

# Watts Rising partners pivot to address pandemic



## BACKGROUND

This story explores how Watts Rising partners adapted TCC-funded projects and engagement to meet changing community needs when the pandemic struck. From safe food distribution to accessible health and safety resources, Watts Labor and Community Action Committee (WLCAC) and Urban Peace Institute leveraged TCC funds and community networks to provide information and services in an uncertain time. To learn more about the specific projects that these partners manage, see [pages 55 and 73](#).

*Interviews for these case studies were conducted from December 2020 to December 2021.*

Volunteers sort produced at a food distribution event during the pandemic in 2020. Photo credit: MudTown Farms

**ELDER MICHAEL CUMMINGS** is a Pentecostal pastor and a gang interventionist fondly referred to as “Big Mike” in the Watts community. As executive director of We Care Outreach Ministries, a nonprofit organization dedicated to helping deter youth from engaging with gangs, crime, and drugs, Cummings is dedicated to keeping Watts youth safe and defusing tensions among community members.

We Care Outreach Ministries is one of the organizations that runs the Safe Passages to Schools Program, which trains local adults to supervise students traveling to and from school. The program is a component of the TCC-funded WalkBike Watts project, which has installed pedestrian infrastructure to make the neighborhood more walkable and bikeable. To maximize the use of this infrastructure, the Safe Passages puts more people on the street, thereby helping create an environment that feels safe, active, and vibrant. To support this effort, community engagement is an essential component of this project.

When schools went remote because of the COVID-19 pandemic, We Care Outreach Ministries pivoted to help feed community members. Given its expansive volunteer network, which grew with TCC funding, We Care Outreach Ministries was well placed to reach community members and jump into action to distribute resources.

With food donations from private donors, We Care Outreach Ministries distributed meals to community members, while volunteers from the Safe Passages to Schools program helped make the process safe and healthy. To minimize COVID-19 transmission, the volunteers helped make sure that residents picking up food were wearing masks and staying six feet apart in line.

**“[We] made sure we could keep the peace as people waited [in long lines] to come and be safe and get their food.”**

ELDER MICHAEL CUMMINGS



A 2020 food distribution event by East Side Riders and We Care Outreach. Photo credit: Spectrum News 1SoCal Twitter

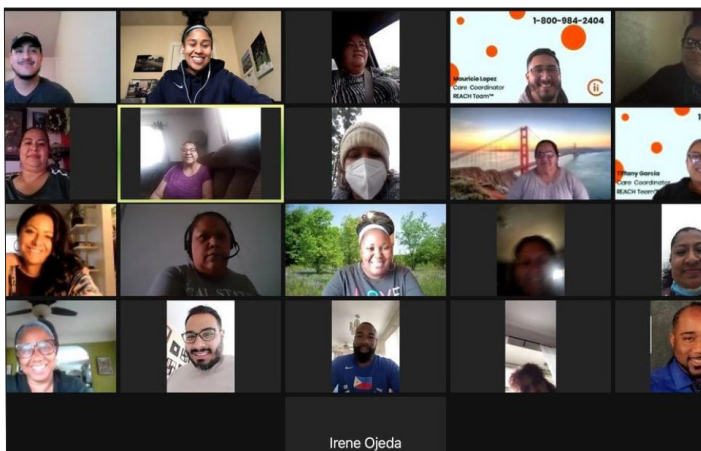
**JACKIE VALLADARES** is a native Angeleno and program coordinator at the Urban Peace Institute, a nonprofit focused on community safety. UPI co-runs the Safe Passages to Schools program with We Care Outreach Ministries. UPI helps train a network of adults to create safe walking routes.

Prior to the pandemic, UPI relied heavily on in-person engagement. As Valladares said, “we were holding meetings to address public safety concerns and also infrastructure challenges.... a lot of it was face-to-face interactions.” When the shelter-in-place order was issued, UPI responded quickly to continue community engagement virtually. TCC resources had helped UPI expand the Safe Passages program and grow the volunteer network. With that in place, UPI could pivot to use its resources to share public health information.

**“We had a good momentum of engaging everyone... there were so many things happening quickly, [so] we doubled our virtual meetings to twice a month.”**

JACKIE VALLADARES

Through its pre-pandemic community connections and communication channels, UPI was able to disseminate vital public health information to Watts residents. The team leveraged the newly virtual meetings to share critical pandemic updates with the community — statistics, messages from the mayor and governor, and information on available resources. They made sure to answer questions and dispel myths to ensure the community was being misled by rumors or inaccurate information. “We were updating them on the COVID-19 numbers [and] any resources that the community members would have benefited from.”



Urban Peace Institute hosts a Zoom meeting of the Watts School Safety Collaborative, a TCC-sponsored initiative that convenes parents for school safety initiatives. Photo credit: Urban Peace Institute Instagram @urbanpeaceinstitute April 2021

**AVA POST**, a longtime environmental activist in Watts, is on the front lines of battling food insecurity, which deepened during the pandemic. As program coordinator at WLCAC, Post is on a team that rescues fresh produce that would be wasted and redirects it to Watts residents through free distribution events. This effort is run through MudTown Farms, a WLCAC project that provides food collection and distribution. The project has received TCC support since Spring 2021, when TCC funds enabled it to open a new garden location.

The program was more important than ever during the pandemic: “The need for produce has gone up. I know pretty much everyone’s been affected food security-wise.” Before the pandemic, the food distribution was set up in a grocery store format — volunteers sorted food onto shelves for residents to pick out. “We had to adapt.... We started to pre-bag all the produce, and we started a drive-through as well.”

**“It’s been great to be able to continue to offer the [food distribution] service especially when people need it the most.”**

AVA POST

**HALEEMAH HENDERSON**, WLCAC project manager for MudTown Farms, works with Post to distribute food to the community. Henderson described how the pandemic caused challenges for engagement and capacity building: “People are at the center of [MudTown Farms]. To do it the way we want to do it requires that people are together in a space interacting. ...That’s a lot harder [during the pandemic].”

Nevertheless, MudTown Farms and other projects adapted. Henderson detailed steps the team took to adapt community engagement efforts — not only to engage Watts residents about MudTown Farms, but to support other organizations’ outreach efforts. Her team shifted toward more online outreach when the pandemic began, especially through social media platforms like Instagram. They moved in-person meetings and classes to Zoom and passed out flyers from other organizations at food distribution events. With fewer chances for in-person interaction with residents, collaborative outreach helped maximize the impact of each public engagement opportunity that arose.

**“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.”**

HALEEMAH HENDERSON