

Bay Area food bank opens pop-up pantries as demand rises

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Dave Gilliam volunteers at the San Francisco-Marin Food Bank's pop-up pantry at Cesar Chavez Elementary School in San Francisco, Tuesday, March 24. The effort is designed to help needy families struggling under the coronavirus pandemic. Karl Mondon, Bay

IN SUMMARY

The National Guard has started helping South Bay and Santa Cruz food banks.

As Bay Area food banks scramble to meet increased demand for their services, the San Francisco-Marin Food Bank has opened seven new pop-up pantries to fill a gap left by dozens of sites that have shut down due to coronavirus and volunteer shortages.

The food bank has seen about 100 of its regular 275 food pantries close in the past few weeks as [volunteers — often elderly themselves — are unable](#) to show up to help keep the distribution sites running. The closures come as tens of thousands of Californians

experience [job losses](#) and growing financial instability during the statewide shelter-at-home orders.

As the need for help swiftly rises, state, local and federal officials have jumped in to offer relief. This week, the Second Harvest Food Banks of Silicon Valley and Santa Cruz began to receive help from National Guard members [ordered by Gov. Gavin Newsom to deploy to state food banks](#) to help with distribution. The National Guard also will help Wednesday at Food Bank of Contra Costa and Solano. In addition, the California Association of Food Banks received \$6 million in state funding to distribute prepackaged boxes of food to 51 food banks throughout the state and partner organizations.

“The economic disruption of this is immediate and severe,” said Sean Brooks, the San Francisco–Marin Food Bank’s chief program officer. “We are getting a lot of calls from people that are distressed and lost work, a lot of older adults who can’t leave their homes because they are fearful of getting sick and don’t have adequate groceries. So that’s really heartbreaking. It is really challenging. People are stuck between getting enough nutrition and staying safe.”

Brooks said the spike in demand has brought flashbacks of the 2008 recession. Since launching its pop-ups last week, the food bank has served about 5,000 people — with 800 people at a distribution in the Bayview neighborhood alone on Monday. He expects those numbers to rise in the coming days and weeks and hopes to open five pop-up pantries in Marin and a total of 15 in San Francisco. Brooks says the pop-ups could be in place for several months.

Less than an hour into a Tuesday morning pop-up at Cesar Chavez Elementary School in San Francisco, more than 100 people had received grocery bags filled with produce, grain, canned fruit and meat. Volunteers maintained strict social distancing guidelines as clients were served one-by-one and those waiting in line were separated by at least six feet.

Claudia Torres, 38, said she stopped by after losing her job at a Chinese restaurant in San Francisco last week following the Bay Area’s shelter-in-place mandate. Torres has three school-aged children and has been relying on help from the food bank and meal giveaways from her kids’ schools to stay afloat as the days stretch on without a paycheck.

“I don’t know what will happen,” she said in Spanish. “I pray that this situation gets better so that we can return back to normal life and work.”