**Case Study: Food for Thought Produce Pickups**

A Collaboration Between Social Justice Learning Institute and Food Forward

The Food for Thought Produce Pickup at Morningside High School began as an idea of a champion community member named Erica Dent, an Inglewood native who wanted to develop a program that specifically addressed food insecurity among Inglewood Unified School District (IUSD) students. She originally reached out to the Social Justice Learning Institute (SJLI), an organization that supports and empowers youth of color, with an idea about a "backpack program" that would be designed to send students home with a bag full of food for the weekend. SJLI was intrigued.

Early on, SJLI brought on the team at Food Forward, a food waste prevention nonprofit that rescues surplus produce in Southern California with the purpose of redistribution to lower income communities. The two organizations had previously connected after meeting through the LA Food Policy Council. They developed a plan to address the whole life cycle of the produce: the program would connect produce distribution to a composting and soil restoration project at SJLI’s school garden sites.

The pilot program began in the fall of 2017, and the results showed significant impact in the school district community. SJLI successfully distributed over 500 bags of produce to about 200 households *each* event, and was able to compost any inedible produce into their soil restoration project at their school garden sites in Lennox. While the primary intent of the program is to increase access to fresh produce to community members, the program also contributes to the fight against regional food waste. The collaboration with Food Forward allowed produce that would have otherwise been sent to the landfill, instead be distributed to families in their community.

SJLI has several objectives for their Food for Thought Produce Pickup events:

**1. Improve healthy food access for Inglewood families** – The Food for Thought Produce Pickup provides fruits and vegetables to families of Inglewood Unified School District (IUSD) students, most of whom receive free or reduced lunch. SJLI aims to improve the students and their families’ eating habits by providing food options conducive to healthy lifestyles.

**2. Empower individuals to make healthy choices –** By improving access to fresh fruits and vegetables, SJLI empowers individuals to make healthier choices for their families. At the Produce Pickup, families also receive free cookbooks with culturally relevant recipes, as well as guidance from SJLI staff members. On special produce pickup days, SJLI also teaches its Healthy Lifestyle classes and provide opportunities for community organizations to be present and offer resources to attendees to help them be better advocates from themselves, their families, and their communities.

**3. Reduce food waste –** All of the produce distributed at the Food for Thought Produce Pickup comes from Food Forward’s Food Recovery Program. Through this partnership, Food Forward recovers quality produce from wholesale food markets in and either redistributes it to local families, or composts it back into SJLI’s school gardens.

**4. Reduce greenhouse gas emissions –** By composting leftover produce, SJLI mitigates the greenhouse gas effect of food waste. When food gets thrown into landfills, it releases methane into the air, which is four times worse than carbon dioxide in terms of greenhouse gas effects. Alternatively if produce is composted, it creates an environment where food can decompose without emitting methane and instead cultivating highly nutritious soil to boost the growth of food.

By the end of 2019, there were more than 20 distribution days, over 250,000 pounds of produce rescued, and over 130,000 pounds of produce redistributed to more than 1,600 unique households in Inglewood and Lennox. Both SJLI and Food Forward hope that the Produce Pickups will continue to expand in the future. Specifically, they would like to hold more distribution events in partnership with larger community events where participants can access multiple resources such as healthcare and housing information, immigration support, and more, in addition to free produce. They also hope to build out an efficient implementation system around procurement, volunteer management, and partner development, so that the Food for Thought Produce Pickup can be replicated at multiple sites in the region.