COMMENTARY: The Making of a Movement: What I Learned About Policymaking from Street Vendors

Rudy Espinoza
Executive Director at Inclusive Action for the City

My hope is that when Angelenos learn about the legalization of street vending in Los Angeles, they recognize the years of organizing work and persistent advocacy that took place before the City formally acknowledged the role that street vendors play in our community.

The LA Street Vendor Campaign (LASVC) is just the latest iteration of several attempts to legalize street vending in the City of Los Angeles, the last being in the 1990’s. When our coalition was formed just over 10 years ago, we recognized that in order to support food entrepreneurs on our public right-of-way, we had to do more than just patronize their businesses and promote them on social media. We had to address the root issues that were harming their livelihood: one being that Los Angeles was criminalizing street vending; street vendors were being fined, arrested, and even put in deportation proceedings because they were trying to take care of their families by vending.

Angelenos know that they can hardly walk a block without encountering a frutero or a hot dog vendor. And yet, many do not know that these vendors operate in limbo, constantly worried about having their equipment confiscated for lack of a permit. We believe that this is unjust. The City of Los Angeles is home to thousands of street vendors that sell food, clothing, and other products, adding vibrancy, culture, and nutrition to every corner. They are woven into the fabric of our city’s DNA.

The LASVC began as a coalition of street vendors, residents, community organizations, law groups, and brick-and-mortar businesses all primed to legally recognize and protect the rights and dignity of sidewalk vendors. I believe that our campaign was made special by the fact that street vendors themselves were the leaders and final decision-makers in all of our work.

Street vendors participated in the majority of the countless meetings we had with elected officials and partners. When policies were proposed and ideas were pitched, street vendors had the final say. Indeed, I believe that one of the main reasons why so many policy initiatives don’t work is because the people that are truly impacted are not centered, nor involved, in the actual policy development.

After 10 years of work, our Campaign was successful. Not only were we able to legalize street vending in Los Angeles, but we were able to advance a statewide policy that decriminalized street vending across the state of California. This new law, SB 946, which went into effect in the beginning of 2020, now requires that cities who wish to fine vendors also create a pathway to formalize them.

One of my partners from East LA Community Corporation (ELACC) began to talk about our work not as a campaign, but as a movement. I think she’s right. Despite our wins, the work for equitable policies that support food entrepreneurs continues, even in the realm of street vending. The first street vendor permits in LA were distributed during the first week of 2020, but it was immediately clear that there was a serious lack of education. And within the second week of permits being available, we were hearing reports that some vendors were being victimized by permit scams. The processes within the County Public Health Department offers a new front for policy change. Despite the milestones in the City of LA the County level, food vendors
who are required to receive a permit from the County Health Department face expensive fees and cumbersome and complicated processes to approve their equipment. These systems are not easily accessible to monolingual, immigrant entrepreneurs.

For me, street vending is an important industry because it cuts across many sectors. Street vendors not only activate our streets, they support local businesses, hire local workers, and often serve as the sole source of retail food in under-invested neighborhoods. For many of us in the campaign, street vendors represent an important sector of our economy, that while neglected, remains an important bedrock of local business ecosystems. The successes of the LA Street Vendor Campaign once again illustrate the power of people; working people with real experiences driving policy change.