

Shortage of donations becoming dire for Bay Area food banks

Donations to fire relief may have affected local donations

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PUBLISHED: December 13, 2018 at 1:14 pm | UPDATED: December 14, 2018 at 4:55 pm

OAKLAND — Despite a robust economy, Bay Area food banks are getting anxious because the donations they usually count on this time of year to serve millions of meals to needy residents so far have been nothing short of anemic.

At least part of the reason for the donations drought may be that area residents depleted their pocketbooks by giving generously to the survivors and families of victims in the recent Butte County wildfires, California's deadliest and most destructive ever, food bank officials say.

For the first time in four years, donations to the [Alameda County Community Food Bank](#) fell short in November, so much so that it needs to raise \$3 million by the end of this month to meet its fundraising goals, said Michael Altfest, the organization's director of community engagement.

Donations also are down at the [Second Harvest Food Bank](#), which serves 250,000 people a month in San Mateo and Santa Clara counties. Second Harvest is a little more than \$1 million short of its goal, CEO Leslie Bacho said.

Also in trouble is the [Food Bank of Contra Costa and Solano](#), which is running about \$500,000 behind last year's pace at this time, communications director Lisa Sherrill said. Besides the fires, some food bank officials speculate that the polarizing mid-term elections also drained people's extra change this year as Republicans and Democrats waged a fierce battle for control of the House.

Of course, the food bank representatives aren't second-guessing people's decision to send their money to the Camp Fire relief efforts. Second Harvest even delivered a truckload of food to Chico for distribution to residents of Paradise, Magalia and Pulga displaced or otherwise affected by the fire.

"Anytime we have a local disaster, it's hard to predict how it will affect funding," Bacho said.

But because November is when food banks typically get the bulk of their money from holiday-spirited donors, officials fear there won't be enough to spread around over the next year. The three organizations collectively distribute the equivalent of 100 million meals a year in the five Bay Area counties.

The Alameda County food bank, which annually serves about 300,000 people countywide, relies on November and December donations to make up two-thirds of its annual budget for the following year.

Although there's a shortage of money at the food banks, there isn't a shortage of people in need. With housing and other costs always rising in the Bay Area, the organizations said they've seen an increase in clients. The number of clients served by Second Harvest rose by 2 percent the past year, for example.

"Unfortunately, a continuous steady increase in the cost of living has increased housing costs so much that some of our clients struggle to pay their rent," Bacho said.

Bacho said she spoke with an elderly couple last month who live on a fixed income and had to dig into their emergency fund after the rent increased. That money too is now gone so they'll need to cut their food budget.

When talking to clients, Altfest said the first words out of their mouths are that rent is so expensive.

"So often in the Bay Area in general, some can keep a roof over their heads, pay for gas in their car ... but at the end of the day, just can't afford a healthy meal," he said.

Unless donations start pouring in, the nonprofit organizations say they'll have to seriously analyze their programs with an eye toward making cuts next year.

Alameda County food bank distributes the equivalent of 31 million meals to some 200 organizations throughout the county, including food pantries, soup kitchens and other food programs such as Meals on Wheels and the Salvation Army. Its mobile pantry helps distribute food through different schools. In fact, the organization mostly serves children and seniors, Altfest said.

Second Harvest distributes about 55 million meals a year and half its clients also are children, as well as seniors, Bacho said. The Food Bank of Contra Costa and Solano annually distributes 18 million meals and reaches 178,000 customers a month.

Although all donations are accepted, monetary donations are the most useful.

The Alameda County food bank says every dollar donated helps provide about \$7 worth of food, and 95 percent of the money goes directly to its programs. Every dollar donated to Second Harvest provides two healthy meals, thanks to its relationships with donors and packers, Bacho said.

To donate to the Alameda County Community Food Bank, go to www.accfb.org. To donate to Second Harvest Food Bank serving San Mateo and Santa Clara counties, go

to www.shfb.org. The Food Bank of Contra Costa and Solano can be reached at www.foodbankccs.org.