



TEAM PROFILE

Mandela Partners

Based in Oakland, CA on the unceded territory of the Huchiun.



ABOUT MANDELA PARTNERS

Mandela Partners is a nonprofit organization that uses food as a tool for communities of color to build their own health and well-being, wealth, and opportunities. Mandela Partners works in and alongside Black, Indigenous, and other People of Color (BIPOC) communities in Alameda County, California with a focus on West Oakland, East Oakland, and Unincorporated Alameda County. These neighborhoods have been shaped by the racist practice of redlining and decades of chronic disinvestment, and are now facing the pressures of rapid gentrification. Mandela Partners envisions a time when local communities have all they need and more – access to fresh, delicious, and culturally relevant foods; economic stability; jobs and business opportunities that build long-term family and community wealth; and economic investment that centers legacy residents and allows those who have been there to stay there.

F2FA PROGRAM QUICK FACTS

► **F2FA PROGRAM REACH:**

Program's priority is in West Oakland, but reaches community members throughout the East Bay through a sliding scale CSA, pop-up neighborhood Community Produce Stands, and produce distribution sites with local partners.

► **FUNDING SOURCES:**

- Local Food Promotion Program (LFPP)
- Other federal funding, including USDA Community Food Projects (CFP)
- Philanthropic funding
- State and local government funding
- Sales revenue

*Organization has been in operation since 2004.
F2FA program has been in operation since 2010.*

► **WEBSITE:**

- mandelapartners.org
- shopmandela.com/about



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As we work toward a collective goal of rebuilding a new equitable food system, I am reminded of how important small projects like these can be. They offer room for creativity and flexibility, while centering real relationships with both the farmers and consumers. An equitable food system values people's well being above all else.”

– NINA ARROCENA,
FOOD ACCESS PROGRAM MANAGER

MANDELA PARTNERS' F2FA PROGRAM HAS THREE MODELS

“Pay-what-you-can” CSA program, which provides a 50% discount to households with CalFresh (federally known as SNAP), and delivers seven kinds of fresh fruits and vegetables to participants' doors each week. The higher tier price point is an opportunity for Oakland residents to engage with a more equitable food system in a deeper way by choosing to help cover the cost of free produce that is distributed to their neighbors.

Produce Distribution Program, which provides culturally-relevant produce to residents at no cost, through a cost-sharing model in partnership with other community-based organizations and affordable housing sites.

Community Produce Stands, Mandela Partners' longest running program. Three times a week, staff set up pop-up produce stands in neighborhoods that have little access to fresh food and that have been identified by residents as a place where they would like to shop. Over the years, sites have included elementary schools, libraries, health centers, senior centers and hospitals. The program is shaped by the insight of “Community Builders” – community members and shoppers hired as part-time staff at Mandela. Culturally relevant produce requested by families such as bananas and avocados are sourced from distributors for the pop-up produce stands, while all locally grown produce from their networks of farmers is sold at a low cost and also eligible for a 50% discount for CalFresh shoppers.

Mandela Produce Distribution (MPD) is the organization's community-based food hub in West Oakland through which the organization's farm to food assistance programs are managed. Launched in 2010, MPD aims to build sales channels for BIPOC farmers who operate small to mid-sized Certified Organic or pesticide-free farms within a 150-mile radius and to create access to quality, nutritious food in limited-resource and BIPOC communities in West Oakland.

MPD offers its network of ten farmers a logistics infrastructure for aggregation and distribution, as well as non-extractive financing – meaning interest-free loans that farmers can pay back in the form of produce. MPD staff work to help their partners understand the rhythms and struggles of farming, encouraging flexibility when certain crops fail by educating customers on the challenges their network of BIPOC farmers face while also being able to offer other great options through multiple sourcing channels. As a project of the non-profit Mandela Partners, they are able to leverage both sales revenues and grants to ensure fair pricing for their farmer network, while securing access to affordable, high quality produce for community members, regardless of their means, through MPD's food access programs.



WHO'S AT THE F2FA TABLE?

Mandela Partners prioritizes channels of feedback through community conversations, surveys and through direct engagement at produce distribution sites. Pricing is determined by farmers and location for food distribution is determined by the community. F2FA programs include hiring community members as "Community Builders" with decision making power to help shape the work.

BUILDING COMMUNITY THROUGH FOOD

While Oakland's communities are diverse — representing a range of ages, identities, and lived experiences — they all face a legacy of systemic disinvestment in their neighborhoods, resulting in widespread economic, housing, and food insecurity. Mandela Partners' programs use food as a lever to support health and wealth-building to counter these inequities, including through culinary job training programs, incubation and training for BIPOC food entrepreneurs, healthy grocery store initiatives, wellness education, and food access programming.

Mandela Partners' programs also build community: they go beyond traditional customer-supplier relationships with farmers, getting to know them as full people. They tailor the support they offer farmers based on continuous feedback through face-to-face conversa-

tions. Meanwhile, the organization's produce programs provide an important opportunity to connect with residents by creating a welcoming, dignified and inclusive experience. As they build relationships with individuals during pick up, the staff interact with the residents, asking for feedback on the program to continuously improve it and meet the community's needs and desires.

Mandela Partners was established in West Oakland almost twenty years ago with a vision for disrupting the zero-sum notion of either supporting farmers or increasing food access. They believed then, and they believe now, that they can and must do both. Food is at the heart of Mandela Partners: "We are connecting our community with hella fresh, hella local produce!"



IN THEIR WORDS



KEY SUCCESSES

Purchasing approximately \$110,000 of product from 7-10 farmers annually to provide high quality produce to families who wouldn't be able to afford it otherwise

Built strong relationships with farmers, residents and partners over the years to be known as a reliable source for high quality and affordable produce in the Bay Area



KEY CHALLENGES

Best practices to gather data and measure impact to better tell our story

Continuous improvement of engagement mechanisms with both farmers and produce recipients

Optimizing procurement and distribution logistics for efficiency and cost-savings



VALUES IN ACTION

Relationships:

We are reimagining the typical transactional approach with customer service. We aim to be flexible with farmers. We require high quality products, but we don't cut ties if they don't have the quantity or type of produce they promised due to external circumstances. Just the opposite: After relationships are built, we are able to support some of them with interest-free loans that they can pay back with produce."

Real & Measurable Results for our Community:

We don't assume our work is achieving its goals; we ask. We engage our community of farmers, consumers, customers, and partners in ongoing and meaningful feedback opportunities to ensure our work is truly meeting needs and building a more equitable local food system. When it is not, we hold ourselves accountable."

Team Sustainability:

We grow our work at a pace that allows us as a team to sustain integrity in our work and our collective wellness; to be thoughtful and intentional in our decisions; to be responsive if and when the needs of our community evolve and shift."

Place-based:

We prioritize West Oakland and the Black and Brown communities that have been there for generations."



LESSONS LEARNED

Don't start purchasing from farmers until you have established the proper infrastructure: refrigeration, trucking, staff that can build relationships.

Put relationships first. Plan for ways to pivot to provide for flexibility when it's called for due to crop failure or other production issues. Cultivate many different sourcing options and help customers understand the realities of farming.

Support farmers by letting them name the price and support them through challenges. ("For instance, we provided rapid response funding recently to a farmer whose entire crop was ruined by a flood.")

Add "Community Builders" to your paid staff from the local community and give them decision making power over how the program operates.

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