

## Amber Orozco '13, LAFPC Story

Headline: Fighting Food Insecurity in the Midst of COVID-19



In the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic, Amber Orozco '13 is fighting food insecurity in Los Angeles by working directly with low-income communities.

Orozco is senior contracts and operations associate for the Healthy Neighborhood Market Network (HNMN), a program created by the Los Angeles Food Policy Council (LAFPC). The goal of the LAFPC is to help small business owners in disadvantaged communities access and sell healthy, sustainably produced food, and the HNMN helps meet this goal in several ways.

Every year, the HNMN supports 10 to 15 neighborhood market owners through one-on-one coaching and multilingual training events related to healthy retail. The program covers marketing, branding, store design, merchandising, product sourcing, pricing, and profitability.

“Through our fundraising efforts, we’re able to offer our store partners marketing support and equipment, including baskets and merchandisers for produce, price signage, and community flyers to promote their business,” said Orozco. “Two or three stores are chosen to be part of the ‘Transformation Project,’ where each store’s interior and exterior is completely renovated.”

The HNMN emphasizes the importance of store owners cultivating partnerships with local community institutions to help build their customer base. For example, one of the store owners Orozco works with provided gift certificates to a local school so families could purchase produce at the store. Store owners like this one often use the HNMN to partner with Todo Verde, a plant-based catering company, to host healthy food demonstrations for the community.

Orozco became interested in food justice and policy while completing her degree in environmental studies at Whittier College. Through faculty-led research and coursework on food systems, Orozco began thinking about her personal and cultural connection to

food. She pursued these interests at the graduate level with an M.A. in natural resources and sustainable development from the United Nations' Mandated University for Peace and an M.A. in international affairs from American University.

"I came across the work of the LAFPC while doing research for one of my graduate courses," said Orozco. "I was drawn to the organization's mission of making food healthy, affordable, sustainable, and fair for everyone, so I applied for a summer internship with them in 2016 and have been here ever since."

By combating food insecurity in Los Angeles, Orozco is addressing a long history of systemic racism and poverty in the city. According to the Los Angeles County Health Survey, 26.8% of LA County households are food insecure, with low-income communities of color making up the majority of that percentage.

"One key factor that has led to food inequity in Los Angeles is the discriminatory practice of 'redlining,' where banks and government institutions limit neighborhood resources for people of color, including supermarkets," Orozco said. "Through policies like the Good Food Zone, which provides economic development resources to local food businesses, the LAFPC seeks to restore the health and vitality of LA neighborhoods."

The COVID-19 pandemic has intensified racial disparities in food security and other areas, making Orozco's work at the HNMN all the more critical at this time. Neighborhood market owners are on the frontlines of providing resources for their local communities. The HNMN helps them manage the negative effects of COVID-19 on their business so they can continue to operate and make healthy food accessible for everyone.

It's likely that the work Orozco and the HNMN did to support store owners before the pandemic have helped them weather COVID-19 much better than they would have otherwise. Not only did the store owners receive the benefits already described, but they will always remain in the program's network, with access to its resources and opportunities to build relationships with other store owners at events.

"Especially during a time like COVID-19, I think networks—personal and professional—are important in building community resilience," Orozco said. "I feel very fortunate to be able to support essential workers and resilient leaders within our regional food system."

While the LAFPC is doing crucial work to advance the food movement in Los Angeles, Orozco acknowledges the amazing work of collaborating organizations who are contributing to the effort during COVID-19. For example, Inclusive Action for the City, East Los Angeles Community Corporation, and Public Counsel are raising money to provide direct cash assistance to street vendors who are unable to access resources from the government.

“I encourage folks to check out these organizations to learn more about their work and how they can get involved,” said Orozco.