PACIFIC COAST FARMERS' MARKET ASSOCIATION

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"RE-THRIVING" A PRE-PANDEMIC PARTNERSHIP

Twenty years ago, a chance meeting between a Kaiser Permanente physician and PCFMA's Executive Director at a farmers market launched a new initiative: the first hospital-based farmers market. The goal for Kaiser Permanente was to help its members more easily access the fresh fruits and vegetables that are essential to preventing diet-related diseases such as diabetes and heart disease. The goal for PCFMA was to provide additional mid-week sales outlets for PCFMA's farmers to sell products that they had harvested but that were too ripe to make it the weekend when most farmers markets were open.

My first day at PCFMA was several months after PCFMA opened its first farmers market at a Kaiser Permanente hospital and on the very day that the second of those markets opened. This partnership between PCFMA and Kaiser Permanente eventually saw PCFMA operating farmers markets on 13 Kaiser Permanente campuses. In addition to serving Kaiser Permanente members, many of whom chose to set appointments to coincide with the presence of the farmers market, these markets also became a workplace benefit for Kaiser Permanente staff. The farmers markets led staff outdoors, into the sunshine, for an essential break during their stressful days and gave them fresh food options with which to refresh themselves.

During this time, Kaiser Permanente adopted "Thrive" as its slogan and beautiful pictures of fresh fruits and vegetables began to appear throughout their hospitals, in their advertisements, and on their marketing

vegetables began to appear throughout their hospitals, in their advertisements, and on their marketing materials. Years later, Kaiser Permanente's rainbow-hued fruit and vegetable shopping bags are still a common site at farmers markets throughout the Bay Area. It was an exciting time for PCFMA is support this synergy between Kaiser Permanente's broad-based and multimedia support for healthy choices and the healthy food access that PCFMA's farmers markets offer.

In 2019, the year before the COVID-19 pandemic disrupted so much of our lives, PCFMA had extended its hospital partnerships to include three additional healthcare providers in the Bay Area. When the pandemic shutdowns began in March 2020, PCFMA closed all of its hospital-based farmers markets, acknowledging that caring for COVID patients was a higher priority for PCFMA's hospital partners. For the next several years, it was unclear if the model of hospital-based farmers markets was still viable.

This year, as the California and federal pandemic declarations formally end, PCFMA is reviving (or re-Thriving) its relationship with Kaiser Permanente by bringing mid-week farmers markets to four of their hospital campuses. The initial response from Kaiser Permanente employees has been excitement and gratitude for the return of this healthy food option and further proof that life is getting back to its pre-pandemic normal.
But not everything will return to what it was before. The last three years also saw a statewide drought that caused farmers to fallow farmland, followed by recent winter storms that disrupted planting cycles. The last several years have also presented us with economic disruptions that have raised the cost of many essential items and made hiring more difficult. These factors, and numerous others, have changed the calculus of what makes a mid-week farmers market work for a farmer and for PCFMA.

Because of these concerns, PCFMA has decided to take a slow and cautious approach to reopening its hospital-based farmers markets. This has led several of the campuses where PCFMA had a presence prior to the pandemic to work with a different operator to reopen their farmers markets this year. While we are disappointed to not be working with some longtime supportive partners, the presence of additional actors in the Bay Area's hospital-based farmers market ecosystem is a positive sign that these farmers markets are still relevant today.

In the coming years, the connections between healthcare providers and healthy food purveyors will continue to grow and deepen as movements such as Food as Medicine continue to gain support and foster innovative programs to help consumers make healthier choices.

We are proud to have been involved at the beginning of this effort and are excited to continue helping our farmers, our consumers, and our community partners to thrive.

Allen Moy
Executive Director

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