

UCHC Volunteer Coordinator Helps Support Locals With Monthly Food Pantries.

Jacob Navarro October 15, 2024

LOS ANGELES - Amid rising food insecurity within South Los Angeles, Michelle Mata helps provide relief by managing several food pantries and providing fresh produce and essentials for local families in need at 1919 San Pedro St. 90011.

In the midst of an overcast Saturday morning in South Los Angeles, a line of people wait outside for fresh produce at Universal Community Health Center. Waiting by the clinic's gate is Michelle Mata with a clipboard in hand and a smile on her face as she checks in with members of the community. The scent of fresh mint permeates the air as volunteers greet anyone who comes in, insisting that they may grab as much mint, carrots, eggplant, raspberries, tomatoes, and celery as they wish. Michelle has been working as the food program and volunteer coordinator since June 2024. So far, she has helped contribute to the distribution of over 100 pounds of produce to over 1,641 individuals. Most recently, she and the community health center successfully hosted their biggest event on September 21, distributing over 1,000 pounds of food to 527 people.



“I was inspired to take on the role of running and managing UCHC’s food program because I believe in the future where fresh produce and good food is abundantly and affordably available to all. Food is medicine and I am very excited that a medical clinic is looking at health holistically. Many South LA community members suffer from chronic illnesses, like diabetes, hypertension, high cholesterol, etc because of eating habits that are based on the availability and convenience of food in the area.”, Mata stated.

For years, South Los Angeles has been considered a food desert by many as countless residents do not know when they will have their next meal. Michelle’s job is to help combat these doubts by managing the pantry’s operation and making sure everything goes according to plan to ensure that

both volunteers and participants feel supported when attending the food pantry. Hosting a Food Pantry may seem like a simple process, but there is a lot of essential work that happens behind the scenes that one may not consider. It takes much more than just one individual to help get these events into production.

“Relationships with food recovery organizations and grocery stores to receive donations and coordinate the logistics of delivering food are an important part of coordinating a food pantry. Knowing where food will be stored, what the operations of the day will look like, how/when volunteers are needed and are volunteers being recruited? Marketing the event is huge, although it looks like word of mouth has done our marketing for me. Transparent and ongoing communication with all people involved is the biggest success factor of a project of this scale.”, said Mata.

As of September 2024, Mata and UCHC have helped benefit the lives of over 1,600 people by providing fresh food during tough times. Through these events, they have brought together strong groups of volunteers who also wish to support the community. As groups of trusted volunteers go through a check-in process where they are assigned their roles, each volunteer has a clear and organized schedule to abide by. The preparation process starts as early as 7:45 a.m. to open the gates and unload all the food. The pantry itself begins at 9:00 a.m. with many people already beginning to line up outside the front gates lasting until 1:00 p.m. Committed to waking up early, lifting heavy boxes, and organizing produce to be given to the public, the work can be exhausting at times, but for Michelle and the many volunteers who join her, it is truly worth it knowing that they are leaving a positive impact on hundreds of people in need.



“There is a synergy created when a group of people get together under a common goal and accomplish it 500 times in a row, distributing free, fresh produce”. Said Mata. “You can’t help but feel good, even if a little tired at the end of the day, knowing that, as a volunteer, you have taken initiative towards improving a food desert resident's access to nutritious foods and accomplished it at a scale of hundreds of families - all in four hours of a Saturday! It’s a great feeling”.

Both Michelle and UCHC have come a long way since the beginning of 2024 with their volunteer work. As the support of volunteers and the number of events continue to grow, it is safe to say that they will continue to leave a positive impact on the southern region of Los Angeles County. For those interested in volunteering in their future events there will be more opportunities on October 12, November 9 & December 14. More information can be found on their website at uchcla.org/food-pantry.