesale Recovery Program**. Teaching Gardens, designed to create "real-life" learning laboratories on health, also provides schools with the tools to grow fresh fruits and vegetables in campus gardens.

To be sure, one of the most accurate indicators of longevity—besides cancers—is heart health. The **American Heart Association** (AHA) says the consumption of larger amounts of fruits and vegetables improves **heart health** for people of all ages. AHA says **studies** have shown that increased consumption of fruits and vegetables reduces blood pressure, and increased consumption of fresh produce over a long period of time may reduce the risk of hypertension.



Life-Extending Food For Seniors

Most **research** also shows that there is a positive relationship between fruit and vegetable consumption and health outcomes across the lifespan—including the prevention and management of chronic illnesses, disease-specific mortality, and general mortality.

A **report** in the Journal of the American Geriatrics Society says that diets high in fruits and vegetables promote a **long life** because they lower the risk of stroke, heart attack, and heart disease. Their antioxidant content also reduces the risk of cancers, and lowers cholesterol levels. In addition, fruit and vegetable nutrients also help strengthen immune systems.



Food Forward distributes life-preserving produce to thousands of older adults through seven nonprofit partners across the region that have programs specifically designed to bolster the health of seniors. Recent research indicates that access to fresh produce may improve the mental health of seniors as well as their physical well-being.

The New York Times article reported the following:

“A new study, one of the largest such analyses to date, has found that flavonoids, the chemicals that give plant foods their bright colors, may help curb the frustrating forgetfulness and mild confusion that older people often complain about with advancing age, and that sometimes can precede a diagnosis of dementia. The study was observational so cannot prove cause and effect, though its large size and long duration add to growing evidence that what we eat can affect brain health.”

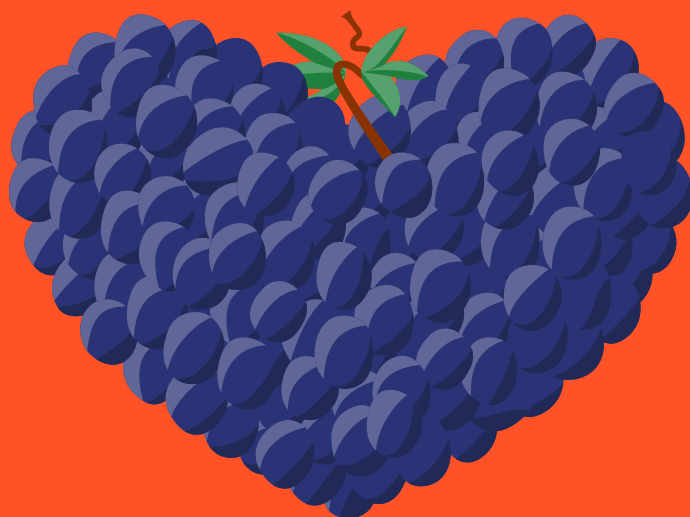


Moving Forward

Regardless of our stage in life—from childhood to our senior years—access to fruits and vegetables is a critical health factor.

Leaders in health agree. Food Forward works with health-focused institutions such as the **Los Angeles County Department of Public Health, Cedars Sinai Medical Center, and Kaiser Permanente.**

For many communities, Food Forward is the only source of fresh fruits and vegetables. Food Forward’s continual partnerships will provide more of the fresh produce that promotes wellness and help shorten the health equity gap.



words by
George White

design by
Joseph Finucane

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