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Opinion: Bay Area food banks need your help during holiday

Hunger in Silicon Valley is at an all-time high, touching an average of 260,000 people every month



Food barrels get taken out to trucks at Second Harvest Food Bank Curtner Center to be delivered to donation locations in Santa Clara and San Mateo counties. (Photo courtesy of Second Harvest Food Bank)

By Bruno Pillet |

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With so many issues facing us this holiday season, it can feel a little overwhelming. But as head of programs and services at Second Harvest Food Bank, I have to stay focused on hunger. From my vantage point, these are extremely challenging times to be doing this work. Hunger in Silicon Valley is at an all-time high, and organizations working to end it need the community's support like never before. To make matters worse, the recent fire in Butte County has devastated the lives of so many living there, further straining the hunger safety-net as Bay Area food banks join together to make sure those affected have nutritious food.

Despite the booming economy and low unemployment in Silicon Valley, Second Harvest and our partner agencies are serving a record number of people – an average of 260,000 kids, families and seniors every month. That’s because the cost of housing has skyrocketed, while wages have remained relatively flat for many, leaving little left over for food. Unfortunately, hunger will take a seat at too many tables this holiday season.

Last month I met an elderly couple living on a fixed income. They had received a recent rent increase and it meant they had to dig into their “emergency” money. Soon they were down to 89 cents in their savings account and they had to eliminate their food budget almost entirely to stay housed. Fortunately, we connected them to a nearby food pantry where they are now getting healthy groceries and fresh produce. In addition to providing the nutrition they need, the relief to their budget means they can keep a roof over their heads.

Nobody wants to think about their grandparents going without food, especially during the holidays. Yet many seniors who worked hard all their lives are now grappling with hunger and malnutrition because they can’t afford healthy food. More than half of those we serve are kids and seniors. Many others are working hard but struggling just to make ends meet. Hunger is often hidden, even though it’s all around us. Many of the neighbors I meet at our food pantries are teaching assistants, retail clerks and health care workers. The face of hunger is more familiar than you think.

This dichotomy between prosperity and widespread hunger is what we call the Silicon Valley Hunger paradox. As the economy grows, so does the number of people who need food. Unfortunately, with the booming economy, some people might forget that so many of our neighbors could use our help putting food on the table.

We’re also faced with uncertainty at the federal level around nutrition programs many local families count on for supplemental food. In addition, many immigrant families are afraid to ask for help due to proposed policy changes. This means even more people will likely need our help in the coming months.

I know there’s a lot happening right now that needs our attention, and I am hopeful our generous community will consider providing food to those who need it a high priority. Nutritious food is the foundation for a healthy, productive life. It literally fuels our community. That’s why I’m asking you to please give to local food-assistance organizations by donating or volunteering your time. Your support will ensure that we all have access to the nutritious food we need to thrive, no matter who we are or what table we sit at this holiday season.

Bruno Pillet is vice president of programs and services for the Second Harvest Food Bank of Santa Clara and San Mateo counties.