

Meeting community needs through healthy food rescue and redistribution



BACKGROUND

This case study spotlights how TCC funding is supporting the expansion of community projects and partnerships like the Saint Rest and Food to Share food distribution program. For additional information about the Southwest Fresno Community Food Hub, see [page 62](#).

Interviews for this story were conducted in December 2021.

Initial renderings of the Saint Rest Food to Share Hub. Photo credit: Paul Halajian Architects

BERNICE WILEY, the director of food ministries at Saint Rest Baptist Church, grew up in “The Garden” neighborhood of Fresno. Her idyllic childhood inspires her work with Saint Rest because she wants others to grow up in a family-oriented, healthy place as she did. But the area has changed and today has high levels of homelessness, poverty, and hopelessness. Yet Wiley says: “I have such hope in my heart for this city.... As long as we can find the tools and the inroads and the means to do it, I know we have the will to do it.”

Wiley took over Saint Rest’s 40-year-old food distribution program in 2009. In 2016, when the need for food outpaced their supply, she forged a partnership with Food to Share, a program run by Fresno Metro Ministry. Food to Share rescues nutritious food that would otherwise be wasted and delivers it to partners, like Saint Rest to distribute to families facing daunting food hardship and lacking the financial means to purchase healthy food.

Wiley is committed to serving the 100 to 200 people who come to each food giveaway, which take place three times a month. “Our motto is rain, sleet, or snow, we’ll be there” she says. One man has been picking up food for years and reported to Wiley that the food he received was critical to his health and nourishment through several lean periods in his life. The impact of the food hub on the community extends beyond the individuals who show up. Wiley noted that residents share food with neighbors who are not able to stand in line for food.

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Bernice Wiley speaks at a groundbreaking event for the Saint Rest + Food to Share Hub in July 2021. Photo credit: Edward Smith, The Business Journal

Driven by an interest in the connection between food waste prevention and pollution, Wiley is excited about the benefits of the food waste prevention project funded by TCC. She hopes the project will help improve the air quality and ultimately rectify the fact that life expectancy in Southwest Fresno is lower than other parts of the county.

She isn’t stopping with this project, however. Wiley has other dreams for cultivating a healthy community through food. TCC funding will support the reconstruction and expansion of the current Saint Rest warehouse and add a commercial kitchen to the site. Wiley looks forward to teaching people how to make meals with unfamiliar ingredients and establishing a central location where vulnerable populations can be connected to resources.

KEITH BERGTHOLD, the executive director at Fresno Metro Ministry, was born in Central Fresno and has a long history of serving the community. He works with many churches in Southwest Fresno, including Saint Rest, because of their commitment to food distribution. Bergthold shares their dedication to addressing the contradiction that the Fresno region is a major center of both food production and food insecurity.

To help Saint Rest achieve its vision for expansion, Bergthold submitted a TCC proposal to support repairs and improvements on an aged and underutilized 6,000-square-foot warehouse. The team was awarded \$1.5 million from TCC to transform the existing building into a food recovery, storage, office, and distribution center that serves the entire Fresno metro area.

After the project began, the Saint Rest and Food to Share team found it necessary to expand the project with an additional new building to safely execute their plans for a commercial community kitchen and training area. They have raised nearly \$3.7 million to do so.

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KEITH BERGTHOLD



Keith Bergthold (right) presents visuals of a separate project that will be constructed adjacent to the Food Hub.

Photo credit: Build Healthy Places Network

Bergthold hopes to complete all warehouse renovations by August 2022, and new building construction by May 2023, and to initiate youth education programs to teach more than 600 students about food security leadership, cooking and gardening. Always seeking to do more for his community, Bergthold would also like to open four or five more food hubs throughout Fresno with expanded offerings.

Bergthold enthusiastically believes "Transformative Climate Communities is a total game changer for Southwest Fresno – it's unlike anything else that's happened before."

RON WILEY, a deacon at Saint Rest Baptist Church, moved to Fresno to attend California State University, Fresno in 1971 and has been deeply engaged with the community ever since. Wiley, a big city kid from San Bernardino, first thought Fresno was too country, but he soon fell in love with the community and the people he met. Now retired, Wiley has remained an active member of Saint Rest and is a highly engaged volunteer with the food ministry.



Ron Wiley and Bernice Wiley distribute food outside the warehouse used for the Saint Rest Food Distribution program. Photo courtesy of Bernice Wiley

Fresno has experienced many changes since the 1970s: The population size more than tripled, rural areas turned into urban sprawl, red-lined portions of the city fell further into neglect, and high levels of poverty and food insecurity plagued the Southwest Fresno community. To counteract the hopelessness many Fresno residents feel, Wiley has turned to food distribution, where he helps engage 25 volunteers to, as the Bible says, "feed the hungry, clothe the naked, visit the sick."

Wiley follows his wife Bernice's lead – working with food banks and other partners to build community visibility and capacity. He is optimistic about the investments from TCC, "I think it is a catalyst to improve the overall quality of life in Southwest Fresno, a catalyst to bridge the gap and close inequities in the system."

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RON WILEY