

Zip code: 98108

## **Leveraging Neighborhood Expertise to Cultivate a Healthier South Park**

The South Park neighborhood of Seattle, located in the Duwamish Valley, is rich with cultural identity and deep connections to food and agricultural practices spanning the globe—Latinx, Southeast Asian, Native Hawaiian, Pacific Islander, African American and more. Despite these robust ties, South Park is a USDA designated food desert where access to healthy and affordable food is limited, and a significant number of residents are more than a half mile from the nearest supermarket. Residents also disproportionately lack other basics like clean air<sup>1</sup>, clean water, safe sidewalks<sup>2</sup> and financial opportunity when compared to other areas of Seattle.

The food access challenges in South Park aren't a coincidence, food deserts predominantly affect communities of color in King County<sup>3</sup> and are a result of racially driven practices, like redlining, that intentionally hinder opportunities for health and prosperity. In South Park, nearly 36% of families fall below 138% of the federal poverty line and the median family income is less than \$50,000 per year<sup>4</sup>.

South Park, surrounded by industrial land and cut in half by a freight highway, also ranks poorly for most environmental health factors; it has the highest number of known or suspected contaminated waste sites in the Valley and is located along the Lower Duwamish Waterway Superfund site, designated by the Environmental Protection Act as one of the most polluted rivers in the country<sup>5</sup>.

As a result of these conditions, South Park residents experience higher rates of heart disease, diabetes, cancer and mental illness than other Seattle neighborhoods<sup>6</sup>.

Cultivate South Park, a resident-led community development organization, has united volunteers, advocates and leaders to mobilize the neighborhood's resources to co-create a more equitable South Park. Part of that equation is to find innovative solutions so that all families have access to healthy foods in a culturally reflective and responsible way.

"We all take pride in this work, pride in community. We recognize that the gifts and strengths of our work come from community members, primarily from a diverse and beautiful group of leaders and mothers. Our impact is a result of the contributions of our talented volunteers and contractors. At Cultivate, we are here to celebrate their strengths," said Mónica Perez, Director at Urban Fresh Food Collective.

The American Heart Association joined forces with Cultivate South Park to bolster Cultivate's commitment to identify, connect and celebrate the talents present in the neighborhood. By leveraging Cultivate's cultural expertise and lived experiences to steer our collaboration, we developed a nutrition policy and community-driven solutions to increase their capacity to provide more produce and perishable cultural food staples. These efforts increase access to nutritious, culturally inclusive foods that address the neighborhood's most prevalent health inequities for an average of 2,500 South Park residents each month.

In response to the lack of brick-and-mortar grocery stores that provide affordable and nutritious foods, Cultivate developed the Urban Fresh Food Collective. The Collective has grown from a small market stand to four large-scale neighbor-to-neighbor programs including El Mercadito food pantry (Casa Orilla) and farmers market, Sharing Tables community meals and home delivery that systemically ensures all

residents of South Park have easily accessible, no-cost food and hygiene supplies. The Urban Fresh Food Collective supports hundreds of households each month and in 2022, distributed over 80,000 pounds of food to South Park neighbors.

“We believe that when you recognize your community, your community will heal,” said Gari Watkins, Operations Manager at Cultivate South Park. “It is Cultivate South Park’s goal to champion community-driven change that transforms the health of our neighbors through sharing knowledge, power, resources and vital health information.”

In September 2022, the American Heart Association invested funding for a commercial refrigerator. This addition has allowed Cultivate to procure and distribute substantially more produce by equipping them to accept more donations from existing relationships and their buy-out program for El Mercadito farmers market. It also provides the opportunity to pursue new purchasing and gleaning partnerships with local Black, Indigenous, Latinx and other POC (people of color) farms like Tierra Libertad and Marra Farm Coalition. In turn, their fruit and vegetable distribution capacity grows.

Once the fridge was installed in a new outdoor shelter and began to fill with produce, the Association identified an opportunity to help guide Cultivate’s food provisions according to the [Healthy Eating Research \(HER\) Nutrition Guidelines](#). The nutrition policy also communicates Cultivate’s dedication to social justice and the reduction of chronic illnesses that stem from a legacy of continued marginalization. Our team conducted working sessions to support Cultivate in developing a policy that outlines their values and goal to meet the nutritional and cultural needs of their vibrant but often under resourced community.

“This nutrition policy reflects the amazing work of Mónica, Gari and the entire team. Providing access to healthy, culturally relevant food is a reflection of the love that is in this neighborhood. It was volunteers from our own neighborhood who spent a Saturday afternoon helping Mónica install the new refrigerator,” said Crystal Brown, Executive Director at Cultivate South Park.

The policy was adopted in February 2023 and highlights items that meet nutritional needs and prioritizes staples that reflect the many cultures that make up the South Park neighborhood. The policy references [OLDWAYS](#) which provides recipes and culturally inclusive food pyramids based on global heritage diets as an alternative to USDA’s MyPlate tool.

It also directs staff to avoid purchasing items that detract from good heart health, such as sugar-sweetened beverages and candy. In acknowledgement of culturally significant holidays which may include occasional distribution of sweets, Cultivate’s policy advocates for funding that will allow their team to explore healthy ingredient swaps in traditional recipes.

To center community feedback and choice, Cultivate conducted a community survey to inform the nutrition policy, food pantry operations, nutrition programs and a donor guide. With implementation support from the Association, Cultivate surveyed over 226 households. Cultivate’s donor guide steers donors toward requested items like fresh produce, spices, fish and Halal and Kosher offerings and provides a list of local, culturally specific grocery stores.

For additional resources and networking, our team connected Cultivate to the Washington Food Coalition, a coalition of emergency food providers that share collective strengths to provide a robust food safety net for communities throughout Washington State. This connection allows Cultivate to take

advantage of support from the Health Centered Food Banking project which aims to create healthier food environments. The Health Centered Food Banking project's nutrition consultant oversaw the development of the donor guide and nutrition policy and facilitated translation to three languages commonly spoken by South Park residents. Cultivate plans to implement [SWAP](#) (supporting wellness at pantries), a program designed to promote the donation and selection of nutritious foods at food pantries by ranking foods according to evidence-based standards. Through the Health Centered Food Banking project, SWAP materials and training are available free of charge to help Cultivate highlight healthy foods in Casa Orilla.

Cultivate South Park's commitment to community extends beyond food access. Rooted in love and joy, their team creates innovative solutions in environmental, housing and economic justice. They conduct outreach to connect residents to local resources and federal programs, host a South Park Art & Cultural Collective to engage youth and celebrate community gifts, and even hold regular lead testing events of household objects. Most importantly, Cultivate provides a space for healing and shares knowledge and power to transform the health of their neighborhood.