

Closing Gaps & Growing Good: San Diego Urban Growers' Collaborative

CalFresh Healthy Living Program funding has supported the capacity building and viability of urban farms and gardens in San Diego County since 2017. This case study and five-year review highlights successes and the trajectory of projects from the San Diego Urban Growers' Collaborative, an urban agriculture initiative started by the Urban Food Equity team at the University of California, San Diego Center for Community Health.

How it Started, 2017-2018



1 Green Cowboy Farm, 2017

San Diego County urban growers ["growers" used interchangeably with "farmers" throughout this document] typically operate at an average parcel size of less than one acre and cannot easily sell to traditional produce distributors due to barriers in cost of entry to meet commercial packaging standards, small production scale of farm/garden operations, gaps in farm infrastructure such as cold storage and transportation, and losses associated with average wholesale prices. Many urban growers in San Diego County are non-profit or social enterprise organizations dedicated to providing job and skills training to beginning gardeners or at-risk populations. As such, they also have very few scale-appropriate marketing outlets to sell their produce to generate a profit to sustain their efforts, much less ensure their long-term viability as urban agriculture assets for San Diego County communities.

In response to these identified needs, the Urban Food Equity (UFE) team [UC San Diego's Center for Community Health](#) (UCSD CCH), under the [Altman Clinical and Translational Research Institute](#), established the [San Diego Urban Growers' Collaborative](#) in 2017. The original goal of the effort was to better understand how to assist small-scale urban growers to be economically viable by helping them collaborate together to develop shared practices and products to meet local market demands. This initial group of eight urban growers also agreed to prioritize development of products, services, and education that would explicitly contribute to improved food access and health opportunities for low-income consumers and/or individuals living in low food access neighborhoods. The majority of participating urban farms are located in or adjacent to low-income and/or low

food access census tracts in the following San Diego regions/neighborhoods: City Heights, Southeastern, and the South Bay. Later, urban farms and gardens in Oceanside and the east region of San Diego County joined the Collaborative.

A combination of start-up funding from the [County of San Diego Health and Human Services Agency's CalFresh Healthy Living Program](#), the [USDA's Local Food Promotion Program](#) Planning Grant, and the [Alliance Healthcare Foundation](#) supported the initial research and technical assistance phases of the project. With support from trusted farm and food system experts [Sona Desai](#) and [Niki Mazaroli](#), a thorough two-phased approach was used to conduct supply and demand assessments for urban grown local farm products, alongside congruent delivery of technical assistance and training for urban growers. The following milestones were met during the planning period:

Phase One:

1. Conducted a thorough literature review related to the viability of urban agriculture.
2. Assessed product supply of nine urban growers.
3. Identified opportunities to provide technical assistance to help urban growers access local markets.
4. Gauged growers' interest in collaborative multi-farm projects and facilitated building a trusted rapport.

Phase Two:

1. Assessed local demand for urban-grown produce from both buyers (restaurants, caterers, small-scale distributors, and small neighborhood ethnic food markets) and direct consumers.
2. Provided initial recommendations for a collaborative project (multi-farm CSA).
3. Provided multiple training and technical assistance opportunities (e.g. financial planning, food safety, marketing and branding) to help growers access local markets and increase their farm viability.
4. Brokered several scale-appropriate buyer relationships for urban farmers.



2 Community Roots Farm, 2020

The planning project concluded with [recommendations](#) and agreement from urban growers to pursue the development of a multi-farm CSA to prioritize service to low-income consumers and/or consumers that live in low food access neighborhoods. A multi-farm CSA could meet consumer demand for diversity and flexibility without straining the resources of a single farm. Given that the supply is relatively small from urban growers in San Diego County and expressed consumer interest is high, a multi-farm CSA could improve farm viability if it offered farmers flexibility, minimal risk, and high returns while providing consumers with the desired diversity, choice, and flexibility in their CSA membership. The CSA would accept and institutionalize EBT payments and explore options for grant funding to subsidize the cost of a subset of shares for high-priority low-income families. The CSA was intended to be based in the South Bay at Wild Willow Farm and Education Center, serving as the main aggregation site. The CSA was intended to serve consumers at drop sites in the South Bay, City Heights, and Southeastern San Diego.

The Opportunistic Flexible Pivot, 2019

In 2019, as the UFE team pursued funding to support the third phase of work to launch the multi-farm CSA, a few changes amongst the growers group emerged that created new opportunities but also required a flexible pivot in the project's direction. [Wild Willow Farm and Education Center](#) underwent a leadership change and was in the process of moving its farm operations and programs to the [Resource Conversation District of Greater San Diego](#) to ensure long-term land tenure and operational capacity. At the same time, participating growers in the group began working with the well-regarded [Solidarity Farm](#), located in Pauma Valley, to plan the launch of a multi-farm CSA called the Fresh Five. The Fresh Five was the first initiative of what soon became [Foodshed Small Farm Distro](#), a farmer-owned food hub intended to improve the viability of local farms and promote food equity for low-income consumers.

Alongside Foodshed's expansion to accept more farmers into their aggregation and distribution hub, the UFE team provided technical assistance and resource development to many of those same farmers and urban agriculture organizations to help prepare them to grow and better serve low-income consumers. Specifically, under CalFresh Healthy Living Program funding with [Live Well San Diego](#), the UFE team conducted site visits with 8 non-profit community farm/garden organizations ([Make Projects](#), [Project New Village](#), [Bayside Community Center](#), [Urban Life Farms](#), [Mundo Gardens](#), [Second Chance Youth Garden](#), [Botanical Community Development Initiatives](#), and Wild Willow Farm and Education Center) and five privately-owned for-profit farms ([Quantum Microgreens](#), [Green Cowboy](#), [Pixca Farm](#), [WD Dickinson Farm](#), and [A La Vuelta Farm](#)) to assist with strategic outreach to low-income consumers, marketing and business development, and overall farm promotion.



3 Farmer Cristina Juárez García at Pixca Farm, 2019

During this phase of technical support, the UFE team became acutely aware of significant resource gaps that persisted since the initial research assessment in 2017, and continued to pose operational barriers to farmers' ability to produce, harvest, and sell crops. The UFE team discovered only 2 of the 13 farms visited had cold storage refrigeration for their harvests. At the same time, the UFE team was in the process of applying for a [Healthy Corner Stores Refrigeration Grant](#) from the California Department of Food and Agriculture (CDFA) to support small neighborhood stores participating in the [Live Well Community Market Program](#). This grant was intended to support corner stores in stocking and selling more California-grown fruits and vegetables. The UFE team already understood from their [previous farm-to-store pilot projects](#) that stores struggled to reliably stock local produce because small farms, particularly urban farms, struggled to sustain their operational capacity to grow and sell fruits and vegetables. The UFE team pivoted their proposal to CDFA to include refrigeration units for urban farms and eventually, to also include a large-scale walk-in cooler to support Foodshed's new retail hub site in City Heights, San Diego, that would become the centralized aggregation site for farms to participate as Foodshed producers, reaching low-income consumers throughout San Diego County.

The Refrigerators Are Here! And so is the Pandemic, 2020

In January 2020, the UFE team began helping both stores and farms determine cold storage equipment specifications to meet their individual site's needs and order customized refrigeration units. In March of 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic struck and

presented pronounced challenges to local farms and consumers. Across the food system, there were significant disruptions in farm operations, food retail, direct marketing channels such as farmers' markets and CSAs, limited consumer purchasing power in households experiencing sudden job loss, distribution and aggregation logistical challenges, and sub-par working conditions for essential workers at farms, grocery stores, and the transportation sector. Farmers' markets in low-income communities, such as the Lemon Grove Farmers' Market, were unable to maintain operations and reopen after farmers' markets were permitted to reopen as essential services in San Diego County. Additionally, farm stands in low-income communities, such as Second Chance Youth Garden's stand in Encanto, had to quickly adapt to an online ordering system and rethink all CSA operations to meet COVID-19 guidelines. Local farmers, particularly Black, indigenous, people of color (BIPOC), and women farmers working in urban settings and/or very small-scale farms and gardens, were deeply impacted by the immediate halt in direct-to-market sales and changes needed to protect workers and customers. Yet at the same time, consumer demand overall for healthy affordable fresh food had grown exponentially because a statewide stay-at-home order meant more people were cooking at home.



4 Farmer Stepheni Norton and UFE Director Elle Mari at WD Dickinson Farm, 2020

With staffing capacity provided under CalFresh Healthy Living Program funding, the UFE team helped urban farms select refrigeration, connect with Foodshed to sell their crops, improve their onsite farm stand look and community visibility, and get access to pandemic relief resources such as securing public dollars to purchase farm boxes available for community donation. The team helped [Community Roots Farm](#) in Oceanside, operated by Botanical Community Development Initiatives (BCDI), improve their onsite farm stand look and community visibility. The team also supported BCDI's proposal to obtain municipal pandemic relief dollars to produce and deliver farm boxes for households in need in north county low-income neighborhoods. The UFE team continued to adapt to respond to farmers' changing needs related to the COVID-19 pandemic. Farm refrigeration equipment was selected and delivered to help urban farms increase their harvest capacity and sell more crops into Foodshed. Ultimately by project end in early 2022, 14 farms and urban agriculture organizations received refrigeration equipment.

The UFE team, still supporting urban farms under the project umbrella of the San Diego Urban Growers' Collaborative, were savvy and nimble in identifying farmer needs and taking prompt action. The team helped long-time urban agriculture partner, Second Chance Youth Garden, find an audience for their 10-week CSA program, which had shifted to a donation-based model after the organization received a generous donation. The UFE team quickly enlisted long-time partner neighboring Second Chance Youth Garden, Encanto Elementary School, to identify 20 students living in households that experienced a sudden loss of income due to COVID-19. The team used its CalFresh Healthy Living Program resources to deliver CSA bags to 20 homes each week for three CSA seasons, as students continued to stay home for remote learning. The team enriched the fresh produce with English and Spanish recipe cards from [EatFresh](#), featuring easy, seasonal, and healthy recipes. This unique partnership was documented in an intern-supported [short film showcasing the team's efforts to build a hyperlocal food justice project](#).



5 UFE Team Members Lakisha McZeal and Nghi Dang, 2021

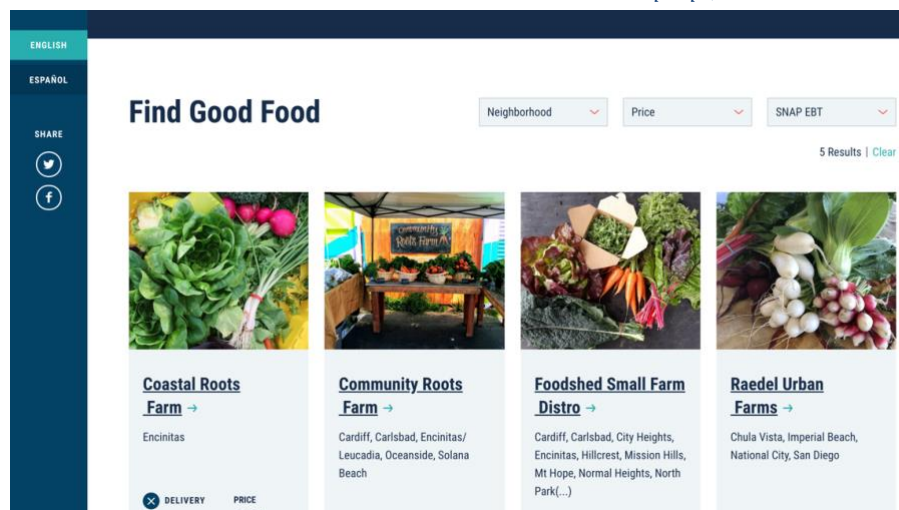
The Good Food Finder, EBT at Farm Stands, and Mobile Market Development, 2021

In 2021, the UFE team continued to provide customized technical assistance to urban farms to help them meet the needs of low-income consumers, alongside navigating supply chain disruptions and delays to secure refrigeration equipment. The team also continued to direct priority services and resources to BIPOC and women farmers, as they disproportionately experience economic hardship, while simultaneously working to serve their immediate communities experiencing food insecurity or poor access to healthy fresh food. The team assisted three farmers (Foodshed, BCDI, and Raedel Urban Farms) to become authorized to accept SNAP EBT, two (Foodshed and BCDI) to accept eWIC and WIC farmers' market fruit and vegetable nutrition coupons, and two (Foodshed and BCDI) to be awarded Market Match dollars.



6 Foodshed Farm Stand Pop-Ups, 2021

Further, the team officially launched the [Good Food Finder](#), an online CSA and farm stand resource directory featuring BIPOC and women farmers. The Good Food Finder initially emerged as a response to consumers and partner organizations, familiar with the UFE team's urban agriculture technical assistance work, who asked how they could support farmers during the pandemic. The Good Food Finder was envisioned as a solution to assist both local producers and eaters in connecting with one another so farmers could thrive with successful CSA enrollment, farm stand operations, and online farm product ordering. Additionally, to support our target audience of low-income consumers, the Good Food Finder has a filter to search for farms that accept EBT or offer a pay-what-you-can purchasing model. As of August 2022, there are 32 farms and gardens featured on the Good Food Finder, with 5 of them accepting EBT and 2 offering pay-what-you-can.



7 Good Food Finder

In 2021, Elle Mari, Director of the UFE team, continued in her long-time advisory capacity supporting the urban agriculture initiatives of Project New Village (PNV), a black-led food justice organization in Southeastern San Diego. Elle has been working consistently with Project New Village on their [Good Food District](#) agenda since a successful [crosswalk-to-community garden project](#) in 2016. In 2020, PNV secured a grant to purchase a refrigerated truck to build a mobile farmers' market to serve Greater Southeastern San Diego. Elle has supported PNV's mobile farmers' market development from the start, assisting with outreach and research to other mobile farmers' markets to learn best practices first hand, as well as building standard operating procedures, permitting, crafting job roles, local produce supply coordination, community engagement, and fund

San Diego Urban Growers' Collaborative Report, August 2022



8 PNV Mobile Farmers' Market

development to launch the social enterprise. As of August 2022, the mobile farmers' market is expected to launch in fall of 2022. This mobile farmers' market will be the first of its kind in San Diego County to serve low-income and low food access neighborhoods in Greater Southeastern San Diego (the Good Food District boundaries include National City and Lemon Grove).

EBT Farmer Workshop & Statewide Urban Agriculture Priorities, 2022 and Beyond

In 2022, Elle Mari, began collaborating with the [Community Alliance with Family Farmers](#) (CAFF) to serve in a regional leadership role representing San Diego County to inform CAFF's statewide urban agriculture planning project. Elle's role on the project is to conduct a series of gatherings and facilitate conversations with urban farmers to identify gaps and challenges farmers face. Since the UFE team had already conducted a thorough assessment of challenges and barriers in urban agriculture and built a trusting rapport with urban farmers in the initial phase of the San Diego Urban Growers' Collaborative, efforts are focused on providing training and peer learning opportunities in tandem with identifying new needs.

In the spirit of collaboration and a synergistic technical assistance plan, CAFF generously supported the UFE team's EBT Farmer workshop, covering the costs of food and incentives not allowed under the CalFresh Healthy Living Program. CAFF provided farmer participants with stipends to ease the cost of attendance to support expenses such as childcare, transportation, and time away from farm operations. CAFF also allocated a host stipend to Foodshed for providing accommodating space and equipment for the workshop at their community hub in City Heights. Six farmers and one farmers' market manager attended



7 EBT Farmer Workshop, 2022

the tailored 3-hour training. Attendees received one-on-one technical assistance to complete USDA FNS SNAP applications to become authorized to accept EBT for their respective customers. [Market Link](#) is a USDA grant-funded organization helping farmers and farmers' markets accept EBT and get set up with electronic point of sale systems, led application assistance. The UFE team is still receiving feedback on the workshop conducted on August 5th, 2022, however, thus far farmers have expressed gratitude for the step-by-step guidance to complete, submit, and track their applications. The UFE team will follow up with Market Link to report back the number of successfully authorized applications and add them to the Good Food Finder once they begin taking EBT payments. Additionally, the UFE team connected five farmers, unable to attend the training, with Market Link to receive remote technical support with their applications.

The EBT Farmer workshop also provided space to facilitate a dialogue with farmers to check-in on earlier reported needs and identify new emerging needs. CAFF intends to include San Diego County urban farmers' needs in a statewide urban agriculture report, with the intention of informing the launch of CDFA's new urban agriculture grant program. The collective goal is to ensure the new statewide program can directly benefit and be accessible to San Diego County urban farmers.

Continuing ahead through the rest of 2022 and planning for the years ahead, the UFE team will continue to host farmer gatherings, trainings, and provide one-on-one technical assistance to support urban farmers' growth and sustainability in the region. Foodshed farmers recently shared a pressing need for on-farm wash station infrastructure, land access, and business counseling specific to navigating insurance liability policies. The UFE team plans to share these needs with CAFF, CDFA, the San Diego County Farm Bureau, the Resource Conservation District of San Diego County, and other farm technical assistance providers to capture and connect farmers with resources.

The San Diego Urban Growers' Collaborative was rooted in a profound belief and understanding that urban agriculture is a

special and unique community asset that should be protected and promoted. Urban agriculture, and most importantly, the hardworking diverse people operating farms and gardens, provide social, physical, environmental, economic, health, and justice-oriented benefits that deserve to be further developed and preserved for future generations to come. As such, the UFE team's work to support urban agriculture will remain dynamic and non-linear. Advocating for urban agriculture and connecting resources for urban farmers to sustain themselves ultimately supports more green spaces in low-income neighborhoods and creates more access points for local fresh food, supporting CalFresh Healthy Living Program goals.

About the Author

[Elle Mari](#) is the director of Urban Food Equity at UC San Diego Center for Community Health (UCSD CCH), under the Altman Clinical and Translational Research Institute. Elle has been with UCSD CCH since 2014, and in a leadership role directing projects focused on food access and health equity since 2016. Elle has a Master's of Science degree in Food Systems and Society, a program of study emphasizing social justice and antiracist strategies to improve our food system. She has over 15 years of experience working in the public sector supporting underserved communities and tackling food justice issues. Elle's interest in urban agriculture was sparked by memories of watching her mother, an immigrant from rural Croatia, grow food in their small yard and share vegetables with neighbors in Chicago. She was honored with the 2016-2017 UC San Diego Exemplary Staff Employee of the Year award. She published a chapter on mobile produce markets and food justice in *Food Justice in US and Global Contexts: Bringing Theory and Practice Together* in 2017. In addition to her urban agriculture work, Elle has worked diligently to promote and support small neighborhood markets since 2015. She was featured in the San Diego Union Tribune in 2017 as a notable person in San Diego for her market work. She was also recognized by the San Diego Chapter of the American Planning Association in 2018 for her market makeover and community gathering space project in City Heights. Elle is a mom and partner, and most proud of her 2021 contribution to the world, her daughter Layla.

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