

# Contra Costa-Solano Food Bank Leader Retires

Larry Sly started driving a truck for the agency in 1977 straight out of college. He devoted all 42 years of his career to the food bank.

By [Bay City News, News Partner](#)

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Larry Sly being honored Tuesday by the Contra Costa County Board of Supervisors in Martinez. (Bay City News)

CONTRA COSTA COUNTY — In 1977, after graduating from University of California at Berkeley with a history degree, Larry Sly took a job driving a truck.

"I thought I can do this for a couple of years while until I figure out what to do," he said. "Little did I know."

Sly never did find that history-related job. That first job out of college was, essentially, also his last, leading the two-man operation that in 1977 was called the Community First Coalition into what is now the Food Bank of Contra Costa and Solano.

And now, 42 years later, Sly is retiring from a nonprofit that now has a spacious warehouse in a North Concord light industrial district and another in western Fairfield, within sight of the Jelly Belly candy plant.

The food bank's 80 employees help provide food for 180,000 residents of those two counties every month through a series of programs not only at senior centers, food kitchens and emergency pantries, but at places like California State University East Bay and community colleges like Diablo Valley College in Pleasant Hill and Los Medanos College in Pittsburg, which have pantries for students who need food to receive it, and the Community Produce Program, which takes fresh fruit and vegetables to the people.

"In a lot of ways, we're doing the same work we were doing then" in the late 1970s, Sly said. "But instead of 36,000 pounds of food a year then, in 2018 it was 25 million pounds."

Just as he didn't foresee driving a pickup truck delivering food for a living, self-described "social liberal" Sly also didn't envision being executive director of a nonprofit (after starting as a Contra Costa County program).

But that's exactly what happened, less than two years after he signed on. And the Contra Costa Food Bank grew steadily, and merged with the Solano Food Bank in the early 1980s.

"I've had to learn a lot about property management and about real estate," the 69-year-old Sly said. "But I can call on people to help, because what we're doing resonates with people."

And an increasing share of the two counties' populations are depending on the Food Bank for sustenance. Sly said.

The Bay Area is an expensive place to live, and low-end wages haven't nearly kept up with those costs. Forty-seven percent of families served by the food bank, Sly said, have at least one person steadily employed.

Sly had an official sendoff Tuesday, when the Contra Costa Board of Supervisors formally observed his retirement. Supervisor John Gioia remembered meeting Sly in the early 1980s, during what he called the "Great Cheese Giveaway."

"You didn't just run the organization; you spoke up for this (food insecurity) as an issue," Gioia said.

Added Supervisor Candace Andersen, "You've helped people understand that there are so many people facing food insecurity. You've done a good job of de-stigmatizing why they should show up at the food bank."

Supervisor Diane Burgis said her family got some of that cheese when she was little, and talked about how important it was. And as someone who once headed up a nonprofit -- Friends of Marsh Creek Watershed -- herself, Burgis said she also appreciates Sly's work as an administrator.

"I know that he's the kind of guy not only running an exceptional nonprofit, but helping all these other agencies to be better organizations." Sly also received a Lifetime Achievement Award in 2016 from Sustainable Contra Costa, in part for his efforts to help divert edible food from the waste stream.

Sly has already handed over the Food Bank reins to Joel Sjostrom, who has worked for the duty-free wholesaler and retailer Fairn and Swanson and Peet's Coffee and Tea. He's also had volunteer experience with the Alameda County Food Bank.

"We're going to try to do Larry proud," Sjostrom said.

As for Sly, he will "do nothing" for a little while, and then visit friends and do a few other things.  
After that?

"I've urged people my whole life to volunteer; the least I could do is follow my own advice."

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