

OPINION > EDITORIALS

Editorial | Hunger: Second Harvest Food Bank's mission continues



By [EDITORIAL BOARD](#) | editorial@santacruzsentinel.com | Santa Cruz Sentinel

PUBLISHED: December 12, 2022 at 3:37 p.m. | UPDATED: December 12, 2022 at 4:06 p.m.

In a county such as ours, where the cost of living, particularly housing, is so high and where we are surrounded not only by natural beauty but bountiful farms and fields providing produce sent around the world, it might seem far-fetched that many people here worry about having enough food for their families, or for themselves.

The truth, however, is that about one in three residents of Santa Cruz County have reported they are food insecure.

Fortunately, among our many blessings in this county, we have benefited from a food distributing organization like few others in the state or nation: the Second Harvest Food Bank Santa Cruz County, which is in the midst of its annual holiday food drive that runs through Jan. 15.

The local Second Harvest Food Bank, based in Watsonville, was founded in 1972 as the first food bank in California. It's the second oldest food bank in the United States and today is part of a national network of similar organizations.

Consider that during the pandemic and the CZU Complex fires in the Santa Cruz Mountains, Second Harvest responded as the need for its food distribution services doubled overnight. That was one reason that in 2020 Second Harvest was awarded Biggest Hero Company from the Sentinel's Readers Choice awards.

In 2021, Second Harvest reported distributing 65% more food than pre-pandemic, and this year is supporting over 75,000 people monthly throughout Santa Cruz County, including children, seniors, veterans, homeless, working poor and others in difficult circumstances.

It's a major undertaking: Second Harvest sources over 11 million pounds of food each year from farms, grocery stores, food manufacturers, distributors and individuals (more than 60% is fresh

produce) and distributes it to 150 food pantries, schools, soup kitchens, group homes, youth centers and Second Harvest program sites in this county.

How does it do it?

For one, through volunteer help. More than 3,000 people volunteer their time and efforts to help collect and distribute the food that will be sent out. Local farmers and grocers are another vital lifeline in the food network.

And it does it through donations. Second Harvest says it can provide four meals for every dollar donated.

That's why many community organizations have made it a practice to make the annual holiday food drive part of their culture.

One such organization, for example, is Aptos' Twin Lakes Church, which has for several years been one of the major donors to Second Harvest. This past weekend, the church announced at church services that in their annual food drive over five weeks, the congregation raised funds that will provide over one million meals to local families. Since 2018, Twin Lakes Church has donated over five million meals to the food bank.

In attendance for the announcement were Second Harvest CEO Erica Padilla-Chavez and UC Santa Cruz Chancellor Cynthia Larive, the food drive co-chair.

Padilla-Chavez took over leadership at Second Harvest in July from longtime CEO Willy Elliott-McCrea who served the organization for more than 40 years until his retirement.

Padilla-Chavez, who grew up in this area and graduated from Watsonville High School, has a strong history with Second Harvest, noting that her family volunteered there and also occasionally depended on the food bank during tough times. Padilla-Chavez previously served as CEO at a nonprofit serving South Santa Cruz County youth.

She told the Sentinel earlier this year that she wants to help Second Harvest cultivate relationships with health care providers and nonprofits across the county to combat food insecurity holistically. Food insecurity, she said, is a symptom of other health and socioeconomic issues, which must be addressed collectively.

Or, put another way, by we the community.

The Holiday Food & Fund drive runs through Jan. 15. You can donate through the Second Harvest website at www.thefoodbank.org or drop off food contributions in the big blue barrels found at grocery stores and businesses across the county.