

OPINION // OUTLOOK

Guess what food banks need in addition to money [Opinion]

By Esther J. Cepeda Nov. 15, 2018



Houston Food Bank employees place produce in their designated isles inside the warehouse in Houston.

Photo: Godofredo A. Vasquez, Houston Chronicle / Staff photographer

Charities often ask for donations around the holidays because that's when people are likeliest to be feeling generous, but hunger runs rampant every month of the year, and it actually peaks for children in the summer when school is out.

Food banks in particular tend to time their drives around Thanksgiving, because so many people are out stocking up for the big dinner that it doesn't seem like too much of a sacrifice for shoppers to throw an extra package of stovetop stuffing, a

can of concentrated soup or a box of cake mix into the food bin at the door of their local supermarket.

This is a good deed, and no one should be dissuaded from attempting to make a local family's holiday dinner a little fuller or sweeter.

In fact, I'm usually the one doing the nudging, asking readers to be generous because a whopping 40 million Americans, including more than 12 million children, experience food insecurity or day-to-day hunger.

But in the 13 years I've been urging generosity at turkey time, the scope of the problem — and of the solutions — has expanded in many directions.

The percentage of the U.S. population experiencing low or very low food security has gone up over the past decade due to the failure to recover from the Great Recession, the decrease in the number of high-paying middle-skill jobs and the rise of low-paying service-sector occupations.

And the world is burning up.

That's not hyperbole. If you think it is, try telling that to the people who are fighting to survive the California wildfires, which, as of this writing, had claimed 59 lives, left hundreds missing and rendered untold numbers displaced.

Which is where the food banks come in.

Feeding America, the nation's largest hunger-relief organization, works year-round to position emergency food supplies throughout the country. So when earthquakes, hurricanes or wildfires hit, member food banks are ready to deploy food, water, equipment and supplies with a network of 2,400 trucks. Then the organization stays in communities to help them with long-term disaster recovery efforts.

Right now, the organization is coordinating in California with the Food Bank of Contra Costa and Solano, as well as with FOOD Share, Inc. and the Los Angeles Regional Food Bank, among many others.

Sue Sigler, executive director of the California Association of Food Banks in Oakland, told me they're supplying food to shelters and evacuation centers, and

coordinating with local governments and first responders to ensure the right type and quantity of food gets to those who need it.

“Unfortunately, because we saw this type of devastation during the Tubbs Fire almost exactly a year ago, we know that there is a long-term recovery that needs to be supported with food,” Sigler said. “Folks who have lost homes and employment will take many years to become self-sufficient again, so there is both an immediate and long-term need for food assistance.”

Most people experiencing food insufficiency are well past the point of just needing a can of crispy fried onions to sprinkle on top of a green-bean casserole.

The reality is that the enormity of the need requires sophisticated logistics to transport fresh milk, meats, fruits, vegetables and other foods and staples long distances from corporate donors and bulk sellers in far-flung warehouses to the people who need them.

This is why, generous readers, if you really want to make an impact on the lives of people who dearly need nourishment, please open your wallet.

“With respect to how people can help, cash donations are the most preferable,” Sigler said. “Food banks obtain food at far below retail cost, and have many other costs as well, such as extra staffing, transportation costs, and much more.”

Please find a way to donate the cost of a box of cereal or a value pack of mac n’ cheese to your local food pantry (locate it here: <https://www.feedingamerica.org/find-your-local-foodbank>).

Or find a little extra in the month’s budget to donate to the tens of thousands of people who won’t have a home for Thanksgiving because of the California fires or other disasters.

Giving your extra dollars via website or text or app may not feel as good as plunking packaged food into a bin at the grocery store, but it will go further, and help more people than you can imagine.

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