

### **Guide for Rapid Response Interviews with CFPAC Staff**

Developed by Rowan Obach, Paulina Vaca, Maddi Perdue, Jack Myers, Tania Schusler and Ma'raj Sheikh

#### **Objectives**

- Understand interviewee's motivation, philosophy, or principles guiding their work with CFPAC's COVID-19 Rapid Response effort, from here on out referred to simply as Rapid Response.
- Understand the narrative surrounding individual working groups within the Rapid Response, including how they formed, evolved, challenges, successes, and future directions.
- Gain insights into specific practices, tools, and strategies that emerged out of the Rapid Response effort.
- Gain insights into contextual forces that support or impede the Rapid Response Effort.

#### **Prior to interview**

- Interviewer(s) will familiarize themselves with staff member's bio and CFPAC notes from prior calls of the working group to be discussed:  
[https://drive.google.com/drive/folders/1gyH8\\_IROPWQE1uB3-r364pkigtX0LQAL?usp=sharing](https://drive.google.com/drive/folders/1gyH8_IROPWQE1uB3-r364pkigtX0LQAL?usp=sharing)
- Confirm permission to record (recording will be deleted after transcription occurs)

#### **Interview Questions** (to be adapted as needed in context of interview)

1. What role did you play in starting the Rapid Response effort and how has your role evolved since?
2. How did the working groups first form? What were the goals behind forming these groups? In what ways did the groups achieve these goals or not?
3. Which working groups are you most involved in? How have these groups evolved over time? How have the goals shifted and through what process?
4. What root challenges have you encountered in convening the Rapid Response effort and making progress towards the intended goals of this effort?
5. In your perspective, in what ways has \_\_\_\_\_ working group benefited the communities you are working with?
6. In your observation, what are some specific impacts that have emerged out of \_\_\_\_\_ working group?
7. What do you hope will be the long-term impacts coming out of the Rapid Response effort?
8. How has your identity informed your work in the Rapid Response Effort? (cultural affiliations, position within systems of hierarchy and privilege)
9. What has been the most meaningful aspect of working on the Rapid Response effort for you? What are you most excited or passionate about with this work?

10. If we were to interview participants from the Rapid Response Effort, what specifically would you like to learn about their experience?
11. Is there anything else that you would like share with us to complete our understanding of the Rapid Response Effort?

**Thank you for participating!**

<https://luc.zoom.us/j/9593465597>

## **Rodger Cooley – Executive Director (CFPAC)**

Interviewed by Paulina Vaca & Tania Schusler on November 10, 2020

I'm the executive director of the organization. I guess it was the end of that middle week of March where things really started heating up around COVID nationally and locally. And I think CPS that Friday announced that they were going to be shutting down temporarily or at least going virtual. So, then we started seeing the mandating of restaurants being closed, bars being closed, a lot of the institutions who are buying and serving food, and a lot of folks getting laid off immediately. Recognizing that a lot of interruptions were happening through the food system, we started having conversations about that early that next week and said, "What if we just see who's interested in coming together?" And then the next morning we had our first call. Then we proposed breaking into more or less the groups we're still maintaining now.

We were like, "Oh, this person, this person, this person, this organization might make sense or might be interested in this." And then some folks shared [the invitation] with others – kind of representing what we thought were kind of broad sectors that we had relationships with. A lot of local farmers, a lot of urban growers, people in public health, some folks who work with farmers down state outside of the city, regionally, also folks who represented different networks around farmers – specific producers – folks who are more on the food service end, some wholesaler folks. And then a lot of folks who were doing on the ground stuff around pantries, emergency food work, the Chicago Food Depository. Just broad swaths. Within a day, we put it out and twelve hours later **eighty people showed up on the first call**, which was really cool.

A lot of these calls, for the first few weeks, we were doing every week for the first few months until June. And then we started spreading them out as it moved out of the immediate crisis. But we had a sense – food workers were big, producers, funders, people who would interact with funders, or philanthropists. But that group immediately did not want to be segregated out. So, we ended up folding in, assuming that kind of jumped into other ones and they would participate how they wanted. Also, food businesses, but that has been much more of a research focus. Emergency food has been one of the biggest ones. Over the summer, **we've transitioned the name to thinking more holistically and for the future calling it the Resilient Food Group**. So how do we respond in a more holistic way (which is always kind of a tension with emergency food work historically). We have not dealt with it a lot over time partly because in Chicago, the Food Depository and their pantry network is set. They have a lot of control over that space. So we have been focusing on more integrative policies and projects.

**One of the things with COVID is the need doubled, tripled, quadrupled in some communities for emergency food access.** So, it stretched them. They were well beyond their capacity to manage it. They needed to bring in a lot of other partners and be a lot more engaged with the larger food system. Starting to think about how smaller scale projects, restaurants, and folks who are doing catering could be part, so doing boxed meal delivery as well. Getting connected to local farmers and producers as part of that work is sparking ongoing conversations.

Farmers, especially smaller scale farmers who already had a sense of doing direct marketing (meaning they are selling more to their immediate consumer, i.e. a household rather than a

restaurant, a wholesaler, a grocer, or an institution) were able to pivot fairly quickly as COVID evolved. In some cases, small scale farmers were aided by farmer's markets or farmer's market groups who helped develop online sales especially when Chicago was really slow in responding to COVID. It took a lot of work to push Chicago to reopen markets safely, even though other cities in other parts of the country, New York City and L.A., rapidly took in CDC recommendations and were able to reopen within a week. It took a month, two months to really push Chicago and be like, "Hey, we can do this safely! Let us do this well. If we follow these guidelines, we will be okay. It's an outdoor activity with masks, hand sanitizer, spacing, and folks not handling produce. There are ways to do this well."

So these markets had to quickly set up websites, exchanges, and delivery programs to get the food into place. There is a really big demand especially for what's called a CSA: Community Supported Agriculture. You would get a box on a regular basis from a farmer. These farmers have done really well and there has been a lot of growth. In some cases, if they had the capacity to do a CSA and get online, they did really well. For folks who were dependent on farmers markets and who didn't make this pivot, it's been a bit more challenging.

Within the Rapid Response, all the CFPAC staff contribute in some way and rotate the leadership on the Rhizome calls, which is bringing all the different groups together. I have been mostly engaged with the Emergency Food / Resilient Food call in part with Aasia who is our primary lead. I attend as many as I can which is most of them. We keep having consistent participation between 15 to 30 folks every other week; highlighting the needs that are there, the spirit of collaboration that people want, and people trying to find partners. Sometimes we will have folks who rotate into these calls. They'll get connections that they need and then they'll move on to doing the work. Other folks will stay consistently engaged, partly to hear what other things are going on, but also to make other connections.

**The Emergency Food / Resilient Food call needs are usually around where I can get food to redistribute into direct communities.** In some cases, it's almost 100 percent volunteer networks like these mutual aid groups and societies that have formed, that are organized via Slack or email groups. Or they're looking for space to put their storage of food, like a refrigerated cold storage (one of the bigger collaborative needs). Matching up with where our food distribution is coming from, whether wholesalers or through these complicated programs the USDA has put in place, or through existing networks like the Food Depository has, or other companies who are making donations off and on. There was an email last week about a business that's shutting down but had a ton of frozen goods that they wanted to push out into these networks -- so being present and aware of those opportunities. Also, **getting matched up with folks in their neighborhood or community that they didn't know were doing the same thing. Finding those opportunities for collaboration, or people who have a truck who can do distribution with them, like a refrigerated truck, or sources of funding.** We really try to push out every grant that we see come through as well. In some cases, we've acted as a fiscal agent or helped facilitate partnerships for different grants as well.

There's been some ebb and flow in how these needs have shifted over time. It's gone down but in some communities it's been pretty constant. I do not think it is near where it was at

different peaks, but folks, especially folks who are in the restaurant worker space or working at restaurants, are getting concerned that with new COVID shutdowns in public spaces where there's feeding -- where people go to eat -- that they as workers are going to get cut out again when those businesses shut down. Also, either finding employment, which is important, so how to repurpose the restaurants or caterers to be providing labor for providing emergency food is important. So, folks are staying at work, which keeps them from needing the food supports as well. There is a real assumption that the demand is going to remain high until COVID is dealt with meaningfully so employment can come back up, especially recognizing some of these folks are some of the most vulnerable. Some of them may be undocumented and some of them may be already in tenuous situations where they are at a minimum wage job or *below* minimum wage in the food sectors. They are already fairly vulnerable to economic shock.

One of our partners is the ROC: Restaurant Opportunity Center. They work with and represent restaurant workers as a labor group. They are part of our Rapid Response. Sometimes they will be part of the emergency food work or part of the worker calls. They have done actions and helped support funds to support folks who are coming out of work. ROC have especially done a lot around working conditions around PPE and safer working conditions in the COVID context.

It's our understanding that [call participants] were able to get close resources that they needed. They were able to develop partnerships with folks in other organizations who could help them get direct either monetary supports, food supports, staff supports, or get directly connected to the right people that they needed to talk to. So really being able to channel and more directly find who they needed when they needed it I think is really valuable in one space, rather than having to hunt on their own. But also know that they were in a space with folks who are aligned with them fairly well with kind of the same set of values and goals.

There's some collaborations that I know did come out of Rapid Response. One that we're calling *The Squad*, that we've been an integral part of, connected the Urban Growers Collective, CTU (Centro de Trabajadores Unidos) based in the southeast side, ChiFresh Kitchen (which is an emergent worker cooperative), Midwest Foods (who is a produce wholesaler), which helped provide low-cost food boxes that got redistributed, and some UGC produce. Several thousand meals weekly were coming out of that program and were part of that as well. And then there's several other partnerships that came out too.

Some of the bigger challenges we had early in the Rapid Response was responding quickly and bringing everyone in at the same time in an emergency fashion. Looking back and moving forward we made a transition or pivot mid-stream in May or early June. Some of this was contextualized of course not just with COVID, but also George Floyd, uprisings, and Black Lives Matter becoming much more part of the conversation. At the same time, **we are re-highlighting that kind of work and equity focus. We were not as clear about how we wanted the meetings to proceed and be engaged in terms of paying attention to power dynamics and paying attention to equity issues within the space.** There were very clear microaggressions, and apparently macroaggressions, that were happening. For some white participants, they were blind to this. There were a few crazy email exchanges that I have where it

was like, “Nope, we need these folks to do it because we know that they’re . . .” -- and there's a lot of implications around race and it's not explicitly said -- but “. . . these organizations are trusted to do this, so we're going to go with them.” Who were predominantly white-owned or led, rather than other organizations who were based in the communities, and who had been there for a while, and have capacity.

So that kind of really damaged some of the relationships and turned some folks off from participating in the groups. And so we kind of had to take a step back and be like, actually, here's how we're going to operate in the space, here are the values that we want. If you're going to participate, here are the things that we are promoting and supporting as a group. And I think over time, that's been really helpful to change the mix of folks who've been coming back. It's also influenced who we've highlighted. So, we highlighted some organizations, especially in the Rhizome calls, and those have been almost exclusively BIPOC, people of color, who led organizations and the work that they've done on the ground.

So making this transition provoked us to help support this process called **Interrogating Whiteness, which is predominantly for people who self-identify as white to have deeper conversations about what white fragility, entrenched white privilege and power**. And to start breaking these conversations apart so they're not only better prepared to participate in these spaces, but also to look at the transformations they can make in their own organizations, personally, and potentially collectively as well. So really highlighting the fact that **in our analysis, the food system, it's really working against entrenched institutional racism that exists throughout the food system**. Some of it is personal transformations, but also institutional policy transformations that need to be part of that as well.

For Interrogating Whiteness, we started recruiting folks, putting it out there. A woman who helps facilitate that process joined the participation and she's done facilitation in other spaces. And we asked her, “Hhey, can you sit in and just give us some thoughts on how we're managing the larger groups as well?” She started the process a couple of years ago and it's been evolving over time. It's these cohorts of seven to eight folks who meet biweekly and have a kind of a curriculum of readings and podcasts. We've added some food systems ones that focus more on the food system. And so we put it out there. We had some grant funding to support the Rapid Response and we put some of that towards that. And then people could pay (we set it so pay what you can) to cover the costs--about half of it came back. We're doing a phase or round two now. It was about 32-33 people who participated, are participating. Some meetings have a bigger picture value and then operational values as the meeting's running, how people should engage with each other.

This has been evolving for myself as well over the years. One of our partners that I work very closely with and have for a long time, Urban Growers Collective (which used to be called Growing Power Chicago), had been nationally engaged in the sustainable food, good food movement. There's been waves of push back against White leadership and White domination of the space. And people of color who were predominantly the folks being needing supports and transformations in the communities but weren't in positions of leadership. At national meetings, they constantly kind of felt sidelined and were subject to a lot of micro and macro aggressions in

the space. They said, “Look you guys, you really have to do a closer look and dismantle the racism within this organization, this national partnership.” It's called the Community Food Security Coalition. And so they helped lead that and started taking on their own trainings, adapting and leading those trainings. It was a couple day workshop processes – and doing it nationally – and leading a few locally as well.

Every other year they get it together to do it. I've been participating in that and **it's really created a lot of sense of where and how I sit in and what does it mean to be an ally accomplice within this space, and how to lean into and push other white folks in the space to be moving in this direction.** We've been having conversations about how to start in that process a people of color caucus and a white caucus. And the people of color caucus tends to be more around healing and connectivity. And for the white caucus, it tends to be having to be like, “Wait a second, how am I participating in this, what am I doing or not doing, my silence to perpetuate these ongoing systems, how am I benefitting from it rather than actually taking it apart?” Usually, there's kind of a lot of guilt that comes out in that process. But really separating it out so people of color aren't having to do that work for white folks. That was one of the things that was like, “Oh yeah, we need to do this” and Interrogating Whiteness fits within that to some degree. But also, there's been a lot of back and forth about what it symbolically means for me – even though our board is predominantly leaders in the space of color; our staff is predominantly now people of color -- I am a figurehead white, cis-gendered male in the front of this organization that's moving in the food justice and equity. It isn't the best for the organization long-term. And so at some point, figuring out what that means for transitioning to co-director, handing off roles. **We're trying to figure out and think through more creative models rather than perpetuating hierarchies in our own organizational structure.** And that's going to take some time, but that's all in the mix too. I think some of it's how to leverage the advantages that I have for the benefit of the movement while making sure to share that leadership and control too.

**The most meaningful aspect of working on the Rapid Response for me has been the speed of the collaborations that have occurred.** In some cases, you cannot do in-person meetings, which does get in the way of making connections that are more in-depth. Over time, we have become more attuned for our work to be more successful with all that relationship building. Also, developing partnerships and trusts with people, other individuals, organizations, and communities about how you operate and who you interact with and how you interact. A lot of that tends to be easier in person. But it is always more challenging timewise to set up those appointments because people have to travel. An hour meeting is actually a three-hour meeting when you include getting to and from the place. These can be harder to connect and sometimes it can take months to even get connections beyond the basic phone call. **But with the transition to all online, it is much easier to bring people together in a much more rapid way.** This has been one of the things that has been an odd lesson, even though people are getting some fatigue and getting cooked from all these online meetings. But it has allowed to open the door for a lot more rapid connectivity, **and the urgency has done the same. There's a lot more engagement across different groups, communities, neighborhoods, and sectors in a much more rapid fluid way than was happening before. The disruption has disrupted the silos across the different groups and sectors in a lot more rapid way.** There are pros and cons.

For us, there's meeting the immediate needs and providing support for our partners but there's also seeing how **this Rapid Response work is looking at and helping support longer in-depth systemic change in the food system.** I think that was some of the naming of the Resilient Call. So how is this coming back? With a strong look at equity. How can these transformations be supporting the community, the ones that are being hit hardest by COVID, and communities struggling the most economically? How are the new programs, partnerships, potential policies, and investments being leveraged to help build longer term economic viability, strength, and autonomy in these communities? Hopefully, the outcome is that we will be moving towards bigger transformations.

**We probably should start renaming it, rather than Rapid Response, the COVID response.** These are conversations we've been imagining happening, or when we get ready and we'll get everybody together, we'll have a launch meeting. But that takes months to pull together and get the carefully curated invite list. We'll plan it out months so people can make sure that they can come. But again, **we just went ahead and did it. We now have these going – we definitely see these as being maintained in some form over time.** There's a lot of complexity to these networks that we're still trying to understand in depth. And just trying to understand the breadth and reach. So, a one-person organization could represent a community and could have connections to a thousand people. If not immediately, but second-hand. And so just trying to get a sense of what that width and breadth of the engagement has been and the potential for the reach. I don't think we fully really understand it all. It's one thing I'd like to understand a bit more.

**Long-term impacts coming out of Rapid Response I think are a different vision of how the food system can operate, really seeing it as an opportunity for providing social services and needs while building up the capacity of BIPOC led organizations, entrepreneurs, and broad scale people all across the food system:** farmers, to delivery drivers, composters, caterers, restaurants, to wholesalers. That those investments need to get made and that part of that work is seeing that you can be a business who is also doing social service, to think about this whole thing as much more elastic but also allowing for more resilience. Because one of the things COVID showed is when there's shock and if you're locked in one lane or one very specific part of the food system which gets impacted, you're going to be completely pushed out of the way or become completely irrelevant. So really seeing it as much more of this ecosystem and partnership and support across the food system with the primary goal of benefiting those communities.

I think also real recognition, even before COVID hit, were reports coming out that's like the money that flows to these businesses, especially food businesses of color in Chicago, **there's a ten to one gap between white businesses and businesses of color in the food space, in terms of loans, investments, philanthropy.** That's a huge gap to have to make up with or without a crisis like this. So I think it's helping to illuminate that even more that imbalance really needs to get addressed. And whether it comes out of a reparation framework or however it gets there, but **seeing those kinds of transformations, that's my hope, really shocking out the status quo with not seeing it.** And it certainly wasn't prepared to manage these crises. And with



the assumption that who knows – with climate change and exposure to other pathogens, is this going to happen often? Is this the new steady state? Climate change impacting the food system in much more dramatic ways. **Being prepared for these shocks in a lot more robust way while promoting equity at the same time – I hope.**

## **Stef Funk- Communication Specialist (CFPAC)**

*Interviewed by Maddi Perdue, Rowan Obach & Tania Schusler on November 11<sup>th</sup>, 2020*

*Edited by Rowan Obach & Tania Schusler*

I was brought on staff in mid-April as CFPAC's communication specialist. My primary role was to build out the COVID page of our website, so I participated in some of the working groups, but mostly just connected with staff to hear what updates there were and how best to organize the page in a way that was easily scannable depending on who you were. So, **in the beginning, everyone was very confused. We had no idea what was going on. We didn't know how long this was going to last.** And so, funders and nonprofits all came together and put out a bunch of resources that were really important and needed, but especially for growers and small businesses, a lot of people don't have the time to sift through [all of these resources]. So, my role was to do that sifting and organize those materials in a way where it's like, "I'm a blueberry farmer, so I know exactly where I go to get things that are specifically for me without having to weed through all of the rest of the mess." And then in June, I believe, I ended up getting a full-time offer. So, I transitioned from being a part-time contract worker, and focusing just on COVID rapid-response work, to doing all of CFPAC's communication and engagement.

Before I was working with CFPAC, I worked with this organization called Plant Chicago, and I managed a farmer's market there. So I think that I was on the very first call, which was a pretty open-ended, nobody knows what's happening, let's gather everyone in the same space, and assess what's needed. And at that time, I think the working groups were one that was focused on local producers, so farmers, ranchers, people that were just producing raw food. And then there was a group focused on small businesses, so people that were processing or cooking food in some capacity, or maybe grocery stores, too, so less of working with soil and more the next part of the food chain. And then there was also a group focused on workers, so restaurant industry folks, trying to figure out how those laborers would be impacted by COVID, particularly with the idea that restaurants were probably going to shut down soon. There was another group that was originally called Emergency Food Response, and that was how to feed people. So, if you were out of work, or if you were somehow impacted by COVID, and you were having a hard time putting food on the table, where you could get food from, and connecting those organizations with one another, so they could effectively get food out to the people that needed it most. And then the fifth group was funding, which was a mix of people that had money to give and people that could inform the best way to give that money.

And so that's how it started, but now there are three groups. So, funders ended up not being a group anymore because we realized everybody needed funding, and that wasn't maybe the most productive way to structure those calls. So now there's this group call called the Rhizome Call, where anybody can go, and we share funding opportunities there. And the local producers' group – we realized that growers just don't want to be online, and they don't really have the time to sit through an hour long call. So that got shuffled into small business and the Emergency Food Response, which has now been renamed Resilient Food Systems. The call was never in a sense of emergency where it's not thoughtful or rushed, but folks wanted the name of the group to better represent what they were actually talking about, which instead of pushing

food out as quickly as possible, was **building a more resilient system so, in the event another pandemic happens, we are not as unprepared.**

My sense of the goals was CFPAC wanted to be a backbone support system. So, we had multiple Zoom lines, and we had the capacity to organize these times, and staff to be the facilitator of the conversations. But for the most part, **we just welcomed anyone that was interested in coming to share resources that they had or to say, "Hey, I need this. Does anybody know where I can get this?"** And I think each group, keeping that in mind, had different goals, like local producers need different things than restaurant workers do. I think that most goals were met. So, either groups continued working together, or they were absorbed into another group after we realized that the space was no longer needed. As we've learned more about the disease and as we've learned more about how things are progressing, at first, it felt like we were trying to cover all of our bases, so providing as much support as we could. And now that more time has passed, we have a better sense of what is actually needed from us.

Before my time being a CFPAC staff member, I was most active in the local producer's group because as a farmer's market manager I wanted to gather resources that I could share with my vendors. And so I think that group particularly struggled because I saw a lot of people like me, but not a lot of growers themselves. And then there's always a conversation to be had about, "Am I the best person to share those resources if I'm not actually a grower? Do I know specifically what growers need? Am I a good judge of that?" CFPAC decided to have that group be reabsorbed into another, because it felt as if two or three people would participate, but there wasn't a lot of real progress happening. The decision was made by the group members, so that specific group. In April or so, when it started, I guess we had anywhere from 20 to 30 people participating in each call. And then towards the end, it was one to five. And so even when folks can't make calls, notes are sent out to the whole Google group. So the person that was moderating those calls – maybe the last three meetings or so – at the end, she would say, "Hey, attendance is pretty low. Do you folks still see value in this time? Do you want to continue meeting? Are folks reading the notes?" And so a couple polls were done where it's like, "Should we move the time? Is it the time that's the issue? Is it the frequency? Should we do every other week? Should we do once a month?" And so a couple adjustments like that were made until eventually, it was decided to just absorb it into a different group. I don't think it's necessarily a failure or a success but, as more information becomes available, CFPAC adjusting accordingly.

So, in the beginning, I think it was good in that the people participating in the calls were able to – when growers were available – hear their perspective and the struggles that they were facing. At the beginning of the pandemic, there was a big seed shortage. A lot of folks overbought seeds in a panic sense. So, folks that didn't do that were left out, and so people were freaking out about they didn't know where to get seeds and, if they were to get seeds, it was starting to get a little late in the season to start planting. So that was an interesting perspective to hear. But I'd say the best thing that came out of it was for organizers to be able to sift through resources to share at least a somewhat more succinct list of things that apply to [growers]. So, lots of funding sources were shared.

There were a few opportunities for farmers to partner with one another. And then another big conversation that happened way in the beginning was what kinds of sales platforms there

would be in June, July, August, when things were ready to harvest. So that group did a lot of work around farmer's markets in the city of Chicago because, in the beginning, the city government wasn't super keen on opening farmer's markets. So, we were able to source input from farmers and get some rough numbers in terms of what percentage of local farms sell through farmer's markets, to make the argument that if farmer's markets didn't open that these farms likely wouldn't survive the year. So that was a good thing that came out of it. I'd say that participation from growers fell off, probably around week six. In the beginning, people did make an effort to show up because all of us were really confused. And maybe another benefit was camaraderie, having a space where a lot of similar people came together and were facing the same issues. But yeah, after about six to eight weeks, I'd say there weren't really any growers that participated anymore, and it was just organizers chatting amongst each other, trying to piece together what was going on and what resources would be best to share with our respective networks. And then I'll also say that CFPAC is not the only organization that has a hard time attracting growers to online things. I think farmers are not the most tech-savvy group. And they are also just really busy, especially in the summer, too. Pandemic plus peak growing season means they don't have a lot of time to just sit and listen. So being adaptive and responsive to that, too, just figuring out the best way to get resources to them in the way that they want.

Things that are impeding progress or the achievement of goals? I think general Zoom burnout. Nobody wants to be on Zoom anymore, especially for an hour because it's so easy to tune out and get distracted by the other thousand things that are on your computer. Initially, the groups would meet weekly. I think every single group would meet every single week, and now, I don't think any of them meet weekly, it's biweekly or monthly. Also, readjusting to, at first, there were so many resources available, and now, there's a slower, more consistent trickle of things that are coming out. I think participation's probably the biggest [challenge]. I looked at the Google Group yesterday, and I was trying to think of how many people were in it originally. But we've got 89 people in the group now, and I would guess that there were maybe close to 300 at one point. So, I spent a little time thinking about why that number has dwindled, and one guess I would have is the balance of communication we've tried to strike. So, this idea that our food system is so broad, and not all resources apply to everybody, but how to share resources within the group, targeted at specific people and not overshare because we don't want people to be left out or unaware. Also, we don't want people to be annoyed with the number of emails I send. So we've tried to use social media as well, because that's more of an opt-in thing.

I think also that folks just have a better sense of what's going on now. In the beginning, everyone was super confused. And some people thought the world was going to end. And other people thought everything would be fine and that there's no way we would still be in a similar situation now [many months later]. In the beginning, I think a lot of folks just signed on for a sense of comfort or to be in the loop. And now people have a much better sense of what they're doing to contribute or what role their organization plays, so they don't need as much support from CFPAC or even the other groups that are involved in the Rapid Response.

As time has gone on, we've seen a lot of participation from community members. So in the beginning, I think our messaging was pretty explicit where it's like if you play an active role in our food system, you should join these calls. And then as time went on, if you think about it, everyone plays an active role in our food system because we all eat. We all buy food. We all go

to restaurants occasionally, maybe more than occasionally. So our definition broadened a bit, and so I, as a communications person, when I post on social media, I try to be very explicit that anyone that's interested can come to these calls. There aren't any barriers, or you don't need to be vetted, necessarily. But if you want to volunteer, or if you run a mutual-aid network that distributes food within your community, that counts, and you should be a part of this. And you can probably find some kind of resource through this network to increase your efforts.

For me, personally, before I worked for CFPAC, I really wanted a job here, and I was never really qualified for any of the jobs that they posted. And I wasn't necessarily qualified for the job that I got. But it was a really rushed posting because it was a Rapid Response effort, and they really needed support. And so, I don't have any web development experience. But I'm a decent communicator, and so I reached out to CFPAC, saying, "I will try super hard if you give me the chance." And they did, and I tried really hard, and it was really hard because I didn't have a lot of the experience needed to build a website. But I figured it out, and so that was really rewarding. Also having something else to focus on in this really chaotic time was really important to me to feel like rather than just sitting there waiting for something to happen that I played some kind of active role in a remedy for this, and **I really care about Chicago. I really care about our food system, and so it felt like a productive way to spend my time, to sift through all these resources so that other people wouldn't have to.**

I am not from Chicago. I'm from Joliet, which is an hour or so southwest of here. But I moved here when I was six, so I don't remember much else. My family is multiracial, and as a kid, food was a pretty important part of my life, but I never really understood where food came from. Both of my grandmothers grew food, and that was a big part of my childhood. Even being in the city, I still hung out in the dirt a lot, and I had a pretty good understanding of how food was grown. But I did not understand how hard it was to grow food for an entire country, and I didn't understand how complicated our food system was. And I didn't know that other people grew food in the city. I thought it was just my two immigrant grandmothers that brought their knowledge from other places to this country where nobody else knew anything about this.

And so, when I went to college, I chose to go to Massachusetts, and I studied abroad in Costa Rica my last year. And so, at 22 was the first time I ever saw a farm. And part of the program was you had to work on a farm. And so that was when I really realized not only is there so much immense knowledge in this field, but **[farming] is so hard. It is backbreaking work, and it's so undervalued, especially when you come from a city that food is just there, and you don't ever need to work for it. You don't need to think about it. It's just there. It's there, and it's wasted all the time. It's so underappreciated.** So, I came back to the city after I graduated with this idea where I was like, I'm going to help build Chicago's food system. And then I got here, and I was like, "Oh, it's already here. It's been here this whole time. I just didn't know about it." So, then I felt angry that I missed out a little bit. And so, when I reconsidered what I wanted to do, food is something that is so important to everyone--so this kind of campaign work felt like a much more wholesome and all-encompassing way to find a job that aligned with my values. **Food is something that I'm really passionate about, and I want other people to be as passionate as I feel** because it's so important, and it shouldn't be taken for granted.

So CFPAC as an organization, too, works to build a more racially equitable food system. But in terms of how my identity informs my work? That's a hard question for me to answer because I don't have a solid sense of my identity. I am half-white/half-Filipino, and depending on the season or the eyes of who's looking at me, I'm relatively white-passing. And so as a kid, I had really – not even as a kid, even as a 26-year-old sitting in front of you today, I have pretty intense identity issues of who I am, where I belong, what makes sense for me. My mom wasn't documented till I was in high school. And that's because it's a really long process, and even though my parents were married, it's not as simple as people think. A lot of times, people think you get married, and you're a citizen, but it's not that at all. When I was very, very young, my mom had to go back to the Philippines, and I went with her. And so, the food in my life has always been very different depending on where I was or who I was with. My mom has recently been more open with where she's from and where I come from, which is really cool. So, I've been learning a lot more about the food that my mom was used to eating growing up, because my dad was really big on, "That's gross food," and "That's not what normal people eat." But yeah, so I think in my work, I've been a lot more vocal with my mom about, "Hey, I want to know where I come from, and I want to understand you a lot better." And **a big part of that is the staff at CFPAC. We have a lot of staff retreats where we're encouraged to look into our ancestors and bring photos of people and share stories with staff.** And so, I guess I'm more answering how my work has informed my identity than the reciprocal.

I called my mom because it was Dia de los Muertos a couple weeks ago, and so one of our assignments was to bring a photo of an ancestor to remember. And so I called my mom, and I was like, "I don't know any of my ancestors. Can you tell me about this?" So I've listened to other people's stories about ancestors and thought, "Wow, you're following in the footsteps of your ancestors, and that's so beautiful and poetic," and I never thought that applied to me. I thought I was really lucky to be in the U.S., and my mom had done all this work so that I had this privilege to do [whatever work] I wanted with my life. But it turns out that my mom wasn't the first person in the Philippines to come to the U.S., and my great-great-grandfather was a really renowned forester in the Philippines and was invited to Seattle to teach some of the forestry practices in the Philippines here in the U.S. And according to my mom, at the time, he had relatively revolutionary ideas, not globally, but for the U.S. People were starting to get into really extractionary practices and overconsumption and mass deforestation. And so my great-grandpa came here and was like, "Y'all are [messing] up. This is so bad. I'm telling you. You can't do it this way." And I guess nobody listened to him, and so he had the opportunity to become a citizen here, but he was like, "You know what? No one values my opinion. I like it in the Philippines better. I'm just going to go back." So he was only here for a few months. But I was pleasantly surprised that I'm not the first person in my family to do work like this, and there's not a direct parallel between forestry and food, but there are definitely some [connections].

We have a very diverse staff. We also have a relatively young staff, which I really like. I didn't know that there were jobs like this before this one, and I wish that for everyone. I hope that everyone gets to learn more about themselves and integrate their identity into the work that they're doing because I think it makes it so much more meaningful. And also, as a very confused mixed person, I never really felt like I belonged somewhere. It felt either like I was pretending to belong, or I just was there, and folks didn't know where I belonged, so they were like, "Cool, she's fine, I guess." But **this is a job where it feels like I'm supposed to be here, and it feels**

**like all of my identity is valid.** I don't have to pick, "I'm white," or "I'm Filipino." I get to be this weird, nebulous thing, and that's totally fine. But yeah, I think the diversity of our staff is the main thing that contributes at least to me feeling like I have a better sense of my identity. My culture and my family don't celebrate Dia de los Muertos. But through an activity of that, I learned a lot more about my family, and I think that's a really cool thing.

How would I envision the Rapid Response effort evolving into the future? What are my hopes for its longer-term impact? That's a question I've wanted to ask staff because, as the person that is managing the website, I wonder how long the website will exist, and I don't know the answer to that. But **I would love it if there was some connection between the resources and the participation in this group and the number of small businesses that survive the pandemic.** I'm personally really concerned that in 50 years, there will only be 10 companies, and it'll just be Amazon and Tesla and Google, and that's it, and that sounds like an awful future. So, I would love if we even had a small impact in terms of the businesses that survived, or inspired new folks to start businesses in this really chaotic and spooky time--just knowing that there is a support network for you, and that if you decide to open a business, not only will you have all these people there, ready to buy your stuff, but people will partner with you, and people will send you funding opportunities, people are there to coach you through a business plan.

I'd imagine that even after COVID, that maybe the group's name will change or the frequency will change, but I think it's important for all members of any food system to have a space to go to collaborate and share resources. Because pandemic or not, those things are important. And **a strong food system is well integrated and connected.** And I think that having all those people in the same space, no matter what it's called, is pretty essential.

I think there are some spaces that exist like that already, but I think the pandemic really highlighted a need for a more general space. So there's a pretty similar group that's farmer's market-specific. They're called the Chicago Farmer's Market Collective. And they formed right before the pandemic, and so the pandemic, for them, highlighted this need where it's like, "Oh, thank God that we were already talking." And so I'm sure they'll continue to talk. And them being in place at the beginning of the pandemic was huge for the farmer's market world. But I appreciate that CFPAC has a space where literally anybody can join. Even if you don't have a job, or you're not an active organizer in the food space, you can come to these calls. You can learn more about how you can support, and even get a job or meet somebody that can give you more skills or more resources, so that eventually you are in a place that you want to be. So yeah, I think open-ended spaces are as important as structured ones – there's a lot of merit in both.

**Marlie Wilson - Good Food Purchasing Plan Manager (CFPAC)**

*Interviewed by Rowan Obach, Maddi Perdue & Tania Schusler on November 12, 2020*

*Edited by Rowan Obach & Tania Schusler*

I have been on staff with CFPAC since January 2019. As part of our role in co-developing and creating, advocating for and implementing policies to advance food justice and sovereignty, we've played this role as a convener and network builder across all of the different kinds of stakeholders involved in Chicago's local food system. **We have maintained an overarching emphasis on racial and social equity. We want the policies that we work on within the Chicago Food Policy Action Council to ensure that black and brown residents of Chicago and the surrounding area can control and define what the food system should look like.**

We've played a role in the past in convening people. Usually, it has been in person, such as in person gatherings and food being something that we want to share in person settings together. Or working collectively on urban agriculture projects and that kind of thing. When the pandemic hit, suddenly we were unable to gather people in person. However, **we still felt like we needed to play this role in bringing people together and addressing kind of in real time: What are the needs emerging from stakeholders?** Where could we be making connections to support the health, safety, welfare of farmers, food producers, small food businesses, and food chain workers across the supply chain here in Chicago, Cook County and the region?

As a staff member at CFPAC I've been involved in helping to develop and call upon everybody to join what started as weekly meetings. We wanted to create several different working groups focused on different stakeholders' groups in the food supply chain. I have specifically spent most of my time in the Rapid Response Effort focused on the "Food Chain Worker" working group and thinking about how the pandemic has specifically impacted those who are harvesting, processing, delivering and distributing [food], while also considering those who are involved in preparing and working in retail, grocery spaces or restaurants to provide food to local citizens. **All these different stakeholders have absolutely been impacted,** whether they've lost their jobs, been deemed essential workers or have even been forced to work under conditions that are not actually promoting the health and safety of workers due to the very lax regulations that have been imposed by the CDC and Occupational Safety and Health (OSHA) board that exists at the federal level, which, as a side note, has been pretty under regulated during and prior to the pandemic. That's been where most of my time has been focused, working with the food chain workers.

In addition, I help to lead what started as a weekly "Rhizome" call, which is our name for bringing everyone together. It's a root that kind of develops horizontally and we really liked this idea of kind of bringing all these different groups together. From stakeholder groups to people working in different issue areas together in these calls, **we wanted to bring all these different calls to action, resource development and coordination efforts together.** Making sure all those groups are into conversation with each other. So, I've been helping to lead those since the inception of the Rhizome call and work on that now every other week.



I think the shutdown was announced mid-March and we kind of the week after we were like, just putting out this call to a whole bunch of our partners. We said something like, “Let’s get together and just talk over zoom.” Just to kind of like grapple with this new reality and all of the different ripple effects that it was having already in that one half week of things – maybe it was a full week of things -- being shut down. That led to us realizing **we needed to be coordinated and moving and supporting all of these different pieces of the food system through this really difficult time.**

And so that was really kind of the goal of the initial development was like: **How we can best support and help coordinate efforts with the goal of equitably supporting members of the food system who are kind of disproportionately feeling the impacts of this pandemic?** Whether that’s community members who are relying on access to food or urban farmers who need protective equipment and don’t have access to it. That was especially the case at the beginning of the pandemic. Food workers, like I mentioned, who all of a sudden found themselves with no paycheck and then experienced issues getting on to unemployment in many cases. Alternatively, we considered meat processing workers who have been exposed to very unsafe working conditions since the pandemic started. I think that really the overarching goal was how we can best as a community come together, align and coordinate our efforts and address some of these issues.

Another thing that was central to the development of the Rapid Response Effort was that we knew that **some groups have resources while others needed resources.** We wanted to figure out how we could help create those connections and matchmaking. This was especially true with institutions abruptly shutting down and suddenly all these distributors had food that they had planned to supply these large institutions with, and they were just sitting on it. And they’re like, well, we need to send it to someone who needs it. **With this rapid change in the economy and our communities, we were figuring out how do we get food to people who need it and identify new markets for it** in some cases. For example, how do we get PPE to folks who need it? How do we get resources and funding, such as quick fix emergency funding to individuals that need it? It was really just kind of grappling with all of those questions.

There have been significant shifts I think as the pandemic has changed and what we know about the virus has changed. For example, how it spreads, how the economy, how the city, the county, the state and the federal government have reacted to the spread. That has shifted what our focus areas are. It’s all been built into the name of Rapid Response. **We’ve had to continually respond rapidly to these changing conditions.** Every time there’s an announcement of a new rule that affects local food businesses and restaurants and their workers, we must figure out what we need to do. What can we do to either get out information to folks or send out a new call to action or support one of the group member’s efforts to protect and support and serve these different populations affected by the changing environment?

Overall, there has been a steady goal of really coming together to address these issues. It’s evolved over time in focus. I think the other thing that as a Rapid Response, like rhizomatic level effort, we have addressed is that some members coming into the group maybe were coming for different purposes. And **we’ve had to work to make sure and find our messaging and our**

**framing to continue to make sure that racial equity sits at the center of our work.** We had to make clear the ways in which we as a Rapid Response team are prioritizing efforts and responding to efforts; centering black and brown communities in Chicago and centering working people as well as their needs and community members' needs are the heart of everything that we do. I think that was a response to some folk's coming for their own benefit.

We had both private and public organizations and businesses at the table. Any time you bring people together it's important to have that strong North Star, that strong goal, a vision for why you're coming together so everyone can work in good faith with each other. I would say, if anything, our intentions haven't shifted but we've had to refine our messaging and our framing for the group to ensure that those goals continue to be why everyone is coming together.

There's been so many challenges. Because **we're trying to create an inclusive space where a lot of different stakeholders can come together.** So finding a time of day that works and a platform that's going to be the easiest for everyone to access in this moment where it is not in our best interest to meet in person because we're trying to stop the spread of this virus -- just all of the accessibility issues that come with technology. A lot of people that we were hoping to work with were directly involved in growing food, providing emergency meals to community members that all of a sudden lost all their resources to access food. **That's difficult to bring really busy people together who have a lot of demands on their time** and continue to create the space that's valuable for them to prioritize. That is all really what's tough. And we continue to struggle with that.

But **we have made some shifts in how we approach the structure.** One is that we've just pulled back altogether on the frequency of our meetings because we recognized that, although some people can make time for that, if we're continuing to have them so regularly, like every week, then some people can feel intimidated if they have to miss a lot of meetings. They still want to be a part of the group but then feel like they're not part of the group, you know. So, we actually very consciously decided to pull back and move to every other week model with the Rhizome call. For some of the working groups, we've pulled back even further, some are just meeting monthly. For some, we're renegotiating like what the role that group can play and figuring out if it should even meet at all. For the food chain worker group, we started doing every other week. We actually took a pause in early October and we'll probably be restarting the group after the holidays. So, we've been renegotiating the frequency and also trying to figure out if there are some key members that can't make the call, how do we find a time that works better for them? Really prioritizing what makes these calls accessible. We used to have the Rhizome call on Friday mornings. That just ended up being not a good time.; We found a lot of service providers were delivering meals then; during the day, a lot of folks were out working on their farms. So we moved it intentionally to the afternoon on Thursdays to kind of create more space for more folks to join. And that's been really successful. So, yes, making shifts and trying to address all of these challenges.

And going back to that other point of when you put out this broad call for anyone and everyone to join this effort, people will come and they'll see that there's a value in it for them. We've had to reassert that we do have this bigger mission and vision for this group. We certainly do want it to benefit folks with aligned mission and vision. **But if it's not creating more racial**

**equity in the food system in Chicago, we're not sure it's something that we want to prioritize** as a part of the content of what this group is addressing. Keeping everybody with that kind of common vision at the core has been challenging.

I also have a connection to the Mutual Aid Network that's underway in Chicago outside of my role at CFPAC. At the beginning of the pandemic, I heard about some efforts across the country of people just going door to door and checking in with their neighbors and creating like a phone tree for everyone to stay in contact with each other and asking if anyone didn't feel safe, if anyone felt vulnerable to the virus and needed help with groceries and other essentials. So, we did that. My partner and I just started [posting] flyers around our block and creating a central spreadsheet for everyone on our block to connect with each other. And then we heard that other people were doing that too across Chicago and that **there was this whole groundswell of people like trying to take care of one another. It was really beautiful. It wasn't coordinated by any central person or organization or anything. It just sprung up out of a real need and concern that none of us have gone through this before.**

As that was developing, we got plugged in to the Logan Square Mutual Aid Network, which had created a Slack channel and was starting to coordinate some regular delivery of food to people in need in the neighborhood. And I knew that this was happening across the city, too. So, we ended up pulling in a lot of the folks that were working on food distribution as a part of Mutual Aid Networks across the city to come join the Rapid Response Effort and be part of what used to be the "Emergency Food Assistance" working group, but is now the "Resilient Food System" call. It's been really great to connect with all of these folks. A lot of folks that are part of the Mutual Aid Network lost their job at the beginning of the pandemic, or started working from home, and all of a sudden had some space and time in their schedules to do something, to take care of their neighbors and wanted to kind of both receive support from their neighbors and give aid and support to others. I'm really, really happy that CFPAC can have some role in supporting the sustained efforts that are happening across the city with mutual aid. Even though a lot of folks are just like DIY-ing it completely and haven't really utilized much of the resources that have been kind of coming through these working groups. But they've been like sharing best practices and I think that has been really helpful.

We actually helped to develop a proposal for the Farm to Families Food Box program, along with several other partners. Our concept was let's **use this federal funding to invest in community driven emergency food access that really also incorporated local food businesses into the mix.** It wasn't more of a traditional emergency food model where food is kind of dumped into a community and isn't necessarily creating any economic investment in that community at the same time. We were trying to see if there were ways that we could kind of flip the script on how this funding was used and provide culturally appropriate meals [and] healthy, balanced, nutritional meals to community members through these box programs. It turns out that was an unsuccessful proposal but, through the proposal development, a lot of Mutual Aid Networks got involved and they were able to connect with the company that did get the bid for that funding. They then started receiving boxes throughout the city that continued to be distributed through volunteer networks to community members. So that's been a nice result of the organizing work is to see that, even though this proposal we were really excited about wasn't

funded, this other partner was able to get connected to all these folks on the ground moving food and supporting their neighbors.

I can talk a little bit about some of the impacts that convening folks with the food chain working group has had. It is largely a group of organizations that work with different stakeholders. It's not a lot of direct food workers necessarily. It's umbrella organizations that represent them in some way. We don't have a lot of union representation, but rather a lot of worker centers. These are organizations like Jobs with Justice and the Restaurant Opportunity Center Chicago, which works with restaurant workers. We've been working with the UIC Center for Healthy Work that's been advocating a lot for safe working conditions and policy.

Through convening these support organization groups, a lot of coordination and addressing of common concerns has come up. **It's really nice to see groups that don't necessarily always work or talk to each other, talking to each other.** One of the things that came up was in reference to this COVID contact tracing funding that both the city and county were getting millions of dollars to set up contact tracing efforts. I think everyone was aware that a hot spot for COVID is in workplaces, whether those are facilities like factories or warehouses where food workers are working or whether it's restaurants and prepared meal places where COVID can spread. We were really kind of concerned that this contact tracing funding be used to **center workers and ensure safer work places** and that there was an intentional design with how the city and county were using those funds. And so, one of the first projects that the group worked on collectively was developing a memo for both the city and county on how contact tracing funds could be best applied in a worker centered approach. This included making sure that all contact tracers were trained on workplace rights and what workplace safety violations look like. And that they also have a direct line of communication with the regulatory folks that are supposed to be enforcing COVID-19 safety practices in workplaces.

We worked on that throughout the summer and shared those memos in early fall with both the Chicago Department of Public Health and Cook County Department of Public Health. It's exciting that some of these conversations have led to some changes in the training that contact tracers receive. So, we have some soft anecdotal evidence that the articulation of this group has had some impact on how the contact tracing programs have been rolled out and who also they have subcontracts with. They're receiving this funding from the federal government and then they have subcontracts with community-based organizations to help with contact tracing. And some of those community-based organizations are worker centers and folks that work on workplace safety. **We're happy to see that partnerships were potentially influenced by our group's work.** But if not directly influenced it was definitely part of the conversation. That's been rewarding to kind of see those impacts.

More recently the group has turned its attention to an effort that's being led by the Warehouse Workers for Justice, which is a local group here in the Chicago area that works with warehouse workers, not always on food related warehouse work, but a lot of the workers that they work with are working in warehouses that are distributing food. They came to the group several months ago sharing that Mars Wrigley warehouse workers, who work with candy, distributing candy, were really concerned about the lack of workplace safety precautions in place regarding COVID. They were being treated as essential workers when it's really questionable

whether candy is an essential product to be prioritizing through the pandemic. But they were going to work every day feeling exposed and vulnerable to the virus and weren't receiving any sick or hazard pay. There was nothing to really honor the fact that if they're going to be required to do this, they're essential workers then and they should be paid accordingly.

Some of them had gone to the company with these grievances and several of them had been fired for their advocacy, which is against the National Labor Relations Board's policies and there's some legal battles that are ongoing right now. But that workplace retaliation is just so upsetting. So, the group as a whole really kind of came together and have since been working with the Warehouse Workers for Justice on how we can all kind of collectively put some pressure on the company. We held a rally in association with Halloween where we all wore costumes in front of the headquarters. Several of the food chain COVID-19 calls [participants] spoke at the rally. We're loosely organizing right now and then talking about some strategies that we can all kind of collectively work together going forward through the winter to put further pressure on the company. So a lot of this work is emerging.

**In times of crises often large corporations and certain political figures will try to take advantage of the situation and use that crisis to further their own ends, often nefarious ends like a land grab or resource grab, at the expense of people and the planet.** What I see in this Rapid Response Effort is to some extent this acknowledgement that **we can fight back against that kind of activity if we coordinate and build this movement together.** It's not just about the crisis at hand. It's not just about COVID-19. It's about how are we using [the crisis] in the opposite way that corporations have used these crises to their own purposes: How do we use the crisis for the purpose of community building and for empowering people and creating a more just, equitable and sustainable food system for the long term that really puts workers and community members first over profits?

That's what really makes me excited about these efforts to bring everybody together and to continue coordinating and talking, I think it makes our movement stronger. And it means that we can really work together to kind of counterbalance some of these folks who have more power than we do individually. **Collectively, if we work together, maybe we can influence the way resources are distributed and allocated so it's more equitable.** Maybe we *can* have a positive impact in the long term.

[How my identity informs my work in the Rapid Response Effort,] it's very much layered. To some extent we [CFPAC staff] all have privilege because we work at this Food Policy Action Council. We have relationships with the city and the county governments -- very strong relationships, for example, with the Department of Public Health. And we can use those relationships to influence systems and policy and resource allocation. It's definitely important to kind of like acknowledge that we as an organization have certain access to power and we have access to other people that have more power than us. We have a responsibility because of that to operate in a way that creates more racial equity and opens up these folks that do have power to join conversations and community. I definitely acknowledge that that is a place of privilege. That **my whiteness is a place of privilege. That I need to be working in explicitly anti-racist ways to counterbalance all of the systemic racism** that structures the way in which policy and our city budget, for example, operates.

I think also like certainly my cultural affiliations and my background influences my approach and how I think about this work. My dad is a labor organizer, he works with unions. That's absolutely an influence on my leadership, specifically in the food chain worker group, and the reason why I'm drawn to working on labor rights more generally. You know we're always kind of influenced by like how we're brought up and then what kind of values and work was kind of prioritized in our household. So I think that totally has had an impact, a ripple effect in what I do and what my brother does. If you keep looking at all of our ancestors and how they have influenced my parents and grandparents, **we're all kind of standing on the backs of all the wisdom and experiences of others that have come before us.**

As I mentioned before, I think what we're really trying to do is **sow the seeds of long-term change** through our immediate rapid response to the pandemic, so that we aren't just thinking short term **We are thinking about how we could (not just in this crisis) prioritize community driven food projects, but also how our investment in community driven food projects now could influence what the food system looks like in the long term.**

As a concrete example of that, we have been working with an organization called Chi Fresh Kitchen. They have been a part of the emergency food assistance efforts that we've been helping to coordinate. Before the pandemic, I'd had several conversations with one of the organizers of this new company. They had been talking and meeting with this group of formerly incarcerated women on what kind of business they wanted to start. It sounded like they wanted to do something in food service. They all had experience in food service and were passionate about feeding communities and wanted to start this food service management company that could create meals, healthy meals, culturally appropriate meals for public meal programs. That's something I work on outside of this Rapid Response Effort is shifting public meal programs towards local, sustainable, healthy, humane, fair food.

I was talking to Chi Fresh Kitchen founders around how they could develop their business model around our Good Food Purchasing standards that we really support and prioritize with departments and agencies. They were like planning to launch in 2020 but they didn't have any business and they were trying to figure out, "How do we get our foot in the door? How do we just kind of get a few clients so that we can start building our business?" That's sometimes the hardest part is just having one person take the risk of working with a brand new company.

When the pandemic hit, several of the members were like, "Hey, we have to start Chi Fresh now. We can't wait. We've lost our jobs. Now is the time to start feeding our community." What's really beautiful is that they've been, since very early on in the pandemic they opened up their doors, started at the Hatchery, which is an incubator kitchen in Chicago in Garfield Park. Through the calls that we've been hosting, they got connected to Urban Growers Collective, which grows food in the city, and started buying food from them. And then working with some of Urban Growers Collective's connections to community health centers and other community groups across Chicago, especially on the South side, they just started serving more and more meals every week. They're doing thousands of meals now. They are really starting their business. It's a worker co-op model. They all own the business together. And they're starting this business in the context of the pandemic. But the goal is that the investment that community

groups are making in getting their food from Chi Fresh Kitchen right now is going to be something that now Chi Fresh Kitchen is like expanding to their own kitchen space, instead of being in this incubator kitchen. Now they're thinking about larger and larger clients who will need food far after this pandemic is over. **Their business model will be sustained, continue to be something that exists because of that initial investment that they received to start doing emergency meals.**

That was a very long way of saying that **we hope that we can be sowing those kinds of seeds now that can have that larger ripple effect.** So that someday an entity like the Cook County Jails, which uses a massive multibillion dollar corporation for their food service management right now, could instead someday be using Chi Fresh Kitchen. Hopefully we're shrinking the size of the jail population and shrinking the need for how large that contract has to be. But simultaneously supporting a group of women that used to be part of the prison system in this new business model that they're creating and building their community wealth. I think **what we're really trying to see come from this Rapid Response Effort are these answers, these solutions that are found in communities, like amplifying those answers and solutions.** And then turning those into like the alternative food system, normalizing that as the way the food system operates in the future.

## Ma'raj Sheikh-Systems and Strategy Manager (CFPAC)

*Interviewed by Maddi Perdue & Tania Schusler on November 18th, 2020*

*Edited by Maddi Perdue, Rowan Obach & Tania Schusler*

I was on vacation when the Rapid Response effort started. I was in Brazil getting married. I came back, and our staff had completely kicked it into gear [and] set up the structure. And I came in, I think within a week or so of it starting up. My role [is that] I've been heading the food business calls. I've been facilitating the food business working group, which has been focused on local businesses. We've ended up engaging in some other efforts aside from that, like PPE distribution. [Currently] we're working on characterizing cold storage needs and resources across Chicago and Cook County. And then I was also facilitating the Local Food Producers Group. And that was for food producers. It was farmers. And initially we had quite a few farmers on that call, because the season hadn't quite started. **I don't want to say panic, but people were [definitely] concerned.**

People were concerned about what was going to happen with the season. They didn't know what would happen with their markets. There was a lot of unknowns up in the air. So, we had quite a few farmers showing up on those calls early on. Over time that group shifted focus as people became heavily involved with the season and weren't in front of their desks anymore. So those were the two primary groups that I've been facilitating. [In regard to] the Rhizome calls; [the] call where we bring together all our working groups, I've [also] been helping facilitate those, or rather co-facilitate, those with the other staff members.

So, I think the whole point of starting the groups was literally, **we wanted to rapidly respond to the needs on the ground, and we wanted to maintain our connectivity to our stakeholders on the ground, and really know what was going on with folks.** We act as conveners in this space. Typically, that would be in a physical space. [As a matter of a fact] we were actually coming off of our summit, which we throw annually. We had over 600 people come to that in person event. So, we wanted to make sure that we maintain that connectivity, and that we knew we had to tap on what was happening on the ground, and that **we were connecting folks to resources that were emerging and also highlighting and advocating organizing around issues that would be arising.**

[Personally, I would agree that] the lack of organization on the governmental level [in response to the pandemic] left this huge gap. **It left the space for us to really scramble as a community, and pull together resources, pull together what we had available to us in order to meet these needs.** A lot of these connections, a lot of these networks that have arisen [built from the effort], are going to outlast COVID. From that perspective, it's been hugely positive. At the same time, government should be serving people. Government should be providing these resources. It's why we pay our taxes. Seeing that discordance and seeing the level to which our social safety net is lacking is very disappointing, it's painful, but it's also a moment of truth, because this has been the case all along in our country.

**A lot of the systems that we're talking about, they were never meant to serve us.** these systems serve different people at different levels, which is what we're getting at when we talk about systems of hierarchy, and systems of privilege. I think we're living in a time now that it's become apparent that we've gone far down enough in this capitalist experiment, in this way, in



this extractive way of managing our economy, of being in relationship with one another, that we're seeing that really, unless you're a part of that elite few who are the Jeff Bezos of the world, most other people are suffering at some level. **[We're seeing that no one is] immune to the impacts. Once the earth is depleted, the earth is depleted.**

In some ways it's not really a surprise. It's definitely not a surprise to me anyway, that these systems are failing us. [It just proves that] it is time for us to build new systems. I don't know what exactly that'll look like. But at the same time, we all have had a role to play in this in some extent, as well, because **I think this whole Rapid Response has highlighted the need for us to do ongoing organizing, for each of us to be participating.** Through the Rapid Response Effort, we were able to engage folks that otherwise would not have engaged. I'm proud that we're doing that work and that we're practicing that resilience and self-sufficiency. And at the same time, my hope for the future is that we're able to actually create a government system that we can hold accountable to providing these needs.

[In reviewing] how have the groups evolved over time, the local food production group that we were working on, initially that had been a lot of farmers showing up, a lot of growers. There were service providers on those calls, as well, folks who provide technical assistance to growers, provide trainings. Initially, when the growers were on those calls, there was a lot of connecting to whatever the needs were that were arising. For example, if somebody was looking for information on COVID safety protocols, if folks were looking for assistance on their farm and wanted to know more what the situation around that was, if folks were looking to get a better understanding of what would be happening with Farmers' Markets, these were some of the issues that people were coming to the calls to get a better understanding of.

It was a unique space, because we had folks from the Department of Cultural Affairs, DCASE, and they oversee Farmers' Market permitting. We had representation from there coming in, keeping in active communication with the growers on what was going on. So, **it was a unique space where folks who otherwise wouldn't have direct access to one another under these circumstances were able to really have that social lubricant to interact, convey their concerns, and update one another.**

Over time, as the growers phased out, it became more of a space for service providers, people who provide technical assistance, trainings, to do a lot of resource sharing. And so, they were sharing things like What sort of funding is available? What kind of training programs are emerging? They were continuing communication around COVID-19 safety protocols, that kind of thing. **As that group shifted from being more growers to being more service providers, we shifted that focus to knowledge exchange and information exchange platform,** and we were sending those updates to our email list so that the growers who were not able to be at those calls could at least get a run-down of what was going on, what the resources were that were emerging through this COVID crisis.

With the local food business group, that group was centered on providing assistance to local food businesses initially. And we were getting a lot of folks who were going out of business. There were folks who were having issues with personal protective equipment, PPE. There wasn't enough PPE. As we were working together, we came to realize that some things that we were well positioned to help with were PPE distribution. For example, one of our group members was connected to an organization that had emerged that did 3-D printing of face

shields. So, we were working with him and he was communicating with his contact and getting together hundreds and hundreds of these shields. We were [also] working with folks on the calls who came in from more of that small business end, or from organizations that work with small businesses, like the Hatchery, to see where there might be need for distributing those efforts. Then, **the group stayed focused on PPE distribution for quite a while, because this was an issue that was really impacting food businesses and restaurant workers who didn't have access to PPE.**

We were also in communication through the Rhizome effort with folks in the emergency food calls. So, we were realizing that there was PPE needs, not only on the small business front, but also for folks who are coming and picking up food at pantries. We didn't want these food distribution sites to become COVID hot spots. We were working rapidly to try to figure out what would be a system for getting PPE, and we wanted it to be more of a localized effort. We didn't want to be ordering PPE from China. We wanted to see if there was a way to get PPE from folks locally. Then we were working with the city, and the city had this contract with an organization that had shifted its focus from providing certain kinds of equipment for medical uses to providing access to PPE sources -- it's almost like an E-bay for medical supplies -- and they shifted to have PPE vendors on their website. And that didn't end up going anywhere.

But we ended up connecting with a local organization through the conversations that were emerging called Greater Auburn-Gresham Development Corp. And we realized that they had been doing a massive PPE distribution effort this whole time and were getting free PPE. They were getting access to huge amounts of PPE through donations. And what they told us is that their needs were not around funding to buy PPE. They needed staff support to distribute this PPE. They needed staff support to oversee this operation. And so, we connected them with a funder who would come in and sit in on some of these calls through the Chicago Region Food System Fund. And they were able to then connect them with some funding to fund those positions and help expand their PPE effort.

**The solution wasn't where we thought it was.** We thought that we had to find the PPE, and then work out how to distribute it. And what ended up happening is that we just needed to connect with an organization already doing that work. There was an organization that was already doing that work, but they [couldn't] do it at the scale that they were looking to do it, because they didn't have the resources to fund staff to do that. So, we re-shifted focus from buying PPE and redistributing it to connecting an organization doing that work with the funding to get the staff to do that. And we still have ongoing check ins with that organization to provide data support. We provided them with a list of food pantries that were seeking PPE. We connected them to another contact at Greater Chicago Food Depository, who was able to make the linkage between different pop-up sites that they had so that they could get PPE distributed at those sites.

After that the group then focused on cold storage, because that was emerging as an issue where a lot of these mutual aid networks – neighbors helping neighbors -- were popping up. There were these food distribution efforts happening all over, but they [couldn't] have cold storage to receive and then redistribute produce, fresh food. If you don't have the cold storage for that, then you can only distribute certain kinds of foods, which aren't necessarily very healthy. An issue that we've been working on now is what are the cold storage resources across Chicago and Cook County, and **how can we create a system for providing community based cold**

**storage? Because that's a need that's emerging.** So, we've been holding these listening sessions right now with folks from mutual aid networks, from emerging seafood distributors, from all of these different worlds that otherwise wouldn't necessarily directly come together around an issue, to focus on, "How can we provide, how can we manifest community cold storage?"

So, the cold storage effort is recently beginning. We have some folks with university ties, so they're bringing more of that research lens to the picture. Is it possible for us to map where cold storage exists? Is it possible for us to develop [a] system where companies that own this cold storage might be able to indicate in real time when they have storage available, so that community members can gain access to that storage? Or maybe it's that we need to put together a grant proposal or put together funding call to create a mixed approach to community storage that's owned by the community, like mobile cold storage units, that kind of thing. **Right now, we're very much in an information gathering phase.** We're also in a phase of connecting with other potential partners to characterize what this problem is, and how [to] best to move forward with addressing it.

There have been other connections that have arisen out of these calls, like folks who were looking for a particular kind of distributor, a local food distributor being connected to somebody who produces, or folks who were looking to partner with somebody on a grant proposal. We haven't tracked very well exactly where each of those connections went, or how exactly the work unfolded. And engagement on the calls has also varied. Sometimes we'll have a lot of folks on the calls, and then folks will disappear once they came and got what they needed. It's very much been an evolution of folks are coming to the calls as they have needs, and then leaving when their needs are met.

Another main challenge has been, **we're an organization that is explicitly focused on racial equity.** I think in person it can be a little bit different, because typically we'd work with different groups in different settings. So, all the groups wouldn't necessarily be coming to one forum. **But because this was a Rapid Response effort, and we wanted all hands-on deck, we wanted to create this as a platform for cross connectivity for resource sharing, for collective engagement to seek solutions to emerging problems.** There have been folks from a lot of different worlds coming into these calls who otherwise would not be interacting. So, folks from the university world, folks from different small businesses, folks that are service providers, folks that are community members. What we've learned is that the same racial dynamics that exist, the same dynamics of hierarchies of privilege, they're very much present on the call.

One challenge has been, for us as an organization, **to really center that phenomenon, to really center that different people on this call have different identities, they have different perspectives based on where they are within hierarchies of privilege.** [Asking questions like] how do we center that as part of the conversation that's unfolding so that those dynamics don't turn into a harmful situation where folks with less privilege are then getting the short end of the stick, or their ideas are being taken without being attributed. Some of that has happened. Those are dynamics that have unfolded on the calls, and we've had to continuously re-center that and make sure that we're providing training, that we're providing context for people who otherwise wouldn't really know. There are a lot of folks who haven't had racial equity training. And even if they have had racial equity training, these are issues that are dynamic, and they require dynamic engagements to really process and understand.

[So,] one thing that came out of that is that we started a training. It's like examining whiteness training. But basically, it's a training course for folks who are white to really examine, what does being white mean? How does it impact collective space? That kind of thing. And so there have been trainings that have come out of that work that folks have signed on for. And I think it's been a huge positive, because people, who otherwise would not have engaged have come together. And yeah, some people have walked away feeling a little burned like, "Oh, this isn't ... maybe something that I was contributing was taken by someone or wasn't properly attributed." So those dynamics do exist. But all-in-all I think it's been a huge positive to have that space and to address these issues as they're coming up, and to work on them as a community.

Folk are self-selecting into trainings like Interrogating Whiteness. That's what the training is called. We provide it as an option. We're setting the tone of the calls, and we're very much actively facilitating the calls. Some of that can weed out folks who are not going to work well withing that community. We also have community agreements that we always start our Rhizome calls with. Folks are aware of what the norms are that we are working towards.

The other thing is, this effort, it was shared out through our networks, who then shared it out with their networks. So, it's not as though the calls are open to everybody. They are, technically, open to everybody. But because of the way that they were shared out, it's still within some level of proximity to our circles of trust or community that we work within. That's not to say that there haven't been folks on the call who might not be as familiar with our cultural norms, and the sort of tone and pace that we're setting. But again, that's active work. By doing that work of facilitation, and holding that space in that way, maybe folks have dropped off who weren't jibing with that. Overall, I don't think it's been too much of an issue. **We've received a lot of messages from people when we have centered the conversation on racial equity, when we have centered these dynamics, people have been largely grateful because they either were not aware, or they were deeply aware and wanted the issues to be addressed.** I think overall it's been a positive response.

[Another] meaningful aspect of working for CFPAC is the fact that most of our staff is relatively new. I started at CFPAC in January. Aasia Castenada, my coworker, she also started in January. As a staff, we had not been working together for very long. We've all worked in this world of food systems or racial equity [for some time]. But as a whole staff, we had not been working together for very long. The only full-time employees that had been at CFPAC prior to January were Roger and Marlie. So, our staff, technically, in January doubled from two to four. And since the Rapid Response effort to now, it has doubled again. So, we're a staff of eight now. As a rapidly growing staff, **it's been hugely meaningful to be co-evolving, and to be engaged in the community in this very focused and solutions-oriented way, in this way that's very responsive to the community needs.**

I think one thing that's been really meaningful for me is **to be with my coworkers, and be doing this huge, Rapid Response effort in real time, while still very much learning about each other, coming together as a staff.** Another thing that's been meaningful for me is that I moved to Chicago in November of last year, so I have not been in Chicago for very long. I have family ties here, but I moved here from Madison, Wisconsin. And so, coming into Chicago, it's a big city, and diving right into all these different worlds from the food business world, to farm

workers. These are all worlds that we work within, but not with this level of cross collaboration that is centered on immediate community needs.

Through this time, I've also been doing some ancestral healing work myself, and looking at my own family history. My great-great-grandmother was documented as being the first female Muslim freedom fighter, and she even fought alongside Gandhi. And so, I think **this fight for liberation and connection to land, and for sovereignty is something that runs very deep in my family. It's something that is part of my blood memory.** And so, that is one big reason I think that I've always been attracted to this work of equity, of liberation.

[My ancestry] is also tied to food, because the culture that I come from is an agrarian culture (in Northern India). Growing up, my family would move between the United States and Pakistan. I lived in Pakistan between 2000 and 2004, during the Iraq invasions. I was there when 9/11 happened. [As a result] I've seen a lot of the impacts very close up of what these systems of inequity look like, especially in countries where there have been land grabs, where there's resources that are taken, and [where] people are displaced. **Having witnessed displaced villagers who had been displaced because of the azo dyes that had polluted their soils through the textiles industry, witnessing things like that really forged my passion for doing this work.**

That is one big reason I think that I've always been attracted to this work of equity, of liberation. **This is personal work to me. It's tied to my family history. It's also tied to my personal experiences.** My family is part of a global diaspora. We come from a small religious minority that's persecuted in India and Pakistan. Everybody is dispersed globally. I didn't grow up necessarily knowing all of this until I started digging deeper into my history and asking, "Well, how did we get here? What happened?" We all have ancestors. It's so interesting to me, because I remember hearing about other people's family histories when I didn't know as much about mine. Then I ended up contacting a cousin of mine who was like, "Oh, yeah. No. I went with my dad. We traced our whole family history back. UC Berkeley has a whole family archive of our family ancestors." It was so cool to learn all of that in my 20s.

**I think my sense of purpose has been focused on connection to land and food on a community level and addressing the systems that have broken that connection.** To have this Rapid Response Effort be so targeted in the community that I just very recently became a part of, and **to focus my energy on specific results, specific impacts, specific needs that are arising in this very beautiful, emergent way has been special.** It's been very nourishing, because moving to a newer place, to look around me and see how many people care, how many people are wanting to do this work [feels nice].

Overall, my hope is that [the Rapid Response effort] spurs greater connectivity between all of the different sectors, all the different groups, spaces in which work around food, land access, workers' rights is happening. And that people who were not previously part of this work prior to the Rapid Response continue to engage in this in a deeper way. That's my hope, is that **this Rapid Response effort will leave us a legacy connection that will alter our food system for the better.** I think that the Rapid Response effort has been a phenomenon. **It's been a way for me to harness my sense of purpose during this time, to build a sense of camaraderie, not only with my colleagues, but with folks across Chicago and Cook County.** That's something that I'm very grateful for.

**Aasia Mohammad Castañeda – Community Partnerships Manager (CFPAC)**

*Interviewed by Paulina Vaca, Tania Schusler, and Rowan Obach on December 4, 2020*

*Edited by Paulina Vaca & Rowan Obach*

I grew up bicultural; I'm Mexican and Pakistani. For [my] family to work, it had to be more than coexisting. It had to be to adapt and active listening. [This background influences my approach to the Rapid Response effort.] My role is that I facilitate what used to be known as the emergency food assistance working group. Now we've pivoted to focus on resilient food sovereignty and food systems. Understanding that **emergency food efforts, while needed (especially in this time of COVID), can undermine resilient and long-term sustainable food systems that ultimately will benefit communities that are most impacted by marginalization**, being under resourced. March 13th is when COVID was declared a national emergency and we saw all this food flying off the shelves. Some people, especially elders, and people that live check-to-check couldn't afford to buy some of this bulk. One of the first thoughts I had that Friday was to convene growers to understand what the season was going to look like. *How do we gather people, convene people to invest in the local food shed?* We didn't know what the food supply chain was going to look like, what was going to be shut down. *There were so many questions.*

I already had a background in the Zoom world because I'm part of another statewide network called Vital Lands Illinois. So, I was already familiar with it. I was like, *well, I know how to do this Zoom thing.* And I know how to do breakout groups. On that following Monday we met as a staff to talk about convening people as a Rapid Response just to hear what's going on. Then we had the initial first working groups like emergency food. There was a funding group that now is not a thing. But the funding group is what led to the Chicago Region Food System Fund. I will say those efforts did lead to that specific fund that has definitely kept a lot of urban growers and food businesses afloat— BIPOC-led. And within a 200-mile radius, because I think that's what their parameters were in their website.

So, there was a funding group, a group to support food businesses, local producers as well, and food chain workers. We had five that were meeting weekly; starting March 18<sup>th</sup> is when we first met. We had over 80 people attend that meeting. This was our first big convening. I don't think we've ever had a meeting with that many people since then— it was huge. That's sort of what kick started this thing that we just starting convening people every week. Then things branched off. Businesses like Gourmet Gorilla came in and then they were awarded a \$27 million contract from the USDA for this farms-to-families program. **A lot of the connectivity to nonprofits—** because that was part of that program— **was that the wholesale distributor had to work with [them] through the Rapid Response efforts.** Rick Bayless's Frontera Grill, so he, and some of the chefs, were in our meetings, worked with Gourmet Gorilla, connected to other community folks that needed food. A lot of things started to spark. ChiFresh Kitchen, which was

a Black-owned food co-op that launched in the middle of the pandemic, was also part of the mix and now part of an ongoing squad with Urban Growers Collective and Centro de Trabajadores Unidos in the south-east side and Las Visionarias Food Co-op, Grow Greater Englewood, and Majani Catering. We're all a squad and [have] been able to keep each other afloat.

So— and this is really interesting— the USDA [said], “Their response is so interesting.” And *of course, right*, because of the way the system works. **Commercial farmers, those that usually provide to hotels, schools, government institutions, were unable to pivot to families. We saw that.** Then the USDA said we're going to invest \$3 billion in U.S. commodities in the U.S. agricultural system. They did that to support U.S. commodities, not for food access to marginalized communities. Because their intention was not well thought out; it was done in haste and it was just done with this specific investment intention when they rolled out. Overnight, I reached out to my network — and I, born and raised Chicago, come from a really strong community organizing background. Overnight, I sent out a Google Form to my network of gathering the need across 40 different organizations across the city. We had a request of 10,000 boxes a week, and *this was overnight*. It was a lot. I did that with the intention of USDA; we can provide, because this was a lot of money. Midwest Foods is who we partnered with because they are a woman-owned local wholesale food that focuses on organic. They're a really good partner. The organization knew Midwest Foods through its good food purchasing program. So that's why it was a natural fit. They already were familiar with us. They have all the values aligned. We got all of these organizations.

The USDA, and you can do research on articles that talk about the insanity of who they gave the contracts to, because it just didn't make *any sense*. We were committing to (even though I gathered 10,000, I think they bumped it up to 30,000— including maybe partnerships with the park district and Chicago Public Schools)— a week. Gourmet Gorilla[’s] proposal was for about 1,000 boxes a week. They're a catering company and then they were awarded the \$27 million. The \$27 million was for six weeks. All of this is public information, you can research it. This was across the nation that the USDA gave contracts to. Everyone was scratching their heads, like why in the world did some of these folks get it, this these ridiculous contracts? This catering company in Texas got \$35 million. I mean it was just unprecedented, it was like what was going on?

There was a lot of hiccups. Nobody understood the nonprofits that were receiving these boxes. The distributors didn't know how to work with the nonprofit because they hadn't done that before, not understanding that you can't just unload this big old pallet. Some nonprofits or food banks, they can take it. So, it was good that we were, in terms of the Rapid Response meetings, holding a space for people to come and say *hey, this is a hiccup. We're not getting our food on time or some of the food is this, some of the food is that*, just some of the hiccups we were able to talk through. Funders were at the meetings to hear things at times, and [groups] like Midwest Foods. Gourmet Gorilla stopped coming to the meetings. I can't speak for them but I

think that they got busy with this \$27 million for sure. Because not only were they given this mega contract, they were then tasked with serving the entire Midwest region. It just didn't make sense. Midwest Foods was the perfect fit, they serve four states. Gourmet Gorilla was just serving food to charter schools, then they had to switch up their whole operation. But Midwest Foods, they stayed. We're still working with them now.

I think a lot of organizations started to do food distribution as a result. An example I have is the 18th Street Development Corporation. They went from supporting small businesses to doing a full-scale food distribution operation and partnering with business. And when they started to come on the call, and I was talking about what do you have in those boxes? **Because you don't have to default to what was defined.** And then we shared with them the examples. Then people understood what we were talking about.

**I think we've achieved the goal to redefine what food access, food distribution is.** My prior definition [of food distribution] was government food boxes that the Greater Food Depository had, that [in] food distribution, food pantries had the lowest quality. There's no value for quality produce and quality ingredients. That was my definition. And I feel like we've shifted the needle on that with the Greater Food Depository. It isn't just milk, wheat, bread, just unhealthy foods, government cheese stuff. We needed to redefine it even though we have a sense of urgency. So **it's almost like building a counterculture with food distribution, understanding the role of being culturally appropriate with some of the food items.**

So, the way a lot of our squad works [is] that in terms of food distribution, we wanted to carry this spirit of collaboration across these two communities, right. And so that's why the Centro de Trabajadores, ChiFresh Kitchen, and Majani and this is like communities that would have never, that are segregated because of the way the city was planned, but that wouldn't have come together or known about each other. We see that shift big time.

We went into the meetings hoping to get people together to create solutions, because no one person has all of the solutions. And as much as we can, **[we] model horizontal and collaborative and collective methodologies for problem-solving for specifically under-resourced communities in the south and west side, but not limited to** (because the native community is spread out). Native American communities [are] spread throughout the city; there's some folks in the north side like in Albany Park doing some good work there.

We don't have a clear line item of our goals, but I think convening folks to address and provide solutions in an equitable way and making sure with this overarching equity that it's about money affecting ability to influence and ensuring the culturally appropriate, culturally rooted foods are within the food distribution that we're trying to push. And food policy. That was a big issue with the USDA boxes. Gourmet Gorilla, there were some boxes some families were complaining would have four gallons of milk. What family is going to consume that? It's just so unhealthy. Again, they're commodities— that's what they cared about.



**We've brought people together.** We did have to do some course correcting around values; this is a space for addressing needs in Brown and Black communities. There's white folks on the call, some people taking credit, some people not feeling comfortable, some people taking ideas. Again, I'm part of Vital Lands Illinois. The facilitator of that, Shannon Sullivan, I brought in as a volunteer. She does a training called Interrogating Whiteness. **We, the Rapid Response efforts, brought the organization significant resources.** We got funding to support our ongoing efforts for Rapid Response. Again, we formed the squad *and the funders of that* so they funded a portion of what our squad needs are. Anyway, Shannon came in and from there Vital Lands established an Interrogating Whiteness training for folks that is still going on to address some of the issues that were coming up in meetings— how people were acting, how people felt treated.

We definitely use data and analyzed it to understand when we had to pivot, when we had to rename a group. We had weekly Rhizome meetings where all of the working groups came together, because that was a goal. We wanted people to come together, not work in silos. But it was turning into a meeting where twelve people were showing up when we used to have thirty. Why is that? Is it the same people? Is it diverse? We shifted it to Thursday afternoons, curated speakers, and still did updates. We sort of reshaped it and then it became vibrant again. I think in this sort of virtual community organizing effort, you have to know when to pivot, listen to folks, assess if something is changing and not what we intended within our theory of change. We do have a theory of change that guides some of the principles of how we work, then we adjust. Those are not easy conversations because people are like *well, no, we can't lose the little people we have*. But **you have to take a risk and be bold about making the right moves.**

**Connectivity and having people adapt to each other and build with one another are meaningful aspects for me.** Midwest Foods and all of these local growers are now connected. [With] the Greater Chicago Food Depository, we created culturally appropriate food boxes for different communities: the Mexican community, African American, First Nations, and Asian (with specificity to Chinese). And the Greater Food Depository loved it. They're like, *we're going to use this because we're having discussions around what food equity and justice looks like with emergency food*. That is something I really love.

The Resilient Food Group [has benefited the community through] ...money. For the first thing, the squad received funding to sustain Majani Catering, las Visionarias, Urban Growers Collective, and ChiFresh Kitchen in May. So, they started distributing food in June-July and are still working together. It was mainly for families [in the] west and south side, for Black and Latinx folks. Having access to good food is something that has come out. Again, these were culturally-appropriate boxes of fresh produce, not just dry grains and fat and proteins. Having influence over the Greater Chicago Food Depository is another thing that, from my group, has come out.

Access to water for growers has been an issue because the water department made changes without any type of community engagement; it's really expensive and not intuitive on how to apply to get access to it. So, this came up in our meetings. Advocates for Urban Agriculture is doing a lot of the sort of campaign work petitions around that. A funder of ours got involved. And she is now having these meetings with the city. She has a lot of power and influence. So that has definite impact for local growers and sort of equitable access to water.

November 17<sup>th</sup> [2020], the meeting before Thanksgiving, we had a bunch of mutual aid networks come on our call and organizations that are like the USDA pulled that program. It was about investing in the commodities. The growing season is coming to an end so they pulled it. Now all of these mutual aid networks are left hanging. The Greater Food Depository is not taking any more partners. So, I sent an email summary highlighting the eight organizations that vocalized the greatest need. Then a funder reached out to these eight entities and gave them \$20,000 as of this week.

**Getting people to quantify their needs, understand and gathering that information, and playing the role of a convener has definitely benefitted the people that come up to the meetings and that working community.** We're trying to push— \$20,000 will get them through December, maybe some [of] January depending on how many people are serving. We're still pushing to fill that gap at least for the next four to five months. **What we really want to do to provide better, more sustainable impact is to *push resilient thinking*. Resilience is not that everything is good; resilience is that you can *pivot*.** That you've imagined what would you do if you ran out of this money [and] what would you do if you don't have this food. That you have a plan B, a plan C, and that you have a back-up of pivoting. That's where resilience lies. **The more and more we can push [resilience], the more impact we'll have.**

[I am most involved with the Resilient Food Group], that's the one I facilitate. [Impacts that have emerged out of the Resilient Food Group are] food access, the squad coming together (those folks would have never [otherwise] organized with each other). [Also] getting them funded, getting those people in their networks and their communities—the south and west side. We're talking about Englewood, North Lawndale, South Shore, South Chicago, [and] Auburn Gresham. That served as a model. We funded another squad, called Food Farm Familias, giving them start-up money from other funds that we got as well. **The impact of that group lies in getting folks good food— folks that need it and are most impacted.** And defining what even good food is and making sure you have culturally-appropriate boxes. A lot of times I didn't understand what culturally appropriate or culturally rooted meant coming in. But then when I got it, I [saw] the shift with [those]. I'm seeing the shift with the Greater Food Depository.

In terms of Chicago history, there's been (and in the city council), a Black caucus, [and] a Latinx caucus. **There's always fights over crumbs.** It's super sad to see. It's more so now the changing demographic within the Latinx community. Back in the day, Harold Washington days,

the main demographic of Latinos in Chicago was Puerto Rican. In the Puerto Rican community ([and] I'm not romanticizing it), but there's a different type of acknowledgement and different type of presence of Afro-Latino identity. It's way different than in the Mexican community. Currently, 80% of the Latinx demographics is Mexican. **We see sort of the colorism and anti-Blackness in the Mexican community.** [We see] the Black and Latinx folks fighting over crumbs [at] the city level. [Thus], the communities are segregated.

What I was saying about making sure it's a safe space [was that we want] for everyone [to engage with the space] in a way that is productive. We don't want anyone to feel left out or like they can't say anything. **We don't want anyone to steal intellectual property and ideas.** We must make sure, because our notes are open to everybody. Sometimes I'm facilitating a meeting and I see someone copy the entire thing. Who is copying this and why? What are they doing with this information? So that's a little nerve wracking. It's a little weird to know who's taking information from what? What are they doing with it? When you're that transparent, sometimes that's a risk you take. [But it's] worth it, I think. In the end, just having faith that people do stuff, at least, if it benefits the community.

I think **making sure that the space that we hold is safe for everyone, and especially for BIPOC leaders.** But when we started doing the Interrogating Whiteness training, that helped to address a lot of the folks in our networks. It was for white folks only, but it helped those folks then to come with a different vibe and a different way of conviviality in these meetings. I think that's been the biggest challenge.

In general, [I am] understanding even myself as a person of color who's navigating fires in the backdrop, as an organizer. I have family, friends and family that have had and that have passed away of COVID. So, **amidst all the chaos, you're coming to this space knowing the self-care and the work-life balance is a challenge in this urgent time.** Those are kind of two tracks of challenges there. [Within] my family, my mother didn't convert to Islam, and my father didn't convert to Catholicism. They had two weddings of each. **We had to co-create a hybrid. That has informed the way I organize and because I'm constantly understanding people's patterns because I've had to do that all my life.**

So, my uncle passed away in May and the cousins tried to organize a Zoom call for all my aunts. We're all family, we're all on WhatsApp. None of them felt comfortable. [Well,] one of my uncles felt comfortable, but none of them felt comfortable coming on Zoom. **They were afraid of being misunderstood if they said something.** Because when you're on here, only one person can speak at a time. And everybody's listening to you. Whereas when you're in *convivia* in a kitchen, you can have all kinds of side conversations and it's not all eyes on you. It's completely different. It's not a gathering, it's not [the same] way.

I'm looking at, even though we're all speaking English in our meetings, [and] certain words mean [different things] to certain people. That informs my work big time [through] the

way I carry myself, the way I organize. **I have a natural drive to want to learn about people that's outside of transactional relationships.** If we do it in another language, I'm thinking in Spanish. Of course, there's other languages to think about. But accessibility is something we are thinking about. We're organizing a summit in February; I was the architect behind the structure of it, **understanding that accessibility is an overarching thing that we [must] understand.** I'm learning about it a lot.

HEARD is an organization that put out a set of guidelines and principles. For example, you shouldn't organize a panel with more than three people because it's hard for any ASL or interpreters to keep up. Three is actually way too much. You should have no more than two. I mean they put all these guidelines to understand because it's a lot for someone to sign or to translate. Then [with using] different things, you can use the interpreter and so people that want to hear in Spanish can listen in Spanish. I would love to see [it all in Spanish] because I think that sort of conditioning or **beginning to get folks comfortable needs to happen.** All Spanish versus translating, leading with it in a different language versus translating it to a different language, I [just] think it would be different. It will take a minute to kick start it. **It would take some time, some trust building.**

I kind of feel like the Herbalife crews would be a good way to start, some of that. I don't know if you guys know about Herbalife, but it's a pyramid thing. It's a pyramid scheme, but it's pretty big in Latino families and culture. I don't know if you've seen these storefronts that have orange and green curtains with no title on it. They're still going, and they love it. Everyone gets together, they buy their herbs and, or supplement stuff. . . it's not herbs, I don't know what it is. But it's big. People in the Latino community love that. It [must] start out with something like that—**something that is relaxed and more about fun as an entry point.** So, maybe all in Spanish but I haven't seen that [yet; at least], not that I'm aware of, but I'm [also] not looking for it. I can't say “no, I don't think so”, because I'm not looking for it. I know in Latin America they are using it, though. I have folks in Bolivia, there's something called Cultura Viva that I'm also kind of connected to. Cultura Viva is across the Americas, they use Zoom. They use Zoom. They don't send you the link, they just send you this access, the code thing.

**The more we can shift equity from being a statement, a position, a staff person, a working group, the more we can push equity as part of the overarching, not a track, that's the long-term impact.** And equity for BIPOC folks' under-resource, low-income communities. **Equity is a shift in power. To me, power is the ability to affect, the ability to influence.** And that comes through different forms. **That comes through decision-making. That comes through shift in money. And that comes through just policies and legislation.**

**If we understand that definition and power and equity, then [we also understand] what equity looks like in the food system: a shift in policies, legislation, decision-making processes for food.** In the food system, I'm talking about having more BIPOC growers, being

resourced as BIPOC growers. And that includes access to land and start-up money for growers, supporting food businesses and food restaurants. And then folks that are working in the frontlines like food chain workers, people working in warehouses, their safety, their having policy to support their living wages and their health, and health care. And then who are making the policies, who's passing the policies, that's also ability to affect and influence.

**The resilience call is an investment.** So, we're talking about for example ChiFresh Kitchen, investing in Majani, investing and amplifying all the local producers to be part of food distribution efforts. That's for sure an example. I think in the Rhizome calls— the culminating sort of calls where all the working groups come together we started co-creating policy platforms using the Heal Food Alliance, their policy platform as an example, and the Soul Fire Farms policy platforms as models to build off. We do it in **a participatory method because that's how we're going to build that information.**