In many low-income neighborhoods, it’s easier to buy a Big Mac than a head of lettuce.

Residents of neighborhoods without access to fresh, affordable food suffer high rates of preventable disease and die earlier — by decades — than those in more affluent areas. Investing in local food systems not only boosts access to quality foods and improves health, but can build community and jump-start inclusive economic growth. Neighborhoods become more vibrant and cohesive.

That’s the goal of Fresh, Local and Equitable (FreshLo), a joint initiative of The Kresge Foundation’s Arts & Culture and Health programs. Launched in 2016, FreshLo supports neighborhood-scale food-oriented development projects — from gardens and incubator kitchens to community markets, while engaging residents through Creative Placemaking, or the integration of arts, culture and community-engaged design into development and planning.

In 2016, Kresge awarded FreshLo planning grants to partners in 26 communities, and in late 2017, selected 23 of them for two-year implementation grants.

"For folks embedded in the community, this is not exactly a new idea," says Tatiana Hernandez, senior program officer with Kresge’s Arts & Culture Program. "It is human nature to use creative expression to engage people."

But “Naming it, and including creative expression in the program design,” is part of what makes FreshLo unique, Hernandez adds.
In High Demand
The urgent need for this work was evident from the start, says Stacey Barbas, senior program officer for the Health team at Kresge. In fact, the more than 500 applications for FreshLo funding set a Kresge record for responses.

FreshLo’s grantmaking process involved grantee organizations and area residents every step of the way. During the planning phase, grantees were able to dive deeply into local issues and to empower residents to design projects that reflect community priorities. That’s because FreshLo grantees were encouraged to tailor their projects to residents’ concerns rather than adhere to rigid funding guidelines.

Grantees even helped design their own evaluations, enabling them to set benchmarks and define success on their own terms. Kresge staff and consultants provided intensive support throughout this phase.

FreshLo supports organizations and neighborhoods that have long been overlooked by national foundations — neighborhoods like the South Side of Billings, Montana, for one. Located literally on the other side of the tracks from Billings’ more prosperous downtown, the historic South Side is on the rebound after years of neglect. Burned-out buildings dot its potholed streets, and food and other necessities are scarce. The last remaining grocery store closed in 2013.

Looking for solutions, the Healthy by Design coalition — which includes RiverStone Health and Yellowstone County’s health department — applied for and won a FreshLo planning grant to improve food access while revitalizing the South Side.

“The Kresge planning grant enabled us to spend a year listening — asking residents what would make the neighborhood healthier and more vibrant,” says Healthy by Design’s Community Health Improvement Manager Melissa Henderson.

Henderson and her colleagues went into the community — to the senior center, middle school, bus stops and mobile home parks. They showed residents a visual display of possible neighborhood improvements and gave each one a few pinto beans to vote on priorities. When the votes were tallied, the winners included
The Kresge planning grant enabled us to spend a year listening — asking residents what would make the neighborhood healthier and more vibrant.”

—Melissa Henderson, Healthy by Design, Billings, Montana

a grocery store, community gardens and a campaign to build neighborhood pride.

Those plans are barreling ahead with the help of a Kresge implementation grant that followed the planning phase. One working group is exploring options for a grocery store. Another is launching community gardening efforts. The coalition is also working with incarcerated women to increase production in their therapy garden and distribute the bounty to South Side residents in need.

The project also engages local artists in Creative Placemaking strategies to help integrate arts, culture and community-engaged design into the neighborhood fabric. Those include wraps that transform traffic signal boxes into public art, signs that brand the South Side as "the bright side of the tracks" and other artful touches.

"I like the positiveness of seeing the South Side as a welcome mat for Billings, rather than just being swept under the mat," says Linda Deavila, a 40-year neighborhood resident.

Supporting local leaders like Deavila is key to the project’s success. Deavila attended a national convening of FreshLo grantees in Memphis, Tennessee, then came back to take on a leadership role.

"The gals at RiverStone are always getting others in the community to take the lead," Deavila says.

Overcoming Barriers

A thousand miles west, Fresno, California, faces a similar dearth of healthy food options. Though it is located in the heart of California’s Central Valley, where rich soils produce much of the nation’s fruits and vegetables, Fresno is among the poorest, most food-insecure cities in the country.

Those problems are especially acute in Fresno’s urban-industrial Blackstone corridor, flanked by strip malls, car lots and fast-food restaurants. Blackstone is rich in diversity, with sizable Latinx, Laotian, Hmong, African American and Native American populations. But the neighborhood’s food offerings don’t reflect those traditions.

Fresno Metro Ministry — a multicultural, multifaith community organization that has served the city for nearly 50 years — received a FreshLo grant for its What’s Cooking Fresno? incubator project. Fresno Metro Ministry surveyed residents and found aspiring chefs and food entrepreneurs who faced barriers to achieving their dreams. The Fresno team worked with the chefs to organize pop-up festivals with themed dishes from various cultures.

Fresno Metro Ministry also employs what Executive Director Keith Berghold calls "software" and "hardware." The "software" is a recently launched, eight-month training program for food entrepreneurs that teaches interpersonal skills, leadership and management, culinary and technical skills and marketing.
Meanwhile, Fresno Metro Ministry is partnering with the local housing authority to create the “hardware” — a planned mixed-use, transit-oriented development with affordable housing, an incubator kitchen, food kiosks and community space.

“We want to fill the space with art and music, to make it a place of culture,” says Chanel Ruiz-Mendez, Fresno Metro Ministry’s deputy director, “a place where you can listen to music and try different foods.”

**Nurturing Entrepreneurs**

Across the country in New Brunswick, New Jersey, Elijah’s Promise received a FreshLo grant to build community with a public market — the Mercado Esperanza. The monthly market celebrates entrepreneurial spirit, culinary and cultural heritage and the artistic soul of New Brunswick’s Esperanza neighborhood.

Elijah’s Promise has long understood the community-building power of food. Since 1989, the group has operated a soup kitchen in New Brunswick, where a third of residents live in poverty and almost two-thirds struggle to meet daily living expenses. Over the years, the group evolved into a comprehensive food systems agency with social services, culinary job training, urban agriculture and food entrepreneurship programs.

For its FreshLo grant, Elijah’s Promise partnered with other established community groups — New Brunswick Tomorrow and coLAB Arts — to increase the project’s success in outreach and Creative Placemaking.

They discovered that many residents had side hustles selling food, clothing and crafts and wanted a market for those products. As in Fresno, aspiring food vendors faced daunting barriers. And members of the Esperanza neighborhood’s large Oaxacan community longed for their children to experience the vibrant markets they had grown up with in Mexico.

And so Mercado Esperanza was launched. The first step was to create a council of local residents that worked to develop a plan for a flexible community market where residents gather, shop, sell, dance, perform and otherwise express creativity and entrepreneurship. In addition, the project works to connect aspiring food vendors to commercial kitchen space, liability insurance and bulk purchasing plans.

The Mercado’s collaborative approach is encouraged by FreshLo’s sector-crossing emphasis on food, health, economic development, equity and Creative Placemaking. And often the journey is just as important as the final destination.

“Sometimes the integrated activity manifests as a product — such as the transformation of a blighted neighborhood,” says Regina Smith, managing director of Kresge’s Arts & Culture Program. “But that’s not the end-all. The process of working with residents — and placing beneficiaries at the center of decision-making — is equally important.”