

Date: April 23, 2021

To: Thomas B. Modica, City Manager 

From: Kelly Colopy, Director of Health and Human Services 

For: Mayor and Members of the City Council

Subject: **Update on Food Security Plan**

At its February 16, 2021 meeting, the City Council requested the City Manager to work with the Health and Human Services Department (Health Department) to establish a Food Security Plan for communities impacted by the closures of grocery stores and make recommendations for inclusion in the inclusive economic recovery plan. The purpose of this memorandum is to provide an overview of current and proposed strategies and initiatives to address food insecurity in Long Beach.

BACKGROUND

COVID-19 is an unprecedented global health crisis, with particularly severe impacts on the lives of the most vulnerable. The issues of poor dietary quality and inadequate nutrition have been exacerbated by necessary public health strategies to mitigate the spread of the virus, concurrent economic impacts of COVID-19, and the recent closure of full-service grocery stores. These impacts, combined with limitations on access to healthy and affordable food, have placed our community at greater risk for food insecurity and for negative health outcomes due to COVID-19 infection.

Significant increases in the number of households who have enrolled in federally-funded nutrition assistance programs, including our Long Beach Women, Infant and Children (WIC) program and CalFresh (SNAP) demonstrate an increase in the number of households struggling to put enough food on the table. The Census Bureau's Household Pulse Survey, launched in April 2020, provides weekly data on health and economic indicators and highlights the impact that the COVID-19 pandemic has had on food security for those living in Los Angeles County (County). Nearly 24 million adults, or 11 percent of all adults in the County, reported that their household sometimes or often did not have enough to eat in the last seven days, according to Household Pulse Survey data collected February 3 to February 15, 2021. For households with children, the percentage was even higher (14 percent) and 9 to 14 percent of adults with children reported that their children sometimes or often did not eat enough in the last seven days.

While the effects of COVID-19 are being felt by all, low-income and communities of color have been hit disproportionately hard. The recent closure of two grocery stores in Long Beach only adds to the disproportionate impacts experienced by residents who live in low-income and "COVID-19 Impacted Communities" and reflects longstanding inequities, often stemming from structural racism, that contribute to gaps in access that have led to a dramatic rise in food insecurity. Additionally, although emergency food distribution via drive-thru and non-vehicle distribution activities have helped meet a crucial demand during this time, there is a strong consensus among anti-hunger advocates and food security experts that this approach is not

the most impactful, or equitable, way to address the root causes of food insecurity in a community.

As a City, it is vital that we address the social determinants of health and invest in programmatic, policy, and environmental system change strategies that will improve the food landscape to strengthen our community as we recover from the economic fallout of COVID-19. To that end, below is a list of current food access activities implemented to address immediate food needs and, pending availability of federal American Rescue Plan Act (ARPA) funds, strategies designed to improve the food system and build the capacity of neighborhoods to meet the food security needs of residents in Long Beach.

Current Strategies to Meet Immediate Food Needs

- Emergency Food Distribution (Drive-Thru, Non-Vehicle Food Distribution). Since the start of the pandemic, the City has organized and/or supported multiple food distribution opportunities that provide shelf-stable and hard-to-access perishable foods reaching up to 3,000 households per event. In partnership with local food banks and community partners, these events provide an opportunity to distribute additional supplies (PPE, diapers, toiletries, etc.), educational collateral material including information on COVID-19, as well as opportunities to connect residents to programs for ongoing nutrition assistance. Food Distribution Events, funded with Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security (CARES) Act through May 30, 2021, continue to be planned for North, Central, and West Long Beach. The Health Department, in the Long Beach Recovery Act plan for Food Security, has proposed funding to continue these efforts for the next three to six months.
- Meal and Grocery Delivery. Since December 2020, the Health Department has contracted with four community-based organizations to provide healthy prepared meals or groceries to older adult residents and those who tested positive or were exposed to COVID-19 who need to isolate at home. To date, the program has served more than 74,000 prepared meals and 11,000 grocery boxes to the homes of at least 1,562 food insecure and isolated individuals. Funding for this program was provided by the CARES Act and will continue as funding allows through May 30, 2021. Short-term continuation of food deliveries are anticipated through the Long Beach Recovery Act; however, program eligibility will likely shift as COVID-19 cases and exposure risk decreases.
- Neighborhood and Place-Based Food Projects. Since November 2020, the Health Department has contracted with 14 community-based organizations to support pop-up food pantries; farm box, meal, and grocery distribution and delivery programs; increased capacity for organizations to receive and distribute healthy perishable foods via the purchase of refrigerators and refrigerated trucks; and, is establishing a new community garden and crop swap program in Central/Downtown Long Beach. In addition, the Health Department contracted with Long Beach City College (LBCC) and California State University, Long Beach (CSULB) to support their “grab and go” food pantry programs. The Health Department plans to partner with community-based organizations to support neighborhood and place-based food security projects that complement the larger food access plan utilizing Long Beach Recovery Act funding.

Existing food and meal distribution opportunities include Meals on Wheels, Long Beach Center for Economic Inclusion (supporting nine small food pantry programs), Parks, Recreation and Marine senior meals, Christian Outreach in Action, Catholic Charities, Puente, Crossroads Church (across from Food-4-Less), Divine Victory Ministries, and the AIDS Project LA Food Store.

In addition, the Health Department is working with Food Finders to identify opportunities for containers that will allow for healthier food to be stored/distributed.

If a household is seeking connection to food opportunities, they can call the LB Resource Line at 562-570-INFO (4636) and select option 5 for help.

Economic Development Strategies to Address Grocery Store Closure and Attract New Business Development

- Food-4-Less Transition. The Food-4-Less at South Street and Cherry Avenue closed on Saturday, April 17, 2021. City staff have reached out to the property owner, Auburndale Properties, and confirmed that the Food-4-Less will continue to pay rent and occupy the location in the short-term (from 6 to 12 months) given the remaining term of the lease. Representatives of the property owner have also confirmed that they are working with their corporate office and the tenant to explore re-positioning or temporary uses that may result in providing grocery services to the community.
- Grocery Store Development Sites. To assist the process of recruiting more full-service, fresh grocery providers to the North Long Beach community, the Economic Development Department has been working with property owners and potential business owners to identify potential sites that may be available for temporary or long-term development. Since the elimination of Redevelopment Agencies in the State of California, there are a limited number of properties owned by the City in North Long Beach that are large enough to support the development of a full-service grocery store. Currently, City staff are reviewing properties, both publicly and privately owned, that may be large enough to support new development of a full-service grocery store.
- Grocery Store Attraction. In addition to the identification of development sites, staff have begun outreach to grocery store operators with the hope of attracting a new service provider to North Long Beach. Although it is not appropriate to disclose the name of grocery store operators who have contacted the City, staff have engaged with at least one well-known, high-quality, full-service grocer who has expressed interest in building a new location in North Long Beach. Staff are currently exploring opportunity sites and requirements with this grocer to determine if there is an opportunity site, either public or privately owned, that could support such a project. Staff will return to the City Council with recommendations and costs associated with the development of a project.

Although the closure of the Ralph's at the intersection of Los Coyotes Diagonal and Wardlow Road is also a concern for residents in the immediate area, a staff review of the surrounding area indicates that there are at least seven alternative grocery stores available to the

community within 1 to 2 miles of the location. This includes Pavilions, Stater Brothers Markets, Amazon Fresh, and Grocery Outlet within 0.9 miles, and Vons, Sprouts, and Smart and Final within 2 miles of the former Ralph's location. Staff have contacted the property owner of the nearly 3 acres site, which is zoned Community Commercial Automobile Oriented, to discuss future plans and potential uses for the site.

Health Department Strategies Designed to Improve Food Systems and Address Long Term Food Security Needs

In addition to programs designed to meet immediate food needs, the Health Department has designed opportunities to increase healthy food access systems in areas of the City where access is most difficult. These will support long-term access to healthy foods. Long Beach Recovery Act funding will provide the resources to further plan and implement these strategies.

- Health Department Healthy Market Partnership Program (Healthy Store Conversions): COVID-19 has disproportionality impacted food access for groups that already had higher rates of food insecurity and disparities in dietary behaviors that have been directly linked to the food environment, including access to markets that sell fresh produce and other healthy foods. The recent closure of grocery stores in Long Beach has added additional barriers to access for the impacted neighborhoods. Building upon the Health Department's existing Healthy Market Partnership Program, the Health Department, in collaboration with Development Services and Economic Development Departments and community partners, is working with neighborhood markets to provide resources and technical assistance necessary to increase the availability of fresh produce, low-fat dairy, lean protein, and whole grain food offerings while decreasing unhealthy marketing. Pending availability of federal ARPA funds, the team will continue to recruit stores in priority neighborhoods where greater than 50 percent of the population is at, or below, 185 percent of the federal poverty level and/or are located within a half of mile of a school where greater than 50 percent of students are eligible for a free and/or reduced lunch.

Building on the momentum currently underway via the CARES Act-supported Healthy Market Conversions, federal ARPA funds will further expand access to healthy and affordable foods for our most COVID-19 impacted neighborhoods by converting existing small markets, convenience stores, and/or liquor stores to "healthy markets" that provide increased access to fresh produce and culturally appropriate healthy food offerings. This strategy will have a positive impact not only on meeting immediate food needs but will allow for a sustainable improvement to the food landscape. As most neighborhood markets are owned by, and employ, Long Beach residents, investments in local markets also impact the economic health of the community by providing jobs and increasing dollars spent in neighborhood stores.

- Atlantic Farms Bridge Community Liquor Store Transformation Project (Project). This Project will provide training and income-generating opportunities for people experiencing homelessness. The Health Department will partner with a nonprofit agency to create an affordable healthy food market at the convenience store owned by the City at 6841 Atlantic Boulevard. The nonprofit agency will be required to operate as a social enterprise that hires transitional aged youth (ages 18-25) who are experiencing homelessness. This Project will

provide these youth with on-the-job experience and skills training that they can use to pursue future employment opportunities. The nonprofit partner will be expected to cover as much of the wages as possible, with some financial support from the Project to support training and ensure that food prices are affordable to the surrounding community.

- Mobile Farmers' Market Program. Access to healthy and affordable food is key to addressing food insecurity and improving health outcomes for those most impacted by COVID-19. Ideally, all residents in the City have access to a food market within safe walking distance. However, in reality, many of our dense neighborhoods do not have adequate commercial space and attracting and retaining "big box" markets is often most difficult for neighborhoods already described as having poor food access. To address this, federal Recovery Act funding is planned for the establishment of a Mobile Farmers' Market Program. Mobile Farmers' Markets can travel to multiple neighborhoods where access to supermarkets or grocery stores are limited, to sell fresh fruits, vegetables, and other culturally relevant healthy foods. These Mobile Farmers' Markets would operate on a set schedule, so residents know when they can shop, and can greatly improve access for individuals without a vehicle and for those with limited physical mobility. Mobile Farmers' Markets can be linked with our expanded urban agriculture programs and may also be set up as CalFresh (SNAP) retailers to allow for our lowest income residents to have healthy places to shop with their nutrition assistance dollars.
- Food Hub to Increase Access to Healthy and Affordable Food. The cost to purchase fresh produce and other healthy foods is often more than 10 percent higher in low-income neighborhoods. This cost is the direct result of the reduced purchasing power small markets face when procuring food, especially perishable fruits, vegetables, dairy, and protein. Pending availability of funding, the Health Department seeks to support the establishment of at least one "food hub," to be managed by a nonprofit partner, that can serve as a distribution center for local markets who participate in the Healthy Market Partnership Program and/or the proposed Mobile Farmer's Markets to order together, increase their buying power, and pass on that cost savings to their customers in the form of lower in-store food prices.
- Support for Urban Agriculture Development and Related Projects. The COVID-19 pandemic has highlighted the need to strengthen local food systems and invest in strategies that allow for the local production of food for personal consumption. Since the first "Safer at Home" Order was issued, we have seen a marked increase in the interest in urban gardening and access to locally grown fruits, vegetables, and herbs. Pending availability of federal Recovery Act funds, and leveraging grant support from the Health Department's Healthy Active Long Beach Program, this strategy will build upon the City's Urban Agriculture Incentive Zone Ordinance by providing funding to remove existing barriers related to start-up costs for the development of community garden/farm space and will also expand access to community supported agriculture programs to reach those who are unable in maintaining a community plot space. Funding allocated to this could also be used to establish "satellite" sites to expand CSA program availability.

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The Health Department and its partners continue to develop, implement, and lead initiatives designed to address the short- and long-term food security needs of our community. Proposed place-based approaches must understand and consider the historical and political context of each community. Creating and supporting a community where everyone is healthy and food secure requires an intentional, collective-impact approach. Through ongoing collaborations with other City departments and with key stakeholders including local businesses, charitable and nonprofit organizations, universities and schools, and community leaders and residents, as well as leveraging and building upon grant-funded food access initiatives currently led by the Health Department, we believe the above described strategies will result in achieving the City's goal to address food insecurity while improving individual and population-level health outcomes.

If you have any questions, please contact me at (562) 570-4016 or by email at kelly.colopy@longbeach.gov.

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