

# Nourishing neighbors during a pandemic



## BACKGROUND

This case study explores how TCC-funded organizations adapted project activities to support the community during the COVID-19 pandemic by distributing food in a safe way (see [page 50](#) for more information about the MudTown Farms project and [page 68](#) for more information about the Walk Bike Watts project).

*Interviews for this case study were conducted in September and December 2021.*

A volunteer sorts produce at a food distribution event during the pandemic in 2020. Photo credit: MudTown Farms

**MUDTOWN FARMS** is on the frontlines of battling food insecurity, which deepened in Watts during the pandemic. As program coordinator at MudTown Farms, Ava Post is part of a team that rescues produce from wholesale distributors before it goes to waste and redirects the fresh produce to Watts residents through bimonthly free distributions events. “The need for produce has gone up. I know pretty much everyone’s been affected food security-wise,” said Ava.

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AVA POST

Launched before the pandemic, MudTown Farms was well positioned to make adjustments to quickly provide food in a COVID-19 safe way. Originally the distribution events were set up in a grocery store style, where residents would pick out food that volunteers had sorted onto shelves.

“But we had to adapt. We started to pre-bag all the produce and we started a drive-through as well to distribute the food. So it’s been great to be able to continue to offer the service especially when people need it the most,” said Ava.

Other complementary efforts as part of Watts Rising also addressed food insecurity. Like MudTown Farms, the Watts Healing Tech Garden was also well positioned to distribute fresh produce to residents throughout the pandemic. Adjusting their food distribution procedures to align with updated health standards, the Watts Community Tech Garden has continued to grow its fresh produce at the Edwin Markham Middle School. (For more information, see [page 39](#) for last year’s profile featuring the Watts Community Tech Garden.)

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AVA POST



A food distribution event led by East Side Riders with support from We Care Outreach in May 2020. Photo credit: Spectrum News 1 SoCal Twitter, @SpecNews1SoCal

**ELDER MICHAEL CUMMINGS** leads an organization that did a big pivot with its TCC project in 2020 to help alleviate food insecurity in Watts. Michael is executive director of We Care Outreach Ministries, an organization that added a new focus on food to its Safe Passages to School program.

A Pentecostal pastor and a gang interventionist fondly referred to as “Big Mike” in the Watts community, he and his We Care Outreach Ministries are dedicated to elevating the lives of Watts youth while keeping them safe and defusing tensions among community members.

“The Safe Passages to Schools Program was implemented to make sure kids get to and from school safely,” Michael said as he explained how the program, part of TCC through

the WalkBike Watts project, involved training local adults to supervise students traveling to and from school. When schools went remote in March of 2020, the program pivoted to meal distribution while keeping its focus on community safety, including health.

**“We’re ground rooted here in Watts and we want to just make sure that we can change lives, one life at a time.”**

ELDER MICHAEL CUMMINGS

“[We] made sure we could keep the peace as people waited [in long lines] to come and be safe and get their food,” Michael said. To support this goal, he explained, “Cedars-Sinai gave our team a COVID-19 training” on health guidelines including mask use, social distancing, and frequent hand

washing. They used the information to implement procedures for people coming to collect food, such as staying six feet from others in line.

Mike underscored the importance of community collaboration. In addition to their main food distribution partner, East Side Riders, they collaborate with other grassroots organizations, including the Watts Leadership Institute and the Watts Gang Taskforce. They are also able to refer residents visiting food distribution to other services through the Children’s Institute, the local housing authority, and more. (For more information on the Safe Passage to School project, see **page 68**).

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