

POLITICS & POLICY

# After sudden \$700K drop in funding, Second Harvest calls for community support



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March 25, 2025



Volunteers pack boxes of food at Second Harvest Food Bank in Watsonville. Credit: Cat Cutillo / Lookout Santa Cruz

Second Harvest Food Bank Santa Cruz County is grappling with the sudden loss of more than \$700,000 worth of federal government aid, with another potential loss of \$400,000 in state funding in immediate danger. The gap equates to more than 3 million meals, threatening the food security of tens of thousands of county residents.

At a news conference held Monday at the food bank's distribution center in Watsonville, CEO Erica Padilla-Chavez said the food bank's longstanding partnerships with federal, local and state public agencies are in "a time of transition," and that there still many questions about what support from these agencies will look like in the coming months and years.

The loss of funding was a surprise for the food bank. In early March, officials noticed in the database they rely on to alert them of federal assistance that the food deliveries they were expecting had been canceled. After talking to other food banks, Second Harvest realized that was a national issue. After more than three weeks, the nonprofit still doesn't have clarification on why the programs have been paused, or when they might return.

"This is a system shift from prior behavior," said Padilla-Chavez – one she hopes is temporary. "I'm hoping this is transitional, and that at some point our federal representatives will react and realize that this is actually a very smart public-private relationship."

More than 70,000 Santa Cruz County residents get food from Second Harvest every month. Before the pandemic, that number was closer to 50,000, but five years on, it continues to climb due to factors like nationwide inflation and extremely high local costs of living. For every dollar the food bank receives, it's able to provide three meals, and distribute food with 66 partner agencies throughout the county. It's still unclear what the gap in services will be, or if it will affect the food bank's operations.

Recent federal funding pauses are putting the food bank's ability to serve those residents at risk. In March, more than \$50 million in federal funding allotted to California through The Emergency Food Assistance Program, or TEFAP, was cut. Santa Cruz County's share of that funding was \$348,728, or 1 million meals. That number represents deliveries of commodities like milk, pork and cheese – items that are difficult to replace locally, Padilla-Chavez told Lookout.

"These are very hard for us to come by in our local region, because we don't necessarily have those kinds of food producers," she said. "We've depended on the USDA [U.S. Department of Agriculture] to ensure that our community has access to these foods that offer a different nutritional value than, say, the local produce."



**Second Harvest Food Bank CEO Erica Padilla-Chavez announced a \$700,000 drop in federal funding at a news conference in Watsonville on Monday.**  
Credit: Cat Cutillo / Lookout Santa Cruz



**Michele Bassi, chief development officer, at Second Harvest Food Bank's distribution center in Watsonville.**  
Credit: Cat Cutillo / Lookout Santa Cruz

In the past few weeks, the food bank has also been cut off from \$360,000 of funding from the Local Food Purchase Assistance Program, which allows the food bank to reinvest in the local economy by purchasing food from local farmers and producers.

Vital state funding is also at risk due to California's own budget challenges. A 90% reduction in funding to California Association of Food Banks, known as CalFood, representing about \$400,000 for Second Harvest – or about 1.2 million meals – is currently proposed in a congressional budget outline. That money is dedicated to purchasing California-grown products, and its loss would ripple out to local food producers and retailers, said Padilla-Chavez. Second Harvest uses that to buy items such as local tortillas, products from small county farms and fresh fish from fishers in Monterey Bay.

Additionally, cuts to other federal and state food assistance programs, like the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program, otherwise known as CalFresh – the modern equivalent to food stamps – and school meal programs puts greater demand on the food bank, which it's now less equipped to handle. "Whenever there are reductions in any one of our food support systems, your food bank ends up feeling the pressure," said Padilla-Chavez.

About 30% of the food bank's budget is publicly supported directly or through grants. That amount of government support is extremely difficult to bridge through philanthropy because the food bank already raises millions of dollars annually for operations.

Padilla-Chavez said she's particularly concerned about a reduction in support from CalFood, especially in light of recent federal pauses. Pre-pandemic, Second Harvest received about \$50,000 in funding from CalFood, but in the past five years that has jumped to more than \$400,000. "If I revert back to \$50,000, I don't know how I'm going to do it," she said. "And I know that I'm not alone in that. Every colleague that I've spoken to, we're just scratching our heads."

In the face of this rapidly changing landscape, the food bank has launched "Operation Bridge the Gap," a campaign to encourage the community to make financial donations, volunteer and advocate for the food bank with elected officials to oppose funding cuts.

Said Padilla-Chavez: "Now, more than ever, we need our community to help us bridge this gap."

Meanwhile, the organization is trying to figure out how far it can stretch this new, leaner budget.

"We have a strong resolve to make sure that we are nourishing our community," said Padilla-Chavez. "While we're tracking all of these moving parts and advocating on your behalf to ensure



**Volunteers pack boxes of food at Second Harvest Food Bank in Watsonville. In February, 72,000 county residents received food assistance from the food bank. Credit: Cat Cutillo / Lookout Santa Cruz**



**In the past three weeks, Second Harvest Food Bank has lost more than \$700,000 in federal funding, leaving empty shelves in the Watsonville distribution center. Credit: Cat Cutillo / Lookout Santa Cruz**

that the policymakers understand the impact of those cuts, we are going to ask the community to support us, because we don't have the luxury of waiting to see whether or not rice, beans, pasta, sauce and spaghetti will be on our shelves.”

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[Link to original story.](#)