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Coronavirus: How Bay Area food banks are coping with critical volunteer shortage

Some are turning to pre-packaged produce while others explore how to deliver



Mariane Yager, of Oakland, and several volunteers fill bags of oranges at Alameda County Food Bank in Oakland, Calif., on Thursday, Dec. 13, 2018. Yager volunteers once a week, she said. (Ray Chavez/Bay Area News Group)

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On a typical day at the vast food bank warehouse in San Jose, 80 to 100 volunteers pack apples, oranges, pears, squash and cabbage into boxes to be shipped out to hundreds of distribution sites across Santa Clara and San Mateo counties.

On Tuesday, just 17 showed up. All told, more than 1,000 volunteers have cancelled this week over concerns that working in close contact with others might expose them to coronavirus.

“This is critical for us because we use volunteers to sort and pack huge trucks of produce,” said Leslie Bacho, chief executive officer of the Second Harvest of Silicon Valley Food Bank, which provides food to a quarter of a million people every month who otherwise would struggle to find enough to eat.

As the COVID-19 pandemic grows, food banks across the state, which serve about 2 million Californians annually, are facing precipitous drops in volunteers. The shortage has been particularly severe in Northern California, where the first cases were confirmed and the number of cases has grown quickly.

Meanwhile, partner organizations like churches, schools and senior living centers that host weekly food bank distributions have also started shutting their doors. Already, 19 weekly food pantries in Silicon Valley that serve 2,400 households have closed, said Bacho, who expects more.

On Friday, Bacho’s food bank announced that Facebook COO Sheryl Sandberg and her fiancé have joined other tech leaders to [launch a new \\$5.5 million](#) COVID-19 Fund for Feeding Families. In addition,

Sandberg said money from the fund would help finance a temporary workforce to keep Second Harvest running.

In San Francisco, the number of pantries that had closed jumped from 13 on Wednesday to about 30 on Thursday, out of a total of about 200. “Whoever was getting food there isn’t getting food there anymore,” said Paul Ash, executive director of the San Francisco-Marin Food Bank. “We’re really kind of scrambling.”

Food banks may start staffing pop-up food pantries in parking lots in areas where distribution sites have cancelled, Ash said. In San Francisco neighborhoods with lots of pantries, like the Tenderloin, a site closing doesn’t make much of a difference. But in areas with fewer services like the Richmond district, families may have nowhere else to turn.

“To be candid, we’re not meeting all the need right now anyways,” Ash said. “We’re going to move from an imperfect system to a little less perfect system.”

So far, the numbers of Californians seeking food have not substantially changed and food banks have found ways to keep up with demand. But leaders of multiple food banks worry that the volunteer shortage could cripple their ability to respond to increasing need as many Californians lose wages or even jobs due to the coronavirus and its economic aftershocks.

“Low-wage workers are more likely to work in jobs that don’t have paid sick leave or other benefits that allow them to stay home,” said Andrew Cheyne, director of government affairs at the California Association of Food Banks. “This is producing a potential two-fold crisis of needing to increase service to communities in need and not having the personnel and infrastructure to be able to do so.”

Help could come in the form of a bill introduced this week in the U.S. House of Representatives that would give food banks \$400 million.

Food banks are being forced to come up with fast solutions. At the food bank that serves San Francisco and Marin County, between a third and a half of volunteers have cancelled for any given shift this week, said Ash. That’s prompted the county to purchase pre-packaged produce, which doesn’t need to be sorted but is more expensive.

“This is the kind of time you don’t stop to ask how much (it costs), you just kind of do it,” Ash said. “We do have a reserve fund for disaster.”

Earlier this week, Second Harvest Food Bank of Santa Cruz put out a new, urgent call for healthy volunteers, after the Santa Cruz Warriors, an NBA minor league team, cancelled their three-hour volunteer shift at the food bank there, as did several school groups.

“That’s leaving us with big holes,” said Suzanne Willis, chief development and marketing officer. “We’re going to have to look at probably finding temporary hires that we can hire to do the work that volunteers had been doing.”

At the Alameda County Community Food Bank, just four people showed up to a morning shift this week where there are usually 40 to 50 volunteers. So the staff, including leadership, deployed to the warehouse to sort produce. As of Wednesday, 350 volunteers had cancelled this month, said Michael Altfest, director of community engagement and marketing.

Volunteers have good reason to take precautions. California public health officials announced a policy that gatherings of more than 250 should be cancelled, while smaller gatherings should only proceed if people can be six feet apart.

“Corporations are being extra careful when it comes to community events and volunteering, so we’re dealing with that right now,” said Jim Floros, president and CEO of the San Diego Food Bank.

With mounting concerns about quarantines and the closure of food distribution sites, the Food Bank of Contra Costa and Solano Counties is already thinking about how it could handle in-home food deliveries to the roughly 178,000 people served monthly.

That food bank covers a wide swath of Northern California, and with just 10 regular drivers, such an effort would require resources well beyond its capacity, says policy and advocacy manager Cassidie Carmen Bates. Bates says it would likely have to contract with a large-scale distributor like Amazon to deliver food if sites close or clients have to quarantine.

The San Francisco-Marín Food Bank started sending people home with three to five pounds of extra shelf-stable goods, along with the 28 to 30 pounds of produce, staples and canned goods that people typically pick up. Their accompanying advice: Save it in case you need to stay in your home for 14 days. And in Alameda County, the food bank is racing to prepare 2,000 emergency bags that hold 15 pounds of shelf-stable goods, like water, pasta, canned peaches, beans, rice and tuna, said Altfest.

No food banks reported shortages of produce or canned goods due to people stockpiling in preparation for coronavirus, as has been reported in other parts of the country.

“We recognize what a critical resource (the food bank) is for folks and we are committed to doing that in as safe a way as possible,” Bacho said. “We are really dependent on volunteers.”

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