

Neelam Sharma
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Neelam Sharma is currently Programs Director for Community Services Unlimited Inc. (CSU), a non-profit community-based organization in South-central Los Angeles, which was originally incorporated in 1977 as the non-profit arm of the Southern California Chapter of the Black Panther Party. CSU is presently affiliated with the New Panther Vanguard Movement (NPVM), since its founding in 1994. Prior to relocating to the United States, Neelam was active politically in London; she first became involved in community organizing as a pre-teen in response to an attempt by fascists to organize in Southall, London, where she grew up. Over the years she was involved in the creation of an employee rights center, several campaigns against police abuse and illegal deportations, and a campaign against spousal abuse within her own community of immigrants from the Indian sub-continent.

In 1986 she was a founding member of the PANTHER organization in Britain, which grew into 5 chapters around the country and a core membership of hundreds of Black youth. PANTHER organized the largest Black event in Britain during the Bobby Seale tour and also the largest street protest of Black youth [when Stephen Lawrence was murdered by fascists in South London]. Seeing the increasing influence of media promoted rap culture amongst Black British youth and the rise in violent activities, PANTHER organized a Los Angeles-based Gang Truce Tour in London in the early 90's, involving ex-Blood and Crips who were brought to England and toured the inner cities with PANTHER organizers talking to youth about the dead end of gang activity. This tour led to a brief return trip by Neelam to Los Angeles where she met members of the New Panther Vanguard Movement.

Neelam has worked with CSU and the NPVM in various capacities since moving to Los Angeles in 1996. As CSU's Programs Director, Neelam has been largely responsible for the development of CSU's food and nutrition programs, which meshed together and led to the formation of ACTION [Active Community to Improve Our Nutrition] and the organization of a local Food Assessment in 2003 (the assessment report is available in PDF at www.csuinc.org). Since the completion of the Food Assessment, she has worked with various community partners to implement the resulting programs, including a Community Food Village project. This multi-faceted project is a direct response to the needs expressed by community members and seeks to create a sustainable local food system where food is grown, distributed and bought within the community; it also incorporates youth training and educational programs in the local schools, the creation of jobs and entrepreneurial opportunities and is supported by partnerships with regional farmers. In addition to her work with the NPVM and CSU Neelam has been involved in founding and working with the Healthy School Food Coalition, the LA Food Justice Network and the California Food and Justice Coalition (CFJC). Her work with the CFJC has created a Land Access Membership Action Team that seeks to make land accessible for sustainable food production. Neelam has been a voice calling for the diversification of the food justice movement and for the inclusion of social justice issues, which she believes are essential elements if this movement is to become relevant to those who are the most food insecure.