

DISH & La Cocina

An Equitable & Innovative Food Security Partnership

An overview of the program and evidence of its success, as told through a participatory evaluation from DISH residents and La Cocina entrepreneurs.



Delivering Innovative Supportive Housing (DISH) is a San Francisco-based permanent supportive housing provider for those with complex health issues who have experienced chronic homelessness.

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La Cocina provides low-income, BIPOC and immigrant women food entrepreneurs with affordable commercial kitchen space, industry-specific technical assistance, access to market opportunities, and access to capital as they formalize and grow their businesses.

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In San Francisco, SRO residents face high levels of food insecurity.

78%

of supportive housing residents say they **run out of food each month**

Food scarcity in permanent supportive housing, particularly in single-room occupancy (SROs), is a persistent problem, yet there has not been a targeted program or investment to address this dire need.

“When you’re on food stamps, it’s really easy to go through \$200 in food stamps in a week or two .” -DISH resident

The DISH-La Cocina meal pilot offers an innovative solution.

“We serve healthy food and we really cook the food we love.”

-La Cocina entrepreneur

In 2020, DISH supportive housing partnered with La Cocina to provide flexible, accessible meals for residents made in small, BIPOC women-owned restaurants in San Francisco. The partnership is a win-win for participants, using existing staffing and infrastructure to ensure food access while supporting the economic recovery and sustainability of BIPOC women-owned businesses.

Participants documented the success of this program through participatory evaluation.

Residents say that La Cocina meals:

-  Help alleviate hunger
-  Are accessible
-  Are high quality

Meals help residents stay in supportive housing by:

-  Making it easier to live in community
-  Allowing them to focus on other important tasks
-  Alleviating the need for other food programs

“So many people are in need of food. I love how nobody has to go hungry.” -DISH resident

\$1M in funding provides 325 delivered meals a day, 5 days a week for a year using existing infrastructure.

The DISH-La Cocina partnership provides a two-pronged solution to a two-sided equity issue in San Francisco.

Persistent Food Insecurity in SROs

Supportive housing residents in San Francisco face persistently high levels of food insecurity, resulting in challenges maintaining good physical and mental health, housing stability, and community wellbeing. While many food programs exist to serve residents, there is a lack of consistent funding and on-site programs that provide accessible, high-quality, and culturally-relevant food.



Residents benefit from a flexible, free food delivery system

that is accessible, high quality, and culturally relevant. Food security and a sense of community and human dignity all contribute to housing stability.

Inequities in the Restaurant Industry

Working-class women of color and immigrants are often excluded from the mainstream job market, including the formal food industry. Many low-income women successfully start and operate their own informal food enterprises. However, they face large risks and significant barriers to entry into formal industry due to insufficient financial and social capital that supports asset-building.



Restaurant entrepreneurs grow their businesses with stable revenue

and opportunities for skill building and culinary autonomy. These self-sufficient businesses support entrepreneurs, their families, and the city as a whole while giving back to their community.

A Participatory Evaluation of the Program

In 2022, program participants worked with Engage R+D, a learning and evaluation firm, to document and measure the impact of the partnership. Through participatory evaluation, an advisory group of DISH residents and La Cocina entrepreneurs refined the research questions, developed the evaluation methods, and fielded and interpreted program data together. The data they collected included interviews with entrepreneurs and a survey of 180 DISH residents representing a third of program participants. We share the findings in the following pages.

SRO residents at DISH face high levels of food insecurity

While emergency programs offer meals, once in permanent supportive housing residents are responsible for securing food and paying rent. Traditional supports often present barriers to getting food while programs such as food stamps don't last as long for SRO residents who lack access to adequate cooking facilities. Seventy-eight percent of DISH survey respondents reported that, without La Cocina meals, they run out of food during the month. More than half of DISH residents also reported having a physical, mental, or emotional disability that made it difficult to do errands; this group had a rate of food insecurity that was 20-30% higher than other residents.

Without La Cocina meals, this is how often DISH residents said they...	never	a few days each month	about half the days	most days each month
 Ran out of food and didn't have money to get more	22%	38%	22%	18%
 Went hungry but did not eat because there wasn't enough food	29%	41%	18%	12%
 Couldn't get healthy food for a balanced meal	28%	33%	19%	20%
 Skipped a meal because they had trouble going out to get food	32%	37%	21%	11%

"When you're on food stamps, it's really easy to go through \$200 in food stamps in a week or two. [La Cocina] really helps stretch that out."

"I eat a LOT of top ramen and it's not exactly a healthy diet."

"We have a number of people who are shut-ins or for medical reasons aren't ambulatory."

The pandemic has added to the challenges for BIPOC women-owned restaurants

La Cocina entrepreneurs are 94% women, 94% people of color, 70% immigrants, and 100% low-income. Women-, BIPOC-, and immigrant-owned businesses face significant challenges, and during the pandemic these issues were compounded by restaurant shut-downs, supply chain issues, changes to the labor market, and rising inflation.

Interviews with small businesses owners at La Cocina showed how they struggled to keep the doors open and pay their staff:

"In the darkness of the pandemic, there was no other income."

"For me, because it wasn't easy to open my business in the middle of the pandemic, it was so hard"

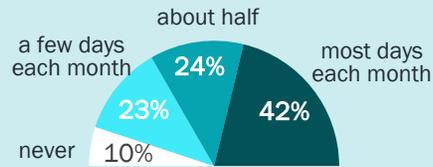
"Sometimes we don't have a lot of customers. Sometimes we had to close for a long time [during the pandemic]."

"In the middle of the pandemic it was extremely hard to find any other way to bring in income and support our employees and support the business to stay afloat."

Accessible, high-quality food for 516 residents

Through the partnership with La Cocina, DISH residents have access to meals five days a week delivered to their building. In addition to providing critical nutrition, they reported that the meals are tasty, healthy, and convenient.

Residents frequently accessed meals: They gave meals positive ratings:



Food security contributes to housing stability

Meals provide a sense of dignity, free time and energy to focus on other important tasks, and contribute to community building. These benefits ripple out to improve resident mental health, employment, and housing stability.

“It’s really easy to go through those food stamps. I know the last two weeks I really relied on [the La Cocina meals].”

89% say meals **help when I am hungry** and don’t have enough food

“The building has a different feel when people are fed.”

84% say meals make it easier to live in a **community with others**

“For many things, my sickness holds me up. La Cocina meals help save time.”

80% say meals help me **focus on other important things**

“You show your love for humanity by feeding the people. I do not take it for granted.”

80% say meals give me a **sense of dignity** or make me feel respected

“[Without La Cocina,] I don’t get hot meals, family meals. Ever. Bless y’all.”

75% say meals help me **share food with others** and get to know my neighbors

“The food is of a higher quality than most other food programs. I see less food go to waste.”

71% say meals make it so I have **less need for other food programs**

Support for 28 entrepreneurs

As part of La Cocina’s mission to incubate small businesses, the partnership with DISH allows BIPOC, immigrant, and female entrepreneurs to build skills while cooking culturally-relevant food. These benefits ripple out to support the entrepreneurs, their families, and the community as a whole. They include:

Generating Stable Income

“I know that at least once a month, I’m going to get this amount a month to be able to support this and this and that. That’s the comfort. That a thing that just makes you feel less stress.”

Building Skills

“We develop skills through this project. We need to think about quantities and how to work on a larger scale.”

Supporting Employment

“[Through the contract with DISH,] we were able to keep a lot of the people that were working for us. We were able to support our family, we were able to not close our businesses at all.”

Giving Back

“We know where the food goes, what kind of people get that food—they are residents and neighbors here.”

RECOMMENDATIONS AND NEXT STEPS

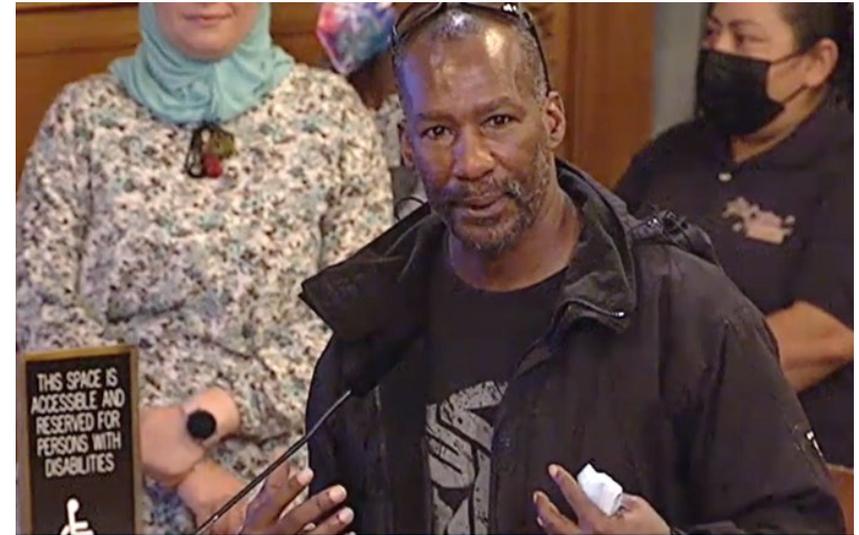


Participant advisors used the evaluation to inform program improvements

The advisory group reviewed feedback from the DISH resident survey and, together with restaurant owners and program staff, agreed to implement the following program improvements, including:

- Post a daily ingredient list including allergens and a monthly schedule with type of cuisine for meal planning
- DISH sites will identify resources for providing desserts, beverages and condiments to complement the meals

Photo: DISH residents and evaluation advisors Susan Lefever and Race Anderson discuss survey results at a meeting of the participatory evaluation advisory committee.



Participants asked for \$2m in funding to continue the program for another 2 years

At a cost of less than \$12 per meal, \$1M in funding provides 325 delivered meals a day, 5 days a week, for one year. Public funding of the successful pilot would:

- Provide food security to adults in SROs who lack access to cooking facilities and programs such as the Department of Disability and Aging Services' congregate meal program
- Support small food business owners, particularly low-income women of color
- Align with multiple SF City Department priorities (including the Food Security Task Force)
- Utilize existing staffing and infrastructure with no additional overhead costs

Photo: DISH resident and evaluation advisor Dimitri Clark addresses the San Francisco Board of Supervisors Budget and Appropriations Committee surrounded by La Cocina entrepreneurs and evaluation advisors Wafa Bouhlil, Nafy Flatley, and Estrella Gonzalez.

Appendix A: DISH Resident Survey Results

May 3, 2022

In 2022, residents and entrepreneurs participating in the DISH-La Cocina meal program worked with Engage R+D, a learning and evaluation firm, to document and measure the impact of the partnership. Through this participatory evaluation, an advisory committee composed of DISH residents and La Cocina entrepreneurs (see Appendix B for participants) worked with Engage R+D to refine the research questions, develop the evaluation methods, and field and interpret program data together. Data collection included conversations with entrepreneurs and a DISH resident survey.

This appendix provides data from the DISH resident survey of 180 DISH residents, representing a third of program participants. Key findings from the evaluation advisory team include:

- Advisors observed from the survey data that DISH residents have a range of food needs. While some do not experience food insecurity, more than three-quarters (78%) of survey respondents at DISH reported that they run out of food at least a few days a month and don't have money to get more. This rate was 20-30% for residents who reported having a physical, mental, or emotional condition that made it difficult to do errands alone.
- The majority of DISH survey respondents (81%) said La Cocina meals are good or great, and that it helped them when they were hungry (89%), made it easier to live in community (84%), helped them focus on other important things (80%), and gave them a sense of dignity (80%). Advisors noted the positive reviews and shared their own experiences with how food helped them live in community with one another and focus on important tasks. Hearing these experiences at the advisory meeting allowed entrepreneurs to hear from residents firsthand and get to know some of the people they have been cooking for.
- In reviewing DISH resident requests from the survey, DISH advisors, entrepreneurs, and staff prioritized three areas for improvement: labeling food and ingredients, providing a schedule of vendors for each month, and providing desserts, beverages, and other condiments through DISH programming.
- Following this evaluation, advisors hope the community will recognize the benefits of this program and continue to support it. They also see opportunities to spread it to recipients of other supportive services.

Food Security

Exhibit 1. Food Security without La Cocina Meals (N=174-178)

Those with a disability were 20-30% more likely to experience the below items at least a few days a month. White participants were 8-10% more likely than people of color to experience the below items at least a few days a month.

Without La Cocina meals...	never or almost never	a few days each month	about half the month	most days each month	percent food insecure*
Would the food you buy each month ever run out, and you didn't have money to get more?	22%	38%	22%	18%	78%
Were there times you were hungry but did not eat because you didn't have enough food ?	29%	41%	18%	12%	71%
Would there be times you were not able to eat a balanced meal because you couldn't get healthy food?	28%	33%	19%	20%	72%
Have you skipped a meal or not had enough to eat because you had trouble going out to get more?	32%	37%	21%	11%	68%

*Food insecure is defined as experiencing this issue a few days or more each month

Experience with La Cocina Meals

Exhibit 2. Have you eaten meals delivered from La Cocina? (N=173)

	%	n
most days each month	42%	71
about half the month	24%	41
a few days each month	23%	39
never or almost never	10%	17

Exhibit 3. How would you rate the La Cocina meal program overall? (N=171)

	%	n
great!	44%	76
good	37%	64
okay	15%	25
not good	4%	6

Exhibit 4. Experience with La Cocina Meals (N=178-180)

Those with a disability were less likely to report some of the benefits below, such as ability to focus on other things, it being easier to live in a community, and share food with neighbors. Residents of Camelot consistently gave lower ratings than other buildings for the items below.

	no	disagree	agree	absolutely!	all agree
La Cocina meals help me when I am hungry and don't have enough food.	7%	4%	37%	52%	89%
Having La Cocina meals in the building makes it easier to live in a community with others (such as improving morale or decreasing conflicts).	10%	6%	48%	37%	84%
Knowing I can get La Cocina meals helps me focus on other important things , like taking care of myself, going to appointments, or running errands.	9%	11%	42%	38%	80%
La Cocina meals give me a sense of dignity or make me feel respected.	10%	10%	44%	36%	80%
La Cocina meals help me share food with others and get to know my neighbors.	13%	12%	39%	36%	75%
Because of La Cocina meals, I have less need for other food programs .	9%	20%	42%	29%	71%

Open-Ended Responses About La Cocina Meals

Exhibit 5. What do you like about La Cocina meals? (N=168)

Topic	Examples
Taste/quality (x58)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • I like that its food you would order yourself. Cooked right & spiced right. • I really love the food! Also, the vision of the program itself and its ability to make such homestyle fare is awesome. • It is spiced and prepared just like it be for a normal customer. • It reminds me of home cooking • The food is of a higher quality than most, or other food bank services. • The food is very tasty and offers the chance to try foods from different ethnic cuisine.
Convenience and Packaging (x34)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The easy thing is I don't have to go out or make a line. It's easy to come here and pick them up and that's helped me a lot. I don't want to go nowhere and I know the food is here. That's saved me time and I don't have to cook because it's already cooked. • Free and right here. Sitting here waiting for you when you're going in and out. • I like that they are here if I need it and they are simple to prepare. I throw it in the microwave. And if I need one, I can have an extra. • It makes save my time under sickness. I have many business I need to do but for many sickness it stuck up. At that time your meal help save time. • I like the packaging (convenient and microwavable!). • They are prepacked and ready to eat meals
Healthy and Fresh (x31)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • I like that there are veggies w/ almost every meal, and... I like that they are usually fresh. • The food is high quality and very nutritious. • The taste. I eat a LOT of top ramen and its not exactly a healthy diet. So its nice to be able to get some food that's not just balanced but tastes good too. • As a bachelor and not a cook I value a well-balanced excellent meal. Thank you! • I like that they are usually fresh. I don't worry that I might get food poisoning. • They're fresh. They are large and last a long time. • Mostly fresh vegetables.
Portions (x19)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Good quality and portions. • Good meals and they are filling. • They're fresh. They are large and last a long time. I have a small refrigerator and the problem is I don't have room for too much but one thing about that food is even if you keep it out of the refrigerator, it still smells good. I wouldn't use it another day but it at least lasts one day. • I have a very small fridge, so I cannot store food. I leave my food room temperature, next day. Is still good, just different. • They can be added to make a complete meal • They are large and last a long time.

Variety (x13)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • I like that there are many different types of meals (spaghetti, Indian, enchiladas, etc.) • The food is very tasty and offers the chance to try foods from different ethnic cuisine. • The meals are fresh and the variety is excellent
Helps those in need (x9)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • I think that it is beautiful. Kind thing that you give of yourselves and show your love for humanity by feeding the people. I do not take it for granted. • It is a blessing to be provided a meal and may it expand to others and open a closed door for those in need • It's so nice that La Cocina is here, so many people are in need of food. I love how nobody has to go hungry. • It's very lovely to know that people in the community are so generous with their time and money
Reliability (x7)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Always on time. • Punctuality of delivery. • They are dependable. • When I receive them, they're always in time and its delicious.
Frequency (x4)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • It comes every day. • It helps having the meals daily. Helps me save money.
General appreciation (x42)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • So grateful. • Just keep going. • You're doing fine. • Excellent program.
Other (x8)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • I can get as many as I want. I eat them. • I have a choice to except it or reject it.

Exhibit 6. What ideas do you have to improve the La Cocina meal program? (N=112)

Topic	Examples
Meal preferences (x23)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Less rice. Less pasta. • Less Arabic meals. Most of the meals are good. More American style food. • Incorporate some fish or seafood dishes into the menu • To serve Hispanic food • If they can have soul food.
Additions: Dessert, beverage, condiments (x19)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • If they add a drink and a dessert would be nice • I would try to have more variety, throw in some desserts like cake or pudding. • They should give you juice with it. A lot of people here get a monthly check but I don't so I can't buy sodas or nothing. • It's very good as it. But maybe some condiments like chopped onions or cilantro, salsa (maybe chips too) and sour cream. • Seasoning on the side. I understand people have different diets. • I would add more sauces.
Taste/Quality (x15)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Keep the meals simple w/out too much spice or salt. • The meals are no good. Unrecognizable. Not good at all. I can't eat it. • Sometimes it's kind of nasty • Our meal today consisted of tuna? Chicken? Salad. IT WAS NOT LABELED OR DATED. Some kind of shredded cheese. WHAT A WASTE. Our tenants need tasty, edible nutrition. Seriously I hate the meals, Yuk!
More variety (x14)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The portions are nice. Could use a little more variety in foods. Besides that, they're fine. • More different foods on the clock. • More food selections • More variety. More vegetarian options like plant-based proteins. Garden salad options.
Nutrition and dietary needs (x12)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • I think there should be some meals that are totally bland no spices no salt/pepper NO NADA • Less carbs • Maybe some fruits or salads • Helping the elderly and handicapped. Eating healthy. Staying away from sugary foods and eating more fruits and vegetables. • I would put more veggies than carbohydrates. • Also, inclusion of vegetables is great, but please make sure that the veggies are cooked enough. Many of the residents suffer from dental issues, so crunchy veggies are not enjoyable.
Reliability delivery and a schedule of the meals (x11)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Seems irregular. We never sure when they're going to show up. • More consistent delivery. There are days that it doesn't come like its supposed to. Delivery times are all sporadic without a dependable time. Sometime its 2. sometimes as late as 7pm. Sometimes it doesn't come at all. Better adherence to a schedule.

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Less days missed - meals don't always come 5 days a week. More consistent timing - meals come from 12:30 to 5. When I depend on the meal that day, I skip doing other things. • Schedule of what they're serving and what day and time. • One time you or La Cocina made pupusas and I had 2 servings. Please let me know in advance when you are serving pupusas. • Maybe knock on the door when you arrive or leave a notice to what time you are coming.
Food safety (x9)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • I would like them to make everything different all the time but to see who's allergic to what. • Just stay with the quality of cooking. Make sure meat is all the way cooked. • They put things like onions in their food—onions allergy. • Better labeling of meals, to include possible food allergies (like peanuts) • The fact that they spoil rather quickly
Portion size (x9)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Bigger portions. When there are meat dishes bring extras • Larger portions. • More portions. You get hungry. Sometimes I want more than one.
Frequency (x9)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • More meals! Breakfast or lunch? More meals!! More food!! • Weekend meals • Please, make an effort to bring meals 5 days/week. Lately, it's been more like 3-4 days/week.
Availability (x3)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The reason why I chose not good for all the choices is because I have only had one meal, they go so fast, I have been here for 1.5 months. • Well, I rarely get to eat La Cocina because the pigs in my building take bags and load them full. Maybe put room #'s on them? • I have a solution to the meals that people are going about at a first come get as many as they like. I will personally help pass them out to each room individually so everybody gets at least one.
Other (x6)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Maybe serve then hot but that might be hard. • If they provide the food I can volunteer or I can see if they are hiring for a cook. • If they took people from the cooking academies and gave them credit to train at their restaurants.

Participant Demographics

Exhibit 7. Building (N=183)

	%	n	response rate	N
Pacific Bay Inn	24%	44	59%	75
Auburn	15%	27	39%	70
Empress	14%	25	28%	89
Windsor	11%	21	23%	92
Le Nain	18%	33	39%	85
Camelot	11%	20	37%	54
Minna Lee	7%	13	26%	50

Exhibit 8. Gender Identity (N=169)

	%	n
Male	71%	120
Female	25%	42
Trans Woman	2%	3
Trans Man	1%	2
Genderqueer and/or gender non-conforming	1%	1
Another gender	1%	1

Exhibit 9. Age (N=157)

	years
Average	57
Minimum	29
Median	57
Maximum	80

Exhibit 10. Race/Ethnicity (N=163)*

	%	n
White, Caucasian, or European American	44%	71
Black, Afro-Caribbean, African American, or African	33%	53
Latinx/o/a or Hispanic American	12%	20
Asian American or East/South/Southeast Asian	6%	9
Native American or Alaskan Native	6%	9
Pacific Islander or Native Hawaiian	4%	7
Middle Eastern or Arab American	1%	2
Another**	6%	10

*Note: percentages may total more than 100% because respondents could select more than one race/ethnicity

**Another race/ethnicity included: Creole, Mixed, Puerto Rican, Romanian, Sicilian

Exhibit 11. Because of a physical, mental, or emotional condition, do you have difficulty doing errands alone such as visiting a doctor's office or shopping? (N=151)

	%	n
Yes	54%	81
No	46%	70

Appendix B: Participatory Evaluation Team ---

This evaluation was conducted under the leadership and direction of the following team members:

DISH Resident Advisors:

- Race Anderson
- Dimitri Clark
- Charles Daniels
- Ryan Davis
- Susan Lefever

Entrepreneur Advisors:

- Wafa Bahloul, Kayma
- Nafy Ba Flatley, Teranga
- Estrella Gonzalez, Estrellita Snacks
- Dilsa Lugo, Los Cilantros
- Guadalupe Moreno, Mi Morena
- Bini Pradhan, Bini's Kitchen

DISH Staff:

- Lauren Hall, Executive Director
- Mattie Loyce, Community Development Manager
- Leila Perrard, Fund Development Manager
- With special thanks to building General Managers, Assistant General Managers, and volunteers, including Janet Avelar, Glenda Couvson, David Weld, and Ashley Neufeld

La Cocina Staff:

- Naomi Maisel, Community Partnerships & Food Justice Advocacy Manager
- Katherine Sundt, Development Manager
- With special thanks to La Cocina Marketplace staff

Engage R+D Staff:

- Clare Nolan, Co-Founder
- Meghan Hunt, Research Consultant