

## Food Bank adds service to help low-income Vallejoans



*Larry Sly, executive director of the Contra Costa/Solano Food Bank, talks about a new program that helps get fresh produce to Sereno Village residents in Vallejo. CONTRIBUTED PHOTO*

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It may not be a miracle from the heavens, but to Sereno Village residents in Vallejo, the Solano/Contra Costa Food Bank's new "Harvest to Home" program is surely a miracle from the ground.

For the last four months, the Food Bank has delivered fresh produce the first and third Thursdays to the low-income residents, complementing similar deliveries to Richmond, Pinole, Dixon, Hercules, and Concord.

"It's rolled out pretty well. It's a very effective way to get to people who need it," said Larry Sly, the Solano/Contra Costa Food Bank's executive director in his 40th year with the nonprofit.

"Harvest to Home" is the eighth "direct distribution" program making food more accessible by the Contra Costa/Solano Food Bank.

“Harvest to Home” is especially needed for those who can’t get to other nearby Food Bank distributions because they are without transportation, are medically home-bound, or are at work during distribution times, according to Food Bank Communications Director Lisa Sherrill.

The bi-monthly distribution typically takes place in an on-site community room and are set up similar to a farmers market. Residents come with bags and pick out what they need.

“The truckloads of food that come into our warehouses can only make a difference if we can successfully get it out to our community members in need,” Sly said. “Our job is to not only procure food, but also to make it accessible. We recognized that if we went to these low-income housing complexes, we could reach more people in need and do so in an efficient manner.”

“Harvest to Home” reaches low-income neighborhoods, senior citizen housing complexes, and, in Dixon, a migrant center.

Of the food delivered, the bread is obtained from grocery stores and about half of the produce is from the state’s “agricultural community,” Sly said.

For example, oranges that may be deemed too small, too large, or not the right color to sell in stores that may end up as orange juice is purchased at a nominal price by the Food Bank, which includes everything from pears, apples, cabbage and other fresh fruits and vegetables in its deliveries.

One of the dramatic changes in Sly’s time with the Food Bank is the changing landscape of the “secondary market” of food distribution, he said. What could have gone to food banks years ago is now sold to stores like Grocery Outlet.

Fortunately, Sly noted, “we’re lucky fresh produce is a big part of California’s economy. It’s enabled us to get a lot more fresh fruit and vegetables.”

And that’s good for all low-income residents served by the cross-county Food Bank, including a grateful Sereno Village where the management “is willing to help us” coordinate deliveries and on-site facilitating, Sly said.

“Most of them (the residents) are very excited about it,” he added. “It’s an additional service for people who live there and helps them have better lives.”

Sure, acknowledged Sly, a few who may not be low income could exploit the program. Still, “our philosophy is that we’re taking it to low-income neighborhoods we know where there are not a lot of affluent people. We’d rather make a mistake by giving food to someone who didn’t need it rather than have strict restrictions and miss out on giving it to someone who did.”

Yes, there have been those who show up in “a pretty nice car,” Sly said, learning later that the person lost their job.

“Suddenly they have no income and a family and they really have to swallow their pride to come down and get help from us,” he said.

Sly added that he’s experienced many seniors who qualify for help via the Cal-Fresh Program (formerly Food Stamps) but they “don’t want to take from other folks” or believe that “someone deserves it more.”

“You understand the pride, but they’re damaging their health by having poor nutrition,” Sly said. An obstacle for many is affording fresh produce in an area of exorbitant housing costs.

“We do surveys every five years or so and the surprising part is that we see pretty much half of the people we serve have a working individual in the family,” Sly said. “I always had envisioned that it was someone unemployed or unable to work. We’re seeing they can’t afford to live because they’re at a job making 12 bucks an hour. You can’t get by on that.”