

LATEST HEADLINES

Erica Padilla-Chavez prepares to lead Second Harvest Food Bank as CEO

Padilla-Chavez will leave post at Pajaro Valley Prevention and Student Assistance in July



Founded in 1972, Second Harvest Food Bank Santa Cruz County was the first food bank in California and is the second oldest in the nation. Erica Padilla-Chavez will be replacing long-time CEO Willy Elliott-McCrea who will be retiring from the position. (Contributed photo — Erica Padilla-Chavez)

By [HANNAH HAGEMANN](#) |

PUBLISHED: May 5, 2022 at 4:34 p.m. | UPDATED: May 6, 2022 at 11:36 a.m.

SANTA CRUZ — Watsonville native and community leader Erica Padilla-Chavez's connection to Second Harvest Food Bank is personal.

"It stems from me growing up in the Pajaro Valley and — like so many families — at one point needing support from Second Harvest as a young child. I know the direct impact that this organization has on the lives of youth and families across the county," Padilla-Chavez said.

Padilla-Chavez is set to lead the organization beginning in July, after serving as CEO at Pajaro Valley Prevention and Student Assistance – a nonprofit serving South Santa Cruz County youth – for more than seven years. She will replace longtime Second Harvest CEO Willy Elliott-McCrea, who is retiring from the organization.

The nonprofit was the first food bank in California when it was established in 1972. Throughout the COVID-19 pandemic, Second Harvest has led the response in getting fruit, vegetables, frozen meals and pantry goods to Santa Cruz County residents facing food insecurity. It serves some 20,000 to 25,000 residents per week.

Padilla-Chavez aims to cultivate relationships with health care providers and nonprofits across the county to approach combating food insecurity holistically. Food insecurity, she said, is a symptom of other health and socioeconomic issues which must be addressed collectively.

“We have seen through the pandemic how important it is for us to work collectively to advance health and wellness,” Padilla-Chavez said. “It’s about being strategic and establishing partnerships with agencies that can further advance that well being for the people that Second Harvest provides care and support for.”

The Pajaro Valley leader was recently named Woman of the Year by Assemblymember Robert Rivas (D-Salinas) for Assembly District 30 in March.

Under Padilla-Chavez’s watch, Pajaro Valley Prevention and Student Assistance expanded from a staff of 20, serving around 2,500 children in the Pajaro Valley, to a staff of more than 65, serving some 7,000 residents across the region. When asked about her legacy at PVPSA, Padilla-Chavez cited the regional partnerships she cultivated over the years across various nonprofits and agencies.

Amidst the coronavirus pandemic Padilla-Chavez spearheaded creating the [South County COVID Support and Triage Group](#), which provided critical assistance to low income families and residents most vulnerable to the virus, such as farmworker and Indigenous communities. During the early days of the pandemic, the group also advocated for a local eviction moratorium in Watsonville, which the City Council passed months before Gov. Gavin Newsom implemented a statewide ban on evictions.

Padilla-Chavez said though she is looking forward to making an impact at the county-wide level with Second Harvest, her departure from PVPSA is bittersweet.

“I look forward to working with PVPSA, but from a different seat,” Padilla-Chavez said. “It’s not a goodbye – I don’t want to say goodbye – it’s just a see you later.”