

REPORT

# Hyper-Local Investment Essential for Community Survival Through Crisis



**FreshLo**<sup>®</sup>  
Fresh, Local & Equitable

THE  
KRESGE  
FOUNDATION

## Hyper-Local Investment Essential for Community Survival Through Crisis



In the midst of a national pandemic that is reshaping the world, The Kresge Foundation’s Fresh, Local & Equitable Initiative has found an important path forward for philanthropy: hyper-local neighborhood investment. With FreshLo, Kresge is the first national funder to intentionally integrate food, art and community

to drive equitable neighborhood revitalization. The neighborhood-specific funding has been supporting powerful, innovative work for several years and is now also yielding different dividends in the face of the COVID-19 pandemic. FreshLo grantee partners are based in historically-plundered neighborhoods and quickly pivoted to community support — showing just how essential neighborhood ties are in times of crisis.

**Lessons learned from the FreshLo Initiative point to how philanthropy can invest in groups with participatory governance where local, inclusive economies reflect and meet the needs of the community at all times, including crises. Toplines of this learning include:**

1. Hyper-local investments are critical to ensure those historically left out of power have the infrastructure, networks and resources to weather crises.
2. These investments need to be strategic, and to be successful should:
  - a. center residents in leadership, planning, and implementation;
  - b. be for the long haul, as results won’t happen overnight;
  - c. strengthen the cultural fabric of neighborhoods — especially through art and food.

In the midst of the pandemic, grantees pivoted to provide support for their communities when government support was lacking. But that's only possible when neighborhood cultural institutions are well-resourced for the long haul.



## Examples of How Hyper-Local Philanthropy Supports Adaptability and Resilience

**The Binghamton Development Corporation (BDC)** has a long history of building trust and relationships in the Binghamton neighborhood of Memphis, TN— where it established the first grocery store in the area, a food desert. With FreshLo, BDC developed its commercial kitchen which trains new food entrepreneurs in English, Spanish, and Arabic, but had to cease its standard programming when the pandemic began to support adequate social distancing. Despite this setback, BDC's long-standing community ties mean it has still been able to support local entrepreneurs during a time when business opportunities are scarce. For example, BDC secured a catering deal for one of its local entrepreneurs to prepare food for emergency medical staff, helping that entrepreneur earn critical income while also supporting frontline workers.

**In Minnesota, Dream of Wild Health**, a Native-led community organization, closed on a land deal that tripled its acreage of farmland with support from Kresge. As this team pivots to meet the growing food needs of their community in the pandemic, Dream of Wild Health

found that its sustainable farming practices, which are informed by indigenous knowledge and traditions, are key in this time. Dream of Wild Health has been able to cultivate its land to yield more fresh produce for their community, including a program that delivers food to elders who are at higher risk from the pandemic.

**Planting Justice in Oakland, CA** is a grassroots organization that works to empower people impacted by mass incarceration and other social inequities. The FreshLo funds have helped to support living wage jobs for formerly-incarcerated individuals at a plant nursery in Sobrante Park neighborhood. Planting Justice has also supported local healing circles and celebrations of community and food. During the pandemic, the Planting Justice team has shifted its efforts to providing immediate critical produce and smoothie distribution to more than 1,000 people each week. Planting Justice has taken on 40 youth interns, engaging them in meaningful activities, paying them for their time and flowing money to their families.

Responding to dire health disparities and a lack of healthy, affordable food in its neighborhoods, **the Montbello Organizing Committee (MOC) in Denver, CO** began just five years ago with \$5,000. Now it is developing a multi-million dollar grocery-anchored

cultural hub with housing that is designed and run by and for local residents. When COVID-19 arrived it left many people without jobs, health insurance and other resources. The MOC team immediately responded by moving to organizing and leading emergency food distribution, working with partners to get food to more than 800 people a day. This work is a testament to MOC's built trust with and commitment to its neighbors.

## Lessons from FreshLo

In the report “**Cultivating Community Across the Country,**” social sector consulting group Learning for Action shares the findings from its independent evaluation of the FreshLo Initiative, and the 23 communities the initiative supports. Since 2015, over the course of the initiative:

- More than 1,000 artists and culture bearers were involved
- More than 6,000 local residents were able to participate meaningfully in community development planning, and
- 80 infrastructure sites were directly supported.

To download the full report, visit [kresge.org/freshlo](https://kresge.org/freshlo).



Here's what they found:

## **Integrate Food and Creative Placemaking to Actualize Community Visions**

The 23 FreshLo communities began their partnership with the Kresge Foundation with a wealth of strengths and lived experiences that they have used for years to resist and rise in the face of a host of challenges, including insufficient access to fresh and affordable food; poverty; and historical and ongoing racism and trauma. Their strategies include sharing cultural traditions; passing down community and family stories; organizing for change; growing and preparing food; starting businesses; and building transformational relationships, among others.

When creative placemaking and food-related strategies are employed together, they offer a uniquely powerful pathway for communities to achieve desired outcomes in a way that is inclusive of residents' visions, interests, strengths and identities.

## Food and Creative Placemaking Work in Practice

The FreshLo communities are building greater autonomy by exercising control across different points in the food production chain: growing food, preparing food, selling and distributing food, and sharing food as a community.

When art is infused during the planning stages of a project, it can help to support an authentic vision that emerges from the community's unique interests. Two examples include:

- Organizers at **La Mujer Obrera in El Paso, TX** didn't intentionally pursue a strategy focused on food and Creative Placemaking, but each of the components of its program — from a community farm to open air markets — emerged organically from community residents' interests and strengths, including a wealth of ancestral knowledge and practices.
- **Partnership for Community Action in Albuquerque, NM** held 15 agricultural workshops to engage the community in celebrating the South Valley's strengths. More than 150 residents were able to participate and share their hopes and visions for the South Valley.

## Signs of Success

By integrating Creative Placemaking and food-based strategies, FreshLo sites have helped expand the conventional understanding of community development and how change happens.

As a result of their efforts, the FreshLo communities have built stronger relationships among residents; changed community narratives and physically transformed their neighborhoods.

FreshLo sites have also made progress toward longer-term outcomes, including promoting community health and wellness; supporting economic development; and strengthening community organizing.

*“One of the most revolutionary, radical and powerful things that you can do is to grow your own food, and to center growing food, and to center cultural experiences and to draw the connection with Indigenous cultures and Indigenous Black and Brown cultures who have had food and what is now considered to be art... Those have always been core practices and principles and components of our ways of life from the beginning of time.”*

- SOUTHSIDE RISING, COMMUNITY AMBASSADOR

## Build Local Democratic Economies with Community Leadership

The FreshLo communities deepen equitable development in two interrelated ways: by building local economic and political systems designed to work in the interests of current residents.

### Claiming Community Power

The FreshLo projects are designed to support traditionally marginalized community members' governance over the planning and implementation of neighborhood revitalization projects.

Through local participatory governance, each FreshLo community has adopted structures and processes that vary along a dimension of community participation from resident involvement to resident leadership.

### Building Economic Systems for Equitable Outcomes

FreshLo communities have set up the structures and processes of participatory governance that are critical ingredients for democratic economies.

Though each community is different, every FreshLo community has worked to construct local inclusive economies and brought in elements designed to support people to thrive.

Two examples worth noting:

- **Elijah's Promise in New Brunswick, NJ** built "Friends of the Mercado," a steering committee of local residents that guides the overall direction of Mercado Esperanza, a monthly community market celebrating the food, art, and culture of New Brunswick's diverse Latinx community.
- The Center for **Great Neighborhoods of Covington, KY** also built its local reputation through decades of strong resident-led organizing. Since the turn of the century, the Center has prioritized supporting residents' efforts to improve their neighborhoods by offering training and meeting spaces. Now, residents are steering the organization as it embarks on a new revitalization effort in Covington's historic MLK Corridor.

## What This Means Amidst a Global Pandemic

As every industry across the nation has been upended by the coronavirus pandemic, every inequality has risen to the surface. In the absence of adequate national leadership, neighborhoods are banding together to keep each other fed, housed, and protected. This moment has shown in times of crisis, we must lean on our neighbors.

The FreshLo Initiative has shown that place-based hyper-local investments are essential to preparing communities for inevitable crises. We've also found that centering this investment around food and culture builds a stronger sense of place and community than culture-blind investment. And finally, we've found that long-term investments in leaders and communities that have been historically under-resourced and ignored can yield huge dividends.

### Our recommendations to other philanthropists in this moment:

1. Hyper-local neighborhood investments are incredibly effective.
2. Local leadership and decision making is essential to this effectiveness.
3. Centering investments in food and art creates a sense of place and community.
4. Invest for the long-term.

Historically under-resourced and marginalized neighborhoods are facing unprecedented strain at this moment. It is essential that neighborhoods have the infrastructure, ties, and supported leadership to meet the needs of this moment. And it's not just coronavirus — from storms to gentrification and corporate pollution, strong and resourced neighborhoods are better prepared to survive and thrive in crises. The FreshLo model is a model of a path forward to support community development without driving displacement, and to ensure people in under-resourced communities have the support to innovate and lift up their neighbors. Local knowledge, relationships, and community are the strongest safety net philanthropy can support.

## FreshLo By the Numbers

FreshLo communities have made significant progress in advancing efforts in their neighborhoods to create greater access for residents to healthy and affordable food and expanded economic opportunity through food enterprises in a way that honors and activates the cultural roots of the community.

For three years, the 23 FreshLo communities have kept track of achievements of progress on a common set of indicators designed to provide one part of the collective story of FreshLo and the progress communities have made towards shared goals. These numbers show the progress that was directly supported by the FreshLo grant and the progress radiating out into the larger *FreshLo ecosystem*, which also includes organizations, enterprises, and entrepreneurs that are partnering with or alongside FreshLo grantees.

### Greater Access to Healthy and Affordable Food

FreshLo grantees opened new, or expanded existing, food enterprises

99

enterprises directly supported by FreshLo where healthy and affordable food is sold



&

190

enterprises in the FreshLo ecosystem where healthy and affordable food is sold

166

enterprises directly supported by FreshLo where affordable food is sold that is also healthy and/or culturally relevant



&

296

enterprises in the FreshLo ecosystem where affordable food is sold that is also healthy and/or culturally relevant

88

enterprises directly supported by FreshLo where healthy and/or culturally relevant food is distributed/shared



&

169

enterprises in the FreshLo ecosystem where healthy and/or culturally relevant food is distributed/shared

### Expanded Opportunity through New Food Enterprises

357

community residents received pay for working at FreshLo-supported food enterprises



## FreshLo By the Numbers

### Revitalization in Low-Income Neighborhoods

**6,232** community residents...

&

**490** artists/culture bearers...

...participated meaningfully in planning for community development efforts



**80** infrastructure sites directly supported by FreshLo...

&

**140** infrastructure sites in the FreshLo ecosystem...

...serve as gathering places for the larger community



### Accelerating & Embedding Creative Placemaking\*

**1,248** artists and culture-bearers were directly involved in FreshLo



**148** spaces where culinary, visual, performing, and/or reflective arts programs and activities regularly take place



**83,465** residents participated in celebrations of community heritage/identity



**74,017** residents participated in a cultural event celebrating local heritage and/or ancestral traditions



**16,704** residents created/influenced narrative of place through an art-based method



**4,086** Residents deliberated/considered a planning or policy issue using an arts-based method



\* Numbers for participating residents may include some duplicates across years of data



## About FreshLo

Fresh, Local & Equitable (FreshLo) is a Kresge Foundation grantmaking initiative that seeks to improve access to healthy food, ignite entrepreneurship, spur economic development and integrate arts, culture and community-engaged design – which we call Creative Placemaking – to spark neighborhood revitalization in cities around the country.

With FreshLo, the Kresge Foundation is the first national funder to intentionally integrate food, art, and community to drive equitable neighborhood revitalization.

The initiative builds on and enhances existing community assets and strengths and uplifts community leaders to ensure that development is led by and for its residents.

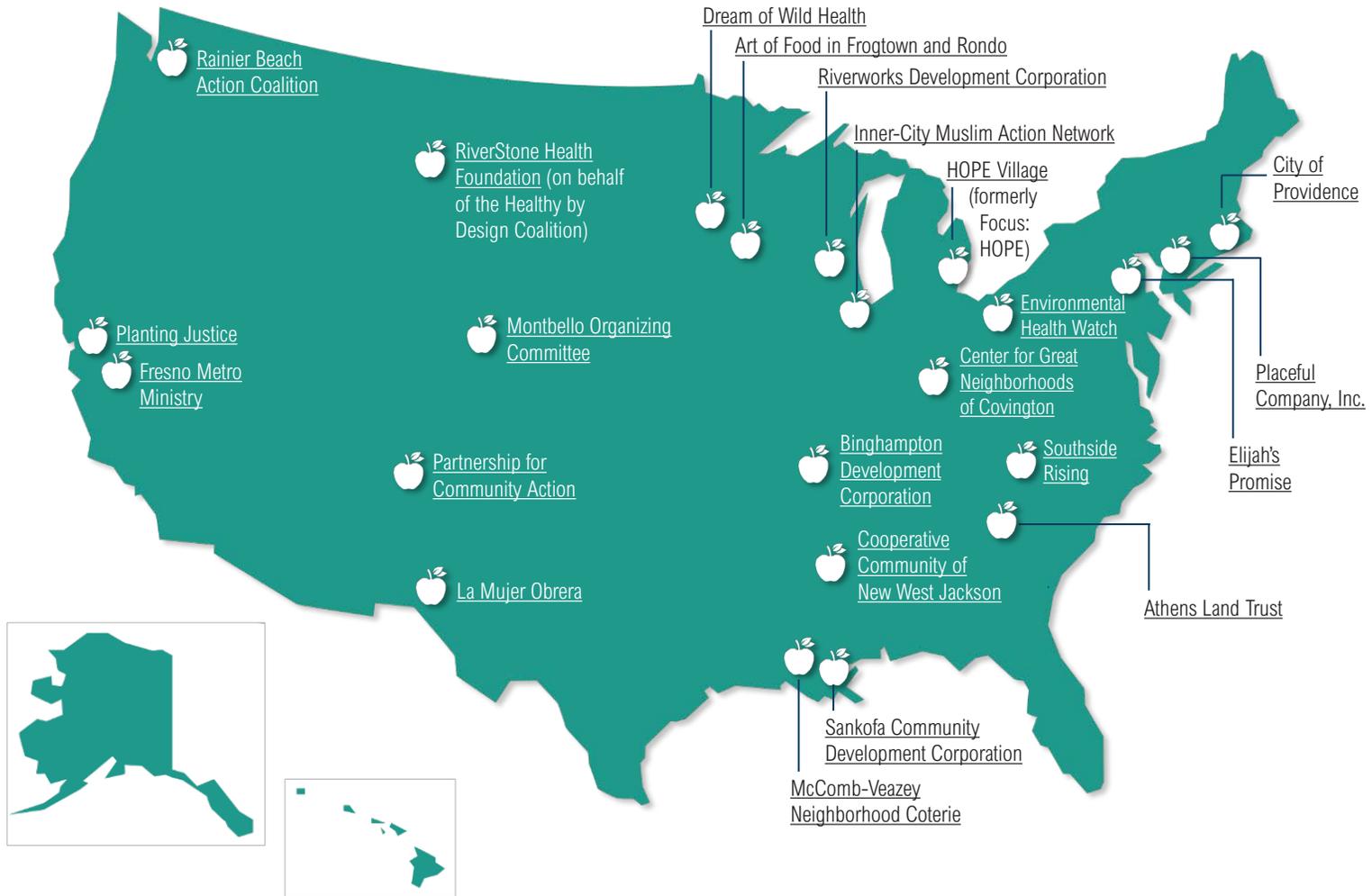
FreshLo seeks to:

- Expand economic pathways, increase political capital and improve the health and well-being of people with low incomes in communities that have historically experienced underinvestment.
- Build an engaged network of community leaders that organize and advocate for equitable economic development
- Create stronger neighborhoods by bringing philanthropy, community and business leaders together to support equitable development in a way that authentically centers local culture and community well-being.
- Celebrate cultural expression, improve access to healthy affordable food, and build social cohesion to strengthen ties across groups and create strong, resilient communities

Since its launch in 2015, FreshLo has provided \$8.4 million in grant funding, as well as technical assistance and learning opportunities, to 23 organizations from around the country.

For more information, email [freshlo@kresge.org](mailto:freshlo@kresge.org).

## FreshLo Map





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