

## Food Bank CEO Erica Padilla-Chavez on Fixing Food Insecurity

Second Harvest Food Bank Santa Cruz County provides free food for those who need it—and a sense of purpose for those who can help.

BY SHARAN STREET PUBLISHED NOV 16, 2023 11:40 A.M.

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Second Harvest CEO Erica Padilla-Chavez (at right) with a group of local Rotary members who helped wrap Holiday Food & Fund Drive barrels. COURTESY OF SECOND HARVEST FOOD BANK SANTA CRUZ

During much of its history—from 1978 to 2022—Second Harvest Food Bank Santa Cruz operated under the leadership of former CEO Willy Elliott-McCrea, whose tenure included the 1989 earthquake, the 2008 recession, and the 2020 pandemic.

When Erica Padilla-Chavez took over as CEO, things didn't get any easier. Within her first year on the job, Santa Cruz County would face back-to-back floods in the Pajaro Valley and catastrophic storm damage along the coast and in the mountains.

The devastation left a lot of hungry people in its wake—a situation made more dire given that post-

pandemic inflation was already swelling the ranks of what Padilla-Chavez and her colleagues refer to as “the food-insecure community.”

Though she was new to the food bank world, Padilla-Chavez was equipped with two decades of experience in helping promote equitable access to education and healthcare resources. Most recently she was CEO of Pajaro Valley Prevention and Student Assistance; before that she managed UCSC’s Latin American and Latino Studies Department. Earlier in her career she worked for the Monterey County Health Department, while also serving on the Hartnell College Board of Trustees and Dominican Hospital’s Community Board.

“I look at social problems from a public health lens,” she says. “I’ve always thought that food insecurity is a symptom of something.” To diagnose the disease, one needs to “peel the onion to get to the root cause of why we’re seeing it manifested in our community.”

She also has a more personal connection to Second Harvest. The daughter of immigrants from the Mexican state of Jalisco, she grew up in Watsonville, where her parents worked in the canneries. “I was the first-U.S. born child. Very special place, Watsonville. I was literally nurtured and nourished by this community,” Padilla-Chavez says.

And some of that nourishment came from Second Harvest Food Bank.

In the 1980s, during the Watsonville cannery strike, Padilla-Chavez’s family first came in contact with Second Harvest. Her parents found it hard to accept that they needed assistance, so they would also serve as volunteers. “We were struggling, but my parents did such a good job in always making me feel safe,” Padilla-Chavez recalls. “I think they were teaching us the art of giving, the discipline of giving and taking care of others. But I now know that my mom also depended on the powdered milk and USDA government cheese to feed us.”

She muses, “It’s surreal every morning to wake up and realize I get to lead an organization that took care of me, that took care of my family, when I was a child. My story is really an outcome of what Second Harvest Food Bank is all about. It took care of me in my time of need and here I am leading it. I mean, if that’s not a manifestation of the spirit of this place, I don’t know what is.”

Padilla-Chavez took time out during a busy time of the year—the annual Holiday Food & Fund Drive—to answer some questions about the past, present and future of her organization, which she describes as “a beautiful balance of heart, mind, spirit.”

**As CEO of Pajaro Valley Prevention and Student Assistance, you expanded operations significantly during your eight-year tenure. What do you see as your primary goals at Second Harvest Food Bank?**



Expanding services for that organization was really driven by community needs. There was a gap in service, and I realized that in order for us to meet the needs we needed to grow. And the same is true about Second Harvest. In looking at the data over the last five years—and I tend to use data to drive decision-making and vision—unfortunately in Santa Cruz County we have an ever-growing food-insecure community. There are certain pockets where we have identified we need to think about how we can better support—for example, the mountain communities in Santa Cruz. We're doing distribution there, but we're seeing vast need and we need to do more. Clearly my first order of business has been—disasters permitting—trying to make my way into the various communities in the county so that I can develop an action plan.

Just looking at the fiscal side of the house, inflation is hitting all of us and that means it's costing us more money to buy food, to fuel up our trucks, to take care of business. If I'm spending more money on the operation side then I have less to be able to purchase food. So I'm exploring ways in which to free up some of those dollars ... to reduce the amount of costs on, say, fuel costs, energy costs. Because unfortunately, while inflation has gotten a bit better, the cost of everything tends to always go up, not down, so we have to be prepared.

**When your predecessor retired, he predicted the need for food bank services would remain high after the pandemic, in part due to high housing costs. Have you observed this?**

Santa Cruz County is like a slice of heaven and we pay a price for it. Certainly that is a contributing factor to why we're seeing growing lines. I was looking at the data and I was appalled to see that the number of people accessing food at this moment in time equals almost pandemic-level requests. And what makes it so hard is that I don't have the pandemic resources that food banks across our nation benefited from due to FEMA dollars being diverted. The demand is there; the federal resources are not. So it really does put food bank executives in a very difficult predicament.

**Do hard times make it harder to get volunteers, because people are under stress themselves?**

I didn't see that! One thing I will say about Second Harvest Santa Cruz is that the community here knows how to step up. It's almost like it's built into our DNA that when our neighbors are struggling, those of us who are able to support, we step up. During the floods what I saw was a community that—with a request on social media or a phone call—they were here packing food on Saturdays because they understood that we needed to get food out to evacuation centers, that we needed to get to our hard-to-reach mountain communities.

I felt a sense of serenity knowing that the community was here responding to our call, pitching in more dollars than they're used to pitching in because they recognized there were going to be more food needs in our community.

**What are the demographics of those who are part of the food-insecure community?**

Sixty-four percent of the people we serve are families. We have a young community here in Santa Cruz County, so clearly we have a lot of households with adults and children. We've got 22 percent senior community. And the rest are individuals—many, we are going to say, are the unhoused population. We tend not to ask too many questions of our participants because we're interested in making sure people of all walks of life know that any distribution site is there for them, should they need it. We don't bury them in the bureaucratic questioning that tends to happen with so many services and programs.

**Second Harvest is part of a national organization, Feeding America. Are there nationwide meetings that you attend?**

One of the biggest *aha's* for me—and I've worked in county health departments before, and was involved in statewide and national associations—but never, ever have I been in a space where an industry is so highly networked at the federal and state level. And I think what makes food banks successful is the fact that we are networked.

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Feeding America is doing a phenomenal job at the moment under new leadership to really ensure that food banks across the nation receive the support that we need to address the myriad issues that each of our communities is facing. We work together in unison to have a collective voice with our federal lawmakers, and there's power in numbers, as we know, and there's something to be said about 220 food banks coming together to create an agenda, a collective agenda. It



*WIC (Women, Infants and Children) is just one program used by Second Harvest.*

Photo courtesy Second Harvest Food Bank Santa Cruz

benefits this particular food bank, and it makes my heart happy to know it's benefiting other communities across the state and across the nation.

At the state level, we are a part of the California Association of Food Banks. We come together, we develop a policy agenda—I serve on the policy committee of that association—where we do our advocacy to our state legislature. And of course we work on statewide issues that impact us all. The beauty of being a new CEO and not feeling alone—what a gift it is that I get to pick up the phone and call my colleagues when I'm stuck.

There's an entire ecosystem of support around me, and I have been really good at leaning into that because it's how I survived this year. And truth be told, without Feeding America and without the California Association of Food Banks, food banks would be challenged to figure out how to leverage federal and state resources. It's a unique model and one that I actually think is the best model out

there for how to organize at the federal and state level.

**You're someone whose career has been spent helping people get crucial resources they lack. Do you think about ways in which inequity could be fixed at the societal level?**

What I love about the board and the strategic visioning of Second Harvest is that at the key of their strategic plan is beginning to work around the root causes of food insecurity. And so the question of how we solve food insecurity really is the homework assignment here.

Having conversations with colleagues from across the nation, looking at data, and looking at what we here in Santa Cruz County are offering our community, I proposed to the board that we start with is what I'm going to call the "three-legged stool" to addressing root causes of food insecurity in our county: the area of health care, the area of housing, and the area of workforce development.

When I had a conversation with some of our CalFresh participants [low-income Californians who meet federal income eligibility rules for food benefits], they are very interested in bolstering their skill set so that they can be more competitive in the market. Some spoke to me about how they wanted to learn English. Others spoke to me about how they know how to use a computer but they're deficient in managing other programs. Others spoke about how they work at a restaurant but they don't really have any certification.

As a result, I've been speaking to representatives at Cabrillo College [and asking], what can we do to connect participants of the food bank to workforce development services? We at the Food Bank can be a bridge between our community that we're servicing and these great opportunities. So I'm exploring partnerships in the workforce development field.

Health care ... I'd like to establish key partnerships with healthcare partners to work specifically with patients who we know have chronic diseases so we can move them into a place of some level of stability of health so that they can focus on nutrition. We coach them through the nutrition process, the education process. How can we create healthcare partnerships to support them?

And lastly there's a lot of great effort in our county to bolster housing, affordable housing in particular. I would love Second Harvest participants to be a part of those conversations ... so that as developers and cities are thinking about housing, it's the voice of our food-insecure community that is being heard and that is being used as a way of designing the type of housing, the location of housing.

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There is no one solution to food insecurity. So we're going to start there and see what we learn in that process. This is going to be totally new for our food bank. And at the same time I will say that as we are doing this work—the one thing I will always keep top of mind—is that I will always make sure the community has nourishment when they need it, because that is our mission. That is what we need to do.

**Are there any volunteers or board members who are still active from the early days of Second Harvest?**

I'm proud to say that, fast forward 45 years later, my father comes and volunteers here. He's in his 80s and he's still volunteering. He's organized his church group, and they're volunteering at the warehouse packing food.

And much like him, there are countless others who have connections to the food bank who are still very active either through their donations or volunteering. People like Bob Norton, who's on my board, who's been around since 2012. Sister Susan Olson, who was just a phenomenal leader, who really helped with supporting the operations side of the house here back in the '80s and '90s—while she's retired, we still have connections. I reach out to her.

I just had a conversation with Jess Brown, who's the president of the Farm Bureau here. He's been around since the 1990s. He's still very active in our food bank. He serves as the chair of one of the committees and is always spreading the good news and the needs of our food bank with the farming community.

And I think of corporations. Driscoll's has been here since the very beginning. You've got Martinelli's, which has been here since the very beginning. These companies have had unwavering support for our food bank—the first food bank in the state of California. I think there's a sense of pride with that fact.

**I was surprised when I learned it was the second-oldest food bank in the United States.**

It doesn't surprise me one bit as a child of this county. There's something about Santa Cruz County—that it is people-centered, neighbor-centered, community-centered—and if there's going to be innovation around how we take care of our community, it's going to be here.

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[Link to original story.](#)