



Breanna Hawkins

# Digesting Data, Transforming Lives

*Policy Director, [Los Angeles Food Policy Council \(LAFPC\)](#)*

WORKS: Los Angeles | LIVES: Los Angeles

FIELD: Policy

**A** native Angeleno, Breanna Hawkins works at the intersection of health policy, social justice advocacy, and food security in her role as policy director at the [Los Angeles Food Policy Council](#). She coordinates working groups, supports strategic campaigns, and leads research initiatives, including the non-profit LAFPC's Food System Dashboard, a collection of more than 260 indicators measuring health, sustainability, affordability, and fairness in Los Angeles's regional food system. She is a PhD candidate at her alma mater, the University of Southern California, with a focus on urban food movements through an equity lens.





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**B**reanna Hawkins hasn’t always considered herself a food person. An unabashed number-crunching policy wonk, Hawkins has always been passionate about the built environment, urban planning, public policy, and the roles they play in quality of life. But in her position as a food systems policy analyst for Community Health Councils (CHC), she began to see how food matters intersect with quality of life concerns, including health, land use, economic development, and economic opportunity. In her seven-year tenure at the policy and advocacy organization, which strives to eliminate disparities in health access for LA’s low-income residents and communities of color, she worked on strategies to attract grocery stores to underserved South LA, and on initiatives to increase the quality and distribution of farmers markets throughout the city.

“I really want to effect transformative change in the lives of those most impacted by systemic oppression, disparity, and inequity: people of color, people burdened with poverty, and people without access to opportunity,” says the 28-year old, who has also worked on global public health initiatives geared towards increasing health resources for disenfranchised communities in Central America, India, and West Africa.

In 2011 she left CHC to tackle a PhD in urban planning. Hawkins knows just how important data-driven research is in her line of work and wants to help fill in the gaps on the statistical front. “One challenge in policy advocacy is the data isn’t always there to support the health, economic, and food planning pieces,” she says. But she also missed on-the-ground advocacy, so she reached out to the Los Angeles Food Policy Council, a move that led to her current job. The council is made up of a small staff and a diverse network of 40 food-systems-stakeholder board members, who collaborate with around 300 organizations and 1,000 people eager to implement systemic change.

“I like to see the tangible impacts of my work,” she says. “It’s so easy to get caught up in theory.” A self-described natural diplomat, Hawkins enjoys being a liaison between community members and decision makers. “It’s one thing to have them in a room talking to each other. It doesn’t mean they’re listening to each other,” she says. “I feel like a mediator sometimes, providing dual translation and playing a bridging role. It’s critical to build trust, nurture relationships, and improve communications. Not everyone is equipped to do that, especially when things are heated.”



Hawkins hails from a food-related family background. She is the great-granddaughter of Southern sharecroppers, and the granddaughter of the first African American grocery store chain manager in Los Angeles. At one time, her father had a food truck business in LA. She has experienced first-hand the health benefits of food policy changes: She used to regularly buy soda at school before it was banned. A family history of cancer has seen her extended clan transition to what she calls a “healthier, cleaner, organic diet that trickled down to me.”

Leveling the playing field, so everyone has access to the same choices to make healthy decisions for their lives, is the crux of the LAFPC’s mission. Victories during Hawkins’s time there include the passage of urban agriculture incentive zones, in which owners of vacant or unimproved property receive tax benefits when they partner with local growers who convert the land for agricultural purposes. Other wins: A campaign to require all of Los Angeles’s more than 55 farmers markets to accept CalFresh Electronic Benefit Transfer cards, formerly known informally as food stamps. And the introduction of

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the RecycLA program. This commercial and multi-family residential waste initiative offers food businesses the option to donate edible surplus food to hunger relief organizations. The Food Policy Council helped create partnerships between waste haulers and food recovery organizations and produced a guide called “Reducing Food Waste: Recovering Untapped Resources In Our Food System.”

Policy work is not without hurdles, including keeping stakeholders engaged for the slow pace of government regulation, which can take years to create change. “We make sure to celebrate the small gains as well as the big wins to help with morale and motivation and to keep people engaged,” she says.





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“With the urban agriculture incentive zones, we started in 2012 with a statewide initiative, and continually worked to get it adopted, first in Los Angeles County, and finally in the city of LA. in 2017. Some coalition members said they never wanted to hear the phrase urban agriculture incentive zones again.”

Policy implementation may seem dull and tedious to some, but there’s comfort and commonality in food policy work, says Hawkins. Everybody eats so everyone can relate, whether they live in upscale Brentwood or downmarket Skid Row.

And food touches most aspects of urban life. “Even if you don’t think you’re working on food issues, you probably are,” says Hawkins. “If you’re working on homelessness, you’re touching on food. If you’re talking about housing security you’re talking about food security. If you’re involved in

transport issues, you’re engaged in food.” Given such overlap, Hawkins would welcome the creation of a more holistic approach to food work by bringing together all stakeholders.

Hawkins is all about dispelling common misperceptions in food systems work. “One of the things I always hear is that we need to teach people to eat an orange versus a bag of chips,” she says. “People think behavioral change is simply about individual choice. People don’t recognize why behaviors are the way they are and the historical and systemic factors that have contributed to them.” In impoverished neighborhoods peppered with liquor stores and fast food restaurants, lack of access to healthy food is a major barrier to change. “Addressing broader systemic problems can help to lead to change on an individual level,” Hawkins says, “but starting at the individual level is really victim blaming.”—Sarah Henry