



Food Banks Ask For Financial Donations, Volunteers, Turkeys During Holiday Season

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Food banks around the Bay Area usually experience a surge in generosity during the holiday season, but specific donations can often make the greatest impact.

Almost every food bank in the region makes a significant portion of its yearly budget through donations during the holiday season, according to charities in the South Bay, San Francisco and Contra Costa County. For this reason, financial donations are critically important.

"We have a really generous corporate community, but what most people don't realize is that over half of our operating budget is coming from individuals," Diane Hayward, spokeswoman for the Second Harvest Food Bank in the South Bay, said.

Food banks also have large buying power through bulk orders and partnerships with local organizations, allowing them to convert every dollar donated into two meals.

Lisa Sherill, spokeswoman for the Food Bank of Contra Costa and Solano, said the organization is heading efforts for Camp Fire victims this year and needs additional volunteers after elderly residents and those with health problems had to cancel because of poor air quality.

The bank will be taking donations to Oroville and Chico and appreciates gift cards, a simpler alternative to the difficult process of transporting fresh food or poultry.

Donations of food items are a staple, however, and banks encourage residents to contribute healthy items like canned beans and vegetables whenever possible. Nutritious items are often more expensive and less accessible for people who are food insecure, according to Sherill.

Every food bank is a little different and Hayward said Second Harvest prides itself on fresh vegetables. Others encourage non-perishable items, and many benefit from little-known food bank favorites like spices, alternative spreads for people with nut allergies, and high-protein foods such as canned chicken and tuna.

People who receive items from food banks or their partners have a range of living conditions, abilities, backgrounds and dietary restrictions, and find use for gluten-free items and culturally-specific foods, like instant ramen.

Mark Seelig, spokesman for the San Francisco-Marin Food Bank, said the organization created a successful meal after once receiving a donated shipment of Nopales, or cactus leaves.

"We're always constantly trying to tweak our menus to make sure folks who are getting food are enjoying it," Seelig said, describing the diversity of the San Francisco peninsula.

This year, Seelig's food bank is critically low on turkeys for the holiday season, and he said chickens are also welcome.

According to Hayward, chickens are easier to fit into compact ovens and cookware for residents who may live in smaller houses or mobile homes.

Residents should also keep in mind food transportation while determining what items to donate. Some banks, like Second Harvest, won't accept glass jars due to their fragility.

"We absolutely want to give nice foods, and we do, but it's just a matter of practicality,"

Hayward said. In the last few years, Second Harvest has teamed up with Starbucks to bring recipients baked goods and other items from the coffee shop's menu.

"Folks are thrilled because it is extra special," Hayward said. "They feel like they're getting something they won't usually get."

Every food bank has an online list of "most-needed" items. Though the holidays are a celebratory season, most food banks discourage sugary desserts or sweets.

Some regional charities also receive pet food donations, and ask that instead these items be taken directly to the Humane Society or similar organization. Most banks will redistribute these items if they receive them.

Residents who are interested in making financial donations but are unsure how their money will be used can find their local food bank at <https://www.charitynavigator.org/>.