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### Santa Cruz County students, nonprofit leaders partner with Food Bank for holiday drive



Families receive bike helmets, food at distribution at Starlight Elementary. (Tara Fateni Walker)



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As the holidays quickly approach, lots of families wonder how they're going to make ends meet. It's time for Second Harvest Food Bank's annual Holiday Food and Fund Drive, which nourishes local community members in need. 100 percent of funds raised during this drive will be utilized for Second Harvest's 130 partner agency and program distribution locations. The goal: raising funds for 4.5 million meals.

## **Engaging with students**

Paul Peters and Tina Chavez, who serve as corporate and community relations managers for North County and South County, respectively, are working with local students to help the drive succeed.

Chavez is excited to engage South County students from preschool through high school. "Our children are smart; they know the importance of having a healthy, well-nourished community. They want to be a part of the solution," she says.

Peters is connecting with North County middle and high school students using a recently launched program. "It involves creating a short social media video. We will still engage with elementary students, but this program is better suited for older students," he says. "Involving students with Second Harvest benefits the community and contributes to students' personal growth and development. It's an opportunity for them to become more informed, compassionate, and engaged members of society, positively impacting the world."

County Superintendent of Schools Faris Sabbah, the 2023 Holiday Food and Fund Drive co-chair, echoes Peters' sentiments. "Helping with the drive gives our youth an opportunity to actively engage in supporting peers and families who are experiencing food insecurity. I am honored to play a small role in supporting this impactful work."

County Superintendent of Schools Faris Sabbah, the 2023 Holiday Food and Fund Drive co-chair, echoes Peters' sentiments. "Helping with the drive gives our youth an opportunity to actively engage in supporting peers and families who are experiencing food insecurity. I am honored to play a small role in supporting this impactful work."

"Our focus on Santa Cruz County students this year is something I'm passionate about," says Food Bank CEO Erica Padilla-Chavez. "Our community's local youth are caring individuals, and they have a variety of skill sets. Their energy and contributions will make a significant impact on our campaign, whether through social media skills or other talents. I am grateful for their participation and collaboration. We are the Food Bank, coming together and feeding the most vulnerable families and individuals."

## Increasing needs

Students are helping raise funds and awareness for the drive; on the other hand, they are one of many groups in our local population needing support in order to flourish. "Recognizing their increasing food assistance needs is vital for students' well-being and academic success," says Peters. "It underscores the importance of creating a support system that ensures students have access to nutrition they need while pursuing their educational goals."

Co-chair Sabbah wholeheartedly agrees. "Food insecurity affects students' ability to learn and grow, impacting concentration, memory, mood, and so much more. About 1 in 10 Santa Cruz County youth experience food insecurity, a rate that remains far too high," he says. "Our schools have an important and growing role to play, both in education and providing direct nutrition — starting with a recent expansion of services providing free breakfast and lunch to any student who wants it, regardless of their family's financial status. As co-chair, I hope to continue raising awareness and resources to address persistent needs in our school community."

Sabbah's goals as superintendent are aligned with the drive's purpose. "Serving community members in need is foundational to our work as public educators. Our role is to uplift, empower, and equip every child for success, regardless of their background."

Susan True, CEO at Community Foundation Santa Cruz County and a Holiday Food and Fund Drive co-chair, also stresses the importance of increasing food security for community members in need. "We live in such an incredible place. We want everyone to have what they need to thrive," she says. "No one can thrive without nutritious food. In this time of rising costs, so many of our families are struggling with the basics. This means individuals cannot live to their full potential and our whole community misses out on so much potential and opportunity."

True is thrilled to continue her co-chair role from 2022. "It is inspiring to see this community make sure no one goes hungry," she says. "Plus, everyone can participate because it takes only a dollar to provide three meals."

She was impressed with participants' creativity during last year's drive. "People think of such unique ways to get their friends and neighbors involved!" For example, yoga instructors donated class fees, and kids gave money they raised at lemonade stands.



## Not just a holiday issue

Second Harvest Food Bank nourishes the community all year long. "The Food Bank provides 65,000 meals monthly," says Chavez, "20,000 of these are for children. There are rising costs – at the grocery store, at the gas pump, everywhere. Parents are making hard decisions, whether to pay utilities bills or buy food. That's where we can help."

## The difference a drive makes

"The Holiday Food and Fund Drive success is vital, so vulnerable individuals and families can enjoy a decent meal and experience a sense of care and support during a time often associated with gratitude," says Peters.

An individual who benefited from a past Food Bank drive expressed their appreciation: "Receiving support was a tremendous relief. As a single parent struggling to make ends meet, this provided my family with much-needed relief during the holidays. It allowed us to enjoy a festive meal and create special moments despite our challenges. I can't express enough gratitude for the community's kindness and support. It reminded me there are caring people."

Sabbah said he strongly believes in Second Harvest. "The Food Bank has the largest impact on hunger in our school community and the community at large. I am persistently inspired by the leadership of Erica Padilla Chavez and Susan True on this issue."

It's easy to sign up; visit the website or scan the QR code off the poster, part of an online tool kit ([thefoodbank.org/tool-kit](https://thefoodbank.org/tool-kit)) with flyers and social media graphics. "You can create a team at work, via social media, or through a group you're in – like a book club," says Chavez. "Or join as an individual. We encourage all to get involved."

An anonymous resident who donated to a past drive shared, "Contributing was a heartwarming experience. It felt good to know my donation helped those in need during a time when people should feel warmth and joy. Giving wasn't just about the funds but about being part of something larger, a collective effort to make the holidays brighter for others. It was a small act of kindness that made a big difference and filled me with a sense of purpose and connection to my community."

Attend the kickoff rally at Cabrillo College: 11:30 a.m.-1 p.m. Nov. 3. Visit [thefoodbank.org/event/2023-holiday-food-fund-drive-kickoff/](https://thefoodbank.org/event/2023-holiday-food-fund-drive-kickoff/) for details. Donate directly to the Holiday Food & Fund Drive at [thefoodbank.org](https://thefoodbank.org).

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[Link to original story.](#)