

SFGATE

Season of Sharing helps Bay Area food banks sustain those in need

By Jonathan Kauffman

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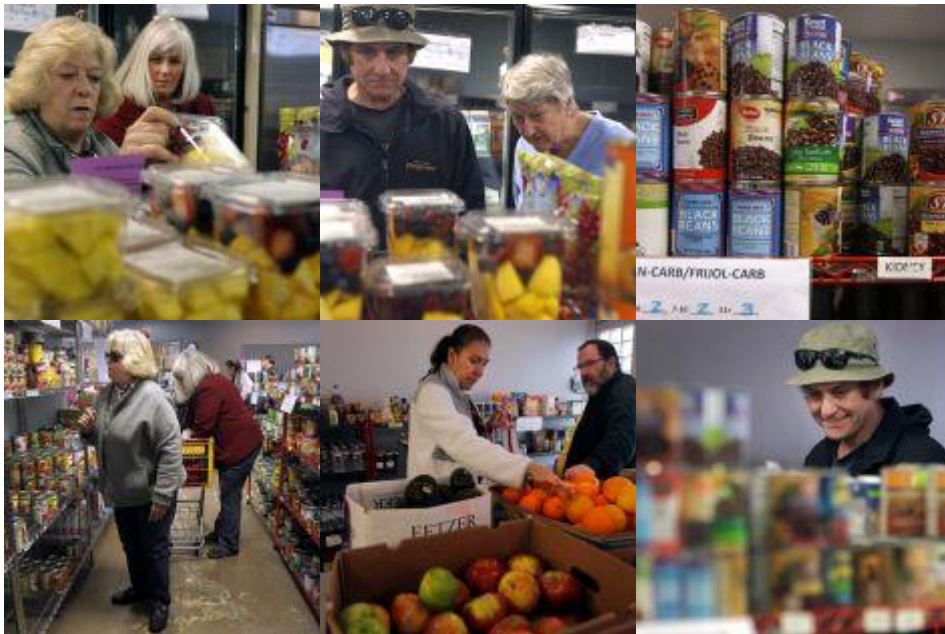


Photo: Paul Chinn / The Chronicle

The earthquake that damaged Napa Valley this summer brought new troubles — and new opportunities — to the Community Action of Napa Valley food bank.

The program was just settling into new offices when the magnitude 6.0 temblor hit in August, Director Shirley King said. Though it wreaked hundreds of millions of dollars in damages, the earthquake appeared to dent only two roll-up doors and one can of peaches — until major structural damage was discovered one week later.

At this point, King found herself scrambling for places to store food while the landlord made repairs. But in that critical first week, Community Action was able to give out food to anyone who needed it.

“Many people who got emergency allotments had no idea that we gave out so much fresh, perishable food,” she said. “It ended up being an outreach tool.”

Many people don’t realize, either, how much support the Community Action of Napa Valley receives from the Chronicle [Season of Sharing](#) Fund.

The fund has long been known for giving assistance to families in the form of direct grants. But 15 percent of its budget goes to Bay Area food banks.

Since its inception 28 years ago, Season of Sharing has donated more than \$16 million to food banks in nine Northern California counties — \$1.7 million in 2013-14 alone.

Organizations like the Food Bank of Contra Costa and Solano receive donations of food from many sources, including backyard trees, food drives and major food producers.

According to director Larry Sly, the \$300,000 that the food bank received from Season of Sharing last year bought nonperishable foods like canned goods, rice and pasta to feed elders and families with young children. “It really makes a difference,” Sly said.

Increasing need

And demand continues to grow.

Sly said that 1 in 8 people in Contra Costa and Solano counties — particularly the more economically disadvantaged areas — rely on the food bank for some assistance, up 30,000 people from last year.

King said that Napa County is an increasingly hard place for low-income families to live, as housing prices continue to outpace wages.

Community Action of Napa Valley currently distributes close to 2 million pounds of food a year to seven food pantries throughout the county as well as 42 local nonprofits.

Thanks in part to Season of Sharing funds, the food bank is shifting the way it serves families. Several sites have become “choice” pantries. “Instead of handing someone a bag of groceries, they get to go through the pantry like a market and pick out their own food,” King said.

Seniors who have special dietary needs are particularly drawn to the new food bank.

And the earthquake showed hundreds more families that they could now amplify their

diets with fresh, nutritious produce, dairy products and eggs. “We’ve moved toward nutrition banking,” King said.

Major support

Season of Sharing has become the Community Action of Napa Valley’s largest single donor. The \$105,000 that the food bank received meant more than a simple budget bump.

“A consistent flow of money allows us to get more nutrient-rich foods,” King said, referring to produce and dairy products. “If we didn’t have specific funding to purchase this food, we would be limited to what we got through food drives and the USDA.”

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Online: Go to <http://seasonofsharing.org/donate-now>.