

Larry Sly: Goal must always be to eliminate hunger

By Larry Sly

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The work we do at the Food Bank of Contra Costa and Solano is always exciting.

We have developed an extremely sophisticated food distribution system, including warehouses, a variety of trucks (up to tractor trailers), computer systems with operational management software and a dedicated staff of more than sixty employees.

We are also lucky to have an amazing group of volunteers who serve as our Board of Directors, setting policies and procedures for the organization.

The Food Bank's board is currently engaged in a strategic planning process as we continue to fight hunger in our community. We have been through a very enlightening process as we considered whether or not our mission spoke to the future of the organization.

We were guided through an evaluation of our mission by pro bono advisors from the San Francisco office of Prophet, an international branding firm. They gathered information from board members, donors, staff members, and other food banks to give us a perspective on our current mission. We are almost finished with the revision of our mission, but an interesting question was raised when we informed staff members that our new mission talks about our responsibility to end hunger. Some people wondered if that is possible.

What many don't realize is that hunger was close to being eliminated in the 1970s. In fact, the Food Bank began with the simple purpose of helping food pantries provide emergency food to people until the people in need could begin receiving help from government assistance programs. The food stamp program (now called CalFresh) grew dramatically during the Nixon administration so that no family would have to put their child to bed hungry. Supported by Senators Bob Dole and George McGovern (a farm state Republican and a farm state Democrat) the program was based on the fact that American agriculture could grow enough food to provide for everyone in our country.

Elected officials knew that how we end hunger is a political issue, but they knew it can be done.

After we talked to staff members about this, an important perspective was shared with me by one of our warehouse workers. We were talking in the warehouse about whether or not hunger could be ended, and he told me he knew it was possible. But, more importantly, he feels that the Food Bank needs to act on the belief that we can end hunger in our day-to-day work. We come to work each day and unload truckloads of fresh produce and other donated food. We work with volunteers to prepare that food so it can be given to low-income people through our direct distribution programs. We are making a difference in people's lives on a daily basis, and that cannot stop.

Whether we believe the political will exists to end hunger or not, the Food Bank of Contra Costa and Solano must continue distributing millions of pounds of food every year while we work toward that goal.

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