

# As inflation spikes more hunger, Second Harvest needs volunteers to help meet the needs



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(Via Carolyn Lagattuta)

The pandemic might be waning, but food insecurity remains a concern for thousands of Santa Cruz County residents. And a new widespread affliction is to blame: inflation.

From the gas pump to the grocery store, high prices are forcing local residents to seek help from organizations like Second Harvest Food Bank to put food on the table.

Before the pandemic, around 65,000 Santa Cruz County residents received aid from Second Harvest every month. That number rose nearly 30% during the first months of the pandemic, reaching a high of 93,000 residents in May 2020. In 2021, once vaccines became more widely available and life began to return to normal, that number decreased to 75,000.

Earlier this year, as prices began rising due to inflation, it rose again to 85,000, and has stubbornly stayed there.

Over the past two years, Second Harvest has distributed almost 13 million pounds of food to Santa Cruz County residents, according to its [2020-21 report](#). More than 60% is fresh fruits and vegetables sourced from local agriculture partners.

Who's hungry?

Second Harvest does not ask for socioeconomic information from those seeking aid, so it's difficult to gauge whether inflation is affecting the same residents as were affected by the pandemic. However, anecdotally, volunteers are seeing new faces on their delivery routes, people who haven't traditionally been dependent on the food bank as a source for food, says [Second Harvest CEO Erica Padilla-Chavez](#).

While she insists there is plenty of food for anyone who needs it, the nonprofit, which celebrated its 50th anniversary last month, faces the same challenges brought on by price increases on everything from office supplies to groceries to diesel.

While we might think of donations when we think of the county's go-to food bank, only 14% of food distributed by the food bank is collected through food donations. Second Harvest purchases the other 86% of the food it distributes, almost all at discounted rates from local farmers and food producers. Over the past year, the price of poultry doubled, says Padilla-Chavez. Other food increased by 15% to 60%.

Then there are the distribution costs.

Delivery rose 70% as the price of diesel fuel for the organization's delivery trucks went up. Even the cost of boxes, bags and other packaging materials used to deliver food went up by 50%. "Across the board we're seeing an escalation of costs for us to do what we're committed to doing," Padilla-Chavez said, "which is ensuring that everyone has healthy food in their hands."

Despite these challenges, the food bank continues to function normally and is working through the ebbs and flows, she said: "The magic of the food bank is that we are committed to ensuring adequate food supply. We're working through it, but there is a cost to working through that process. This is where our community steps in to support us."

During the pandemic, the food bank opened new distribution sites to meet demand but closed many when need fell. Now that demand has increased again, Second Harvest is considering reopening some distribution centers, but lacks the volunteers to operate them. Many of its volunteers were older and haven't returned to volunteering since the pandemic, Padilla-Chavez

says; Second Harvest is actively trying to recruit new, reliable volunteers to take their place.

A steady stream of labor from volunteers is also needed to package food so it can reach its destination.

As recruitment continues, some of the food bank staff are rolling up their sleeves, but Padilla-Chavez admits that that's not sustainable, especially as the nonprofit continues to see an increase in need.

Volunteers are crucial for the food bank to execute its mission. "The escalation of costs for us to just do our work has been further than we had planned budgetwise," she said, "so any support that our community can provide to help us during these challenging times is much appreciated."

Moreover, anyone who feels as though they need help to feed themselves or their family should contact the food bank — no questions asked. "We're not going to ask you to provide us with proof that you need food. The food bank is here to ensure that you have it," Padilla-Chavez said. "There's nothing more challenging to our communities than an ever-growing number of households with empty bellies. That shouldn't be the case."

*For more information on receiving food, giving donations and volunteering, visit [thefoodbank.org](https://www.thefoodbank.org).*