

# Engaging the community during a pandemic



## BACKGROUND

This case study explores how TCC dollars have supported community engagement. Specifically, these case studies spotlight the work MudTown Farms and Urban Peace Institute did during the COVID-19 pandemic to continue providing residents with information about health, safety, resources, and more. This represents part of Watts Rising's larger Community Engagement Plan. See **page 41** for more information about this plan.

*Interviews for these case studies were conducted in December 2020.*

**A volunteer distributes food to a community member using a socially distant method.** Photo credit: MudTown Farms Instagram, @Mudtownfarmswatts December 2020.

**HALEEMAH HENDERSON**, project manager at MudTown Farms, works to distribute food to the community. MudTown Farms also found ways to creatively adapt its community engagement and even helped other organizations with their outreach. In addition to online outreach, especially through social media like Instagram, the project passed out flyers from other organizations through its food distribution events. This collaborative outreach with other organizations can help other projects with less of an opportunity for in-person interaction with residents during the pandemic also maximize their impact.

Other projects similarly adapted community engagement by moving meetings and classes online, prioritizing social media and online outreach, sending mailers, and distributing flyers instead of door-to-door canvassing and in-person events.

Haleemah noted how the pandemic caused challenges for community engagement: "People are at the center of it and it requires that people are interacting because it's about the space at MudTown Farms and building capacity with folks. That's a lot harder to do [during the pandemic]."

**"How do we still serve folks and still build capacity and still engage people? [We're] just coming up with new ways to do things.... We're still in the process of working that out. How do we adapt the program and still meet our goals?"**

HALEEMAH HENDERSON

As the pandemic continues into 2021, Watts Rising project partners, including MudTown Farms, are looking to continually improve and adapt to better serve the community. Haleemah notes, "Now we're really having to sit down and look at how do we revamp the program to adjust to what's now being considered this new normal and not knowing when this is going to end? How do we still serve folks and still build capacity and still engage people? [We're] just coming up with new ways to do things. We're still in the process of working that out. How do we adapt the program and still meet our goals?" It will be an iterative process, not without challenges, but these projects so far have proven to show resilience and creativity in adapting and supporting their community.

**JACKIE VALLADARES** is a native Angeleno and Program Coordinator at the Urban Peace Institute, one of the organizations supporting the WalkBike Watts project. This project includes pedestrian and bicyclist improvements, the development of a cultural trail, and the establishment of a Safe Passage Program (described more on **page 68**). Community engagement is an essential component of this project.

When the shelter-in-place order was issued, the Urban Peace Institute responded quickly to continue community engagement virtually. Jackie notes: “We had a good momentum of engaging everyone. We saw that there were so many things happening quickly, [so] we doubled our virtual meetings to twice a month.”

Before the COVID-19 pandemic, Jackie described the community engagement facilitated by the Urban Peace Institute: “We were holding meetings to address public safety concerns and also infrastructure challenges.... Before COVID-19, we were doing a Walk to School Day ... a lot of it was face-to-face interactions. A lot of our work pre-COVID was engaging the community.”

In doing so, they creatively maximized their platform. They already had connections in the community and had established a communication channel through their project, which they were able to use to disseminate vital public health information to the community. They maximized their existing meetings to help share critical public health information with the community about the pandemic, such as statistics, updates from the mayor and governor, and available resources. During their meetings, Jackie explained, “We were updating them on the COVID-19 numbers. We were updating on any resources that the community members would have benefited from.” They made sure to answer questions and dispel myths to ensure

the community was being misled by rumors or inaccurate information. Jackie explained how COVID-19 statistics updates were “a tool to help inform them and also inform others.”

Saul Garcia, Coalition Organizer at the Urban Peace Institute, reiterated the importance of information in engagement and its particular importance during these uncertain times. Saul described that prior to COVID-19, these meetings were focused on “issues that indirectly affect violence.” As they adapted, the information covered evolved, but Saul noted that, “We’re still looking at those issues in addition to COVID.”

**“There’s a lot of information that needs to be shared and it’s not really just about sharing. It’s about doing something with it.”**

JACKIE VALLADARES

The methods for community engagement also in some ways stayed the same. Saul explained how he continued to provide reminders to community members about meetings, including personalized text messages. In other ways, information about attending the meetings naturally needed to be modified in response to the pandemic. Saul made efforts to ensure that meetings, hosted on Zoom, were easily accessible by helping attendees understand which phone number to call in to and which link to click, as Zoom invitations can look confusing for those unfamiliar.

The project continues to evolve. Jackie explained the next step they are working on to improve the efficacy of their meetings, including adding a parent advisory committee: “Starting next week, we’re having our first meeting with two [parents] that will give us direction [on] what needs to be changed.”

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Urban Peace Institute hosts a virtual Watts School Safety Collaborative meeting over Zoom. Photo credit: Urban Peace Institute Instagram @urbanpeaceinstitute April 2021

