



Director ready for new chapter after 40 years at Food Bank

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Food Bank Executive Director, Larry Sly, works alongside other volunteers at the Antioch High School site Oct. 26 as part of the twice monthly produce distribution effort for clients in Central Contra Costa County. Sly will step down as director in 2020 (photo David Scholz)

As Thanksgiving nears, our community can shower well-deserved gratitude on Larry Sly – whose leadership for more than 40 years has helped combat hunger in Contra Costa and Solano counties.

Soon, the 69-year-old will make a clean break from his role at the Food Bank of Contra Costa and Solano, and a new executive director will bring fresh insights to carry on the mission.

Ahead of those changes, the non-profit faces the biggest demand for its services in November and December, with distribution of holiday meals and groceries in

addition to regular food. Each month, 1 in 9 people living in Contra Costa and Solano counties will turn to the Food Bank.

Sly anticipates a new executive director by year's end, and he will fully step away by the end of the first quarter in 2020. The main challenge for the new leader will be helping put together a strategic plan that focuses on increasing food distribution, creating new partnerships with organizations and solidifying disaster response.

From infancy to \$11 million

What began with one borrowed truck and one pickup truck distributing 30,000 pounds of food and a couple of staffers the first year has grown into an organization annually distributing 25 million pounds of food per year. Eighty employees and thousands of volunteers giving more than 100,000 hours (the equivalent of 57 full-time staffers) fulfill a variety of vital roles. And there's now a fleet of 18 trucks, with a fourth specialized produce delivery truck enroute.

Operating budget in the early days was a pittance compared to the \$11 million needed today to serve the ongoing need. Each year, the organization must raise at least \$6 million to support operations. The balance comes from grants, corporate, governmental and community group sources.

Sly takes pride in knowing that more than half of what moves through the Concord and Fairfield warehouses is fresh food and vegetables.

The Food Bank incorporates a two-pronged approach to serving the needs of low-income communities through relationships forged with 189 other non-profits. One part is direct distribution. The other half is advocacy, which is where Sly sees the attention increasing.

“How can the county and the state level do a better job of getting food (to where it is needed)?”

In his mind, what has been accomplished is just the beginning. “I see us partnering with others on a grander scale to make a more significant difference in the lives of the people we serve,” he said.

Responding to ‘the new normal’

Disaster relief and plans to proactively respond to those demands in the region will be among the issues on his successor's plate, as natural disasters increasingly becomes a way of life for Californians.

When relief efforts were focused on Paradise and the demand exceeded what Alameda County and San Francisco's Food Banks could do, the Food Bank of Contra County and Solano carried forth food distribution for them as part of previously established mutual aid agreements.

"This is the new normal," said Sly. "What can we do to support other groups when there is a disaster in the area and (whom can we call upon) when we need assistance?"

"There is more work to do to make us better," he added.

Other priorities include devising ways to better use the warehouse space that he says is "bursting." The agency is examining plans to retrofit the current facilities, which Sly said will buy them some time before having to move forward with any expansions.

Along those lines, the Food Bank recently signed a lease with Marathon Petroleum Corp. for \$1 per year to use its land adjacent to the Nelson Avenue warehouse near Highway 4. It will serve as parking for trucks bringing in food and those waiting to take shipments away.

In addition, the closer lot will accommodate Food Bank employees and volunteers, said Patty Deutsche, director of Government and Public Affairs.

Building on success

Sly emphasized that there are things that must not and will not change, like the importance of relationships forged with many communities the Food Bank serves. Maintaining credibility and a good image in the community remain important objectives as the organization prepares to adapt to new leadership.

"Who we are and how we work" will continue, said Sly. "There will not be dramatic changes."

As advocacy grows, Sly says the challenge will be to serve more rural and remote communities while not forgetting the core focus.

“How can we continue to build on our partnerships with other organizations so we can enhance their services without diminishing what we are doing for existing communities?” he asked.

‘Not a permanent vacation’

Sly believes it’s best for him to be out of the picture, so the new leader can see the landscape with a new set of eyes. “It is up to a new person wanting me to give input and not me forcing it upon them,” he noted.

“It is not healthy to have me floating around in the background,” said Sly, with people saying: “That is not how Larry would have done it.”

Sly sees himself visiting more with friends, and backpacking and camping in new places like Yellowstone.

One thing is for sure: “This is not a permanent vacation.”

For example, he wants to have a voice in climate change. Though not a scientist, Sly plans to use his experience with talking to organizations and in education to be an advocate.

Hunger will never be far from his interests, either.

“We will look at these things and see what is realistic,” said Sly. “I am pretty sure I will end up volunteering.”