

Times-Herald NEWS

Local food bank to teach public speaking to welfare recipients



COURTESY PHOTO Patricia Romero-Aguasvivas is seen seated to the right of Carly Finkle, Advocacy Manager for the Food Bank of Contra Costa & Solano during the bus ride to Sacramento to discuss hunger-related policy with lawmakers last week.

By [Rachel Raskin-Zrihen](#), *Vallejo Times-Herald*

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During her nearly 30 years as a manager for AT&T, Patricia Romero-Aguasvivas of Vallejo said she never imagined needing public assistance, but circumstances have changed.

Romero-Aguasvivas and several others recently completed a training course designed to give them public speaking skills to both enhance their own marketability and to tell their stories to policy makers, program organizers said.

Romero-Aguasvivas, a 61-year-old mother of two grown children, said she was downsized out of a job along with thousands of others some months ago, and eventually found herself in the until-then unimaginable position of needing help.

“I worked for AT&T for 29 ½ half years, but was laid off with 5,000 other managers,” she said. “We had 30 days to find another job within the company, but, I couldn’t find one, and was laid off.”

In the following months, Romero-Aguasvivas said she went through her severance package, and her unemployment insurance as she searched unsuccessfully for work.

“So I ran out of money, and had to get on Cal Fresh and Medicaid and that’s how I found out about (local food pantry) Faith Food Fridays,” she said. “I never thought I’d be in this situation. But I’ve just got to deal with it. It’s very emotional for me. I’ve been surviving with government assistance — something I never thought I’d need and knew nothing about — so it was daunting. I was so embarrassed. Thank God I was able to do that, though.”

It’s stories like these that the organizers of the “The Speaker Series,” feel lawmakers needed to hear before making decisions, so this six-week intensive training was developed, Faith Food Friday’s Mary Ann Buggs said.

“It took participants through instruction led by Carly Finkle, advocacy manager for the Food Bank of Contra Costa & Solano, who taught the group the importance of anti-hunger programs like food banks and CalFresh nutrition assistance,” she said. “In addition, Toastmasters’ Alan Paolini, Ruby Bayson and I used the Toastmasters International outreach program called ‘Speechcraft’ to teach the art of public speaking.”

In 2016, the Food Bank of Contra Costa & Solano hired Finkle as an advocacy manager, to keep up with hunger and poverty-related legislation that affect

individuals in Contra Costa and Solano counties, and meet with legislators to advocate for anti-hunger policy at the local, state and federal levels, Buggs said.

“Earlier this year, after reading about a similar program in New York, she teamed up with Faith Food Fridays, to find people directly affected by programs such as CalFresh (formerly known as Food Stamps) who also wanted to learn public speaking and advocacy,” Buggs said. “Four Vallejo residents affiliated with Faith Food Fridays completed the training and will receive their certificates at a graduation ceremony this Thursday. Two graduates have already given their new speaking skills a try-out, as they attended the annual Hunger Action Day last week at the state capitol in Sacramento.”

They met with Assemblymember Timothy Grayson and State Senator Bill Dodd to share their personal hunger experiences and encourage them to take action to address it, she said.

Faith Food Fridays Founder and Director Benjamin Buggs said it’s been “amazing” watching program participants “blossom.”

“We get more confident volunteers, the Food Bank now has on-hand spokespeople who can candidly and passionately convey how legislation affects them, and the trainees themselves get a skill that will take them far in their lives,” he said.

MaryAnne Buggs said hearing these stories from the people who lived them is more impactful than hearing them from a professional outsider.

“It’s better for an elected to hear from the people who are directly affected by hunger and poverty to put a face on the issues,” she said. “And that’s what (these graduates) do. We saw it in action the other day in Sacramento, at the Hunger Action Day — attended by 400 people from across the state.”

She said the hope is that opening the lines of communication with lawmakers will result in more humane laws coming out of Sacramento and Washington, D.C.

“We want to appeal to their sense of humanity, and at least one woman had them in tears,” Mary Ann Buggs said. “I’ve been there myself. I was a single mother on food stamps, and it takes over your life.”

The woman who so moved the audience was Romero-Aguasvivas, who said she gained at least as much as her audience at the event.

“I’ve been able to talk about what I’ve been through,” Romero-Aguasvivas said. “I went through a major depression. Couldn’t get out of bed. This is giving me confidence. And it’s really important to me to talk. My brother died year ago of diabetes, because he didn’t eat right, so this is an important topic for me. So, it was important for me to be able to talk about this, and I’m, pretty sure I wouldn’t have been able to do it without this training.”

Faith Food Fridays hands out free boxes of food and groceries from 11 a.m. until 2 p.m. Tuesdays and from 2 to 6 p.m. Fridays. Toastmasters International is a nonprofit educational organization that teaches public speaking and leadership skills through a worldwide network of clubs.

More information can be found at www.foodbankccs.org and www.toastmasters.org