

EAST BAY TIMES

By LOU FANCHER | Correspondent

PUBLISHED: February 16, 2017

Community News

Food bank director: Trump presidency could affect East Bay food programs



Ray Chavez/Staff

Staff

WALNUT CREEK — Pivots in politics and society operate a lot like the weather when it comes to food insecurity and hunger in Contra Costa County.

“President Trump’s executive orders and the changing social climate are having repercussions on people who receive assistance from government agencies. It’s a damper,” said Larry Sly, director of Food Bank of Contra Costa and Solano. “It’s put a chill out. People are scared to talk to us, even though we don’t give out their names.”

Speaking to an audience of approximately 50 people Feb. 8 at a Diablo Valley Democratic Club meeting held to discuss hunger issues in the county, Sly and Elaine Clark, director of Meals on Wheels Senior Outreach Services, suggested that, especially for seniors, food insecurity’s biggest problem might be that people think it isn’t or shouldn’t be a problem. Lack of awareness is one difficulty; harder to erase is social

stigma that says people who lack food ought to “just pull themselves up by their bootstraps,” according to Sly.

In light of the abundance of food in the Bay Area — including fresh fruits and vegetables year-round — Clark said that many people are unaware that one in six seniors in the county struggles with hunger or that California is the only state in the country in which people who receive Social Security income cannot also receive “CalFresh” benefits (the national food stamp program).

Clark said one ramification of malnutrition among people age 60 and over is the \$51 billion spent annually in the United States on health care treatment. Seniors who receive Meals on Wheels say the program’s greatest values are improved health, increased safety and the ability to remain in their homes as they age.

“But everyone is scared,” Clark said, echoing Sly’s comments. “What we’re hearing are the rumblings of defunding the Older Americans Act and using that money to fund the military.”

The Older Americans Act covers 40 percent of Meals on Wheels’ meals, safety checks and visits to more than 6,530 seniors in the county.

“The problem is that if OAA gets further defunded, people will die. If annual caps are put on it, when the money is gone, it’s gone. If you eat too much in January, you won’t eat in December,” she said.

One strategy to tackle the mountain of problems is to partner with national organizations like the Root Cause Coalition, which brings together experts from health care institutions, insurance companies, food insecurity and social service organizations, and others. “We’re partnering and looking with them at nutrition as a health issue. If insurance companies are in it, you can tell there must be money savings in solving this,” said Clark.

Sly said that during his 40 years with the food bank — he started as one of two truck drivers — the organization has had to be nimble. From initially delivering 30,000 pounds of food, they now work with 19 emergency food organizations to deliver 21 million pounds of food each year, more than half of that fresh fruits and vegetables. “That means that what we get on Monday has to be sent out by Friday.” Distribution, therefore, is a larger nemesis than is supply.