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Editorial | Second Harvest Food Bank holiday drive: ‘Every dollar counts’

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

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We live in a wealthy county, compared to much of the rest of the state.

And yet, nearly a quarter of Santa Cruz County residents, some 65,000 people, are receiving food through the ever-present-in-times-of-trouble Second Harvest Food Bank.

The juxtaposition is not that difficult to understand with the cost of housing, scarcity of rentals, and incessant inflation that has eroded the purchasing power of many county residents.

The Food Bank’s goal this year is to raise 4.5 million meals, Second Harvest CEO Erica Padilla-Chavez told the Sentinel Editorial Board last week. The Food Bank primarily relies on its annual Holiday Food and Fund Drive to provide the food it distributes at 130 locations around the county. The Holiday Drive is underway now.

Over the years, Second Harvest has become known for the familiar blue barrels, where folks who wanted to help would drop off food.

And the barrels are still out there, but fewer with about 100 around the county this season, including at workplaces. The barrels remain a symbol of the food drive – but cash donations are more efficient and don’t have a shelf life. The goal is to raise approximately \$13.5 million to provide the 4.5 million meals (last year, the goal was 5 million meals). Inflation, with higher expenses, now means that while before, \$1 would provide four meals, now it provides three.

Food insecurity in the county was perhaps at a high point during the pandemic, but as the plague has receded, the nonprofit Food Bank, which anticipated a big drop in demand, is still seeing significant numbers of local people who rely on the organization for healthy and nourishing food. With the loss of state and FEMA support, Padilla-Chavez says this year’s food drive is “a real test of our post-pandemic reality,” adding that demand might be higher than 4.5 million meals, but “we need to be realistic” about fund raising.

The Food Bank also is less than a year past the floods of last season, when again, the organization was quickly there, along with other nonprofits, to help victims.

Padilla-Chavez, who took over as CEO a year and a half ago and is quick to tell the story of how as a child her own family received help with food, notes how the response to the floods and the people displaced was a community effort. Volunteers helped at evacuation centers, prepared hot meals, filled sandbags and donated money. (The Food Bank was able to raise another \$500,000 in a post-flooding campaign.) The local Food Bank also worked closely with Monterey County nonprofits since the floods in Pajaro were in that county.

Looking past the annual Holiday Drive, Padilla-Chavez is advocating with local members of Congress to increase the U.S. Department of Agriculture support for food banks.

Rep. Jimmy Panetta, D-Carmel Valley, is a co-sponsor of the Farmers Feeding America Act, a needed bill that would help food banks meet demand and ensure families stay fed and healthy by expanding the U.S. Department of Agriculture's ability to purchase food directly from producers. The bill would significantly increase funding for The Emergency Food Assistance Program for commodities like fruits and vegetables, as well as monetary support to food banks, food pantries, soup kitchens and shelters.

Second Harvest also was able to get a state grant to install a new food cooler.

About 40% of the food for the food insecure comes from Cal Fresh – much of the rest comes from the Food Bank which works to get people enrolled in the state program (nearly 29,000 county residents are enrolled). The Food Bank also is working with health-care providers to identify food insecure patients.

"I often say that the Food Bank is not only the hard-working Second Harvest staff, or generous donors, or grateful recipients, or volunteers, Second Harvest is the whole community – we are the Food Bank – and this organization belongs to all of us," Padilla-Chavez wrote for this page.

And, as she told us last week, "Every dollar counts."

For more information or to donate to Second Harvest Food Bank's annual Holiday Food and Fund Drive, visit thefoodbank.org.

[Link to original story.](#)