Fair: Street Vending

CASE STUDY: The Fight for Fair Food on our Streets

The Los Angeles Food Policy Council (LAFPC) has strongly supported street food vending since its inception. LAFPC recognizes that in communities across California, street food is a large part of food culture and dynamic street life. Additionally, sidewalk vendors provide communities with delicious foods, including fresh fruits and vegetables. In food desert communities – and particularly in the absence of healthy food retail development – fruit and vegetable sidewalk vendors can help to fill a void by providing fresh food to the local community that may struggle to access them otherwise.

Up until recently, the City of Los Angeles was the only major city in the United States, and one of the only cities in LA County, without a sidewalk vending permit program. LAFPC and key partners such as Inclusive Action for the City (formerly LURN), East LA Community Corporation (ELACC), Public Counsel, street vendors themselves, and many others, had been working street vending legalization since 2011. In its early years, LAFPC created a street vending Working Group, and since then, ELACC facilitated the steering committee for the Los Angeles Street Vendor Campaign (LASVC).

Due in part to increased fear among immigrant communities in the wake of President Trump’s election, in early 2018, then Senator Ricardo Lara (now California Insurance Commissioner) introduced SB 946, the Safe Sidewalk Vending Act. The bill allows local jurisdictions to develop sidewalk vending regulations as they relate to public health, safety, and welfare. Additionally, the bill decriminalizes sidewalk vending, a critical step in protecting sidewalk vendors, many of whom are immigrants. The legislation was ultimately signed into law by Governor Jerry Brown in 2018, largely in part because of a strong coalition of immigrant rights, economic justice, and faith-based organizations that supported the bill, known as the California Street Vendor Campaign.

As of January 2020, sidewalk vending is in the implementation phase, as permits are currently being issued by the City of Los Angeles. Sidewalk vendors who have fought tirelessly for a fair sidewalk vending program look forward to this phase because they could finally obtain a permit that will legitimize their business. However, the work is not over. The new program for street vendors requires multiple levels of permitting including as a sidewalk permit, a public health permit, a compliant food cart, and more. These processes are both lengthy and very costly for existing vendors. It is important to remember that many sidewalk vendors are low-income entrepreneurs who need extra assistance to be compliant with public health regulations; these vendors are largely immigrants, mothers, elderly individuals, and members of other socioeconomic groups with limited ability to cover these hefty startup costs.
Moving forward, the LASVC, including LAFPC, will continue to work with sidewalk vendors so that they can enter the formal sidewalk vending economy. In particular, LAFPC has facilitated trainings on food justice and healthy food menu options. Other organizations in the coalition are working to inform sidewalk vendors of their rights, connect them to financing options, and learn about other city requirements to become permitted. 2020 will be a crucial year for street vending implementation—one that will require plenty of support not just from nonprofit organizations but also from our local government—if this sidewalk program is to equitably bring sidewalk vendors into the formal economy.