

Help for the hungry

Bay Area food bank steps in to fill void in North State grocery recovery

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This article was published on **08.09.18**.



Stephen Terry, executive director of the Oroville Rescue Mission, picked up 10 pallets of food from the J.M. Smucker Co. in Chico Wednesday—including 4,500 bags of pasta—to be distributed to several nonprofits in Butte County. Lisa Roehling, an agency relations specialist with the Food Bank of Contra Costa and Solano, coordinated the exchange.

PHOTO BY KEN SMITH

A year ago, Lisa Roehling was working for the North State Food Bank, ensuring that local families struggling to put healthy food on the table didn't go hungry. She'd been employed by the Community Action Agency of Butte County—which runs the food bank, as well as the Esplanade House, among other programs—for 18 years. In October, she was out of a job.

The North State Food Bank (NSFB) had decided to stop participation in a national program called Feeding America, which partners with major retailers like Walmart and Costco for grocery recovery, which diverts edible food from the landfill. It sets stringent guidelines for food safety, which retailers like, but it doesn't come with a lot of funding, according to Tim Hawkins, chief programs officer at Community Action Agency of Butte County.

"We were running at an \$80,000 deficit," he said. While the NSFB does receive some government funding, as well as grants and private donations, it simply was not enough to justify continuation in the Feeding America program, he said.

North State families are not suddenly going hungry, he emphasized. The Food Bank of Contra Costa and Solano swiftly stepped in to fill the void. And Roehling, who'd lost her job because NSFB no longer needed her to coordinate with Feeding America retailers, didn't have to look long for employment—she made an easy transition to the latter agency and continued her work. And more North State families are benefiting as a result, she says.

"I was surprised when I saw the numbers—they're higher than the North State Food Bank was able to distribute to agencies before," she said from her Paradise home, where she works remotely. In 2017, the NSFB disbursed 1.7 million pounds of food, according to Hawkins. Since moving into the North State region in November, the Food Bank of Contra Costa and Solano has helped to distribute 1.1 million pounds of food to local families. With additional retailers coming onboard—Raley's is joining the grocery recovery program—they are poised to surpass NSFB's numbers by November.

Roehling sees the shift in oversight as a positive change. The increase in service can be attributed to several factors. More retailers have signed onto the grocery recovery program, and the management philosophy has made delivery more efficient. Instead of warehousing food collected from throughout the region—the NSFB coverage area includes Butte, Glenn, Colusa, Plumas and Sierra counties—Roehling now connects local agencies directly with retailers.

"We're decentralizing the system," said Larry Sly, executive director of the Contra Costa food bank. "With the grocery recovery program, it's much more practical to have it done with an agency-store relationship. We're helping local stores get the service they need and making sure the local community gets the help it needs. It's been a win-win in that respect."

The NSFB still operates in the region, albeit to a lesser extent than it did a year ago. There are a number of programs that do pay for themselves, Hawkins explained. According to the agency's website, it helps deliver food to an estimated 45,000 people a year at 53 different sites. It holds "tailgates," where staff and volunteers unload pallets of a variety of different foods and individuals and agency representatives can come and essentially shop for what they need. The food bank also has a large warehouse in Oroville, its home base, where it stores food collected from local grocers (those that don't partner with Feeding America) and farmers, many of them working with the U.S. Department of Agriculture to reduce food waste.

Among the programs that Hawkins highlighted as a model it hopes to emulate elsewhere is Farm 2 Kids. It incorporates education by way of recipes and cooking demos with distribution of fresh produce, with NSFB coordinating with agencies like the Boys & Girls Clubs of the North Valley and Chico State's Center for Healthy Communities.

"We've really moved to trying to use our resources to get healthy food to families, with an education focus behind it," Hawkins said. "Feeding America is a great program; however, it requires quite a bit of matching dollars and we kept running in the red. We're determined to focus in on the resources we have to get healthy food to the community."

Roehling and Sly see the NSFB's dropping out of Feeding America as a failure of sorts, though they were ready and willing to step in to fill the void. Many local agencies work with both food banks, which is good, Roehling said, but also there's quite a bit of confusion in the region as to who is doing what.

"They are providing an important resource," Sly said of NSFB. "What we are doing to add to what they're about is providing food through national donors and also connecting agencies in Butte County [and the surrounding area] with local grocery stores that are providing grocery recovery. It allowed local resources from stores like Walmart and Target to go directly to local agencies."

