

Food banks face shortages of volunteers; many Bay Area pantries close as coronavirus spreads



A large sign hangs over the warehouse that says, 'Thank you volunteers' in the volunteer center at the Alameda County Community Food Bank on July 25, 2019. The food bank relies on roughly 100 volunteers every day to package thousands of meals to be distributed. Photo by Anne Wernikoff/CalMatters

In Summary

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As the coronavirus pandemic grows, food banks across the state, which serve about 2 million Californians annually, are facing precipitous drops in volunteers.

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 volunteers 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 the 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 Silicon Valley Second Harvest 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 coronavirus pandemic grows, food banks across the state, which serve about 2 million Californians annually, are facing precipitous drops in volunteers. This 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 the Silicon Valley that serve 2,400 households have closed, Bacho said, and she expects more to close soon. In San Francisco, the number of pantries that had closed jumped from 13 on Wednesday to nearly 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-Marín 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.

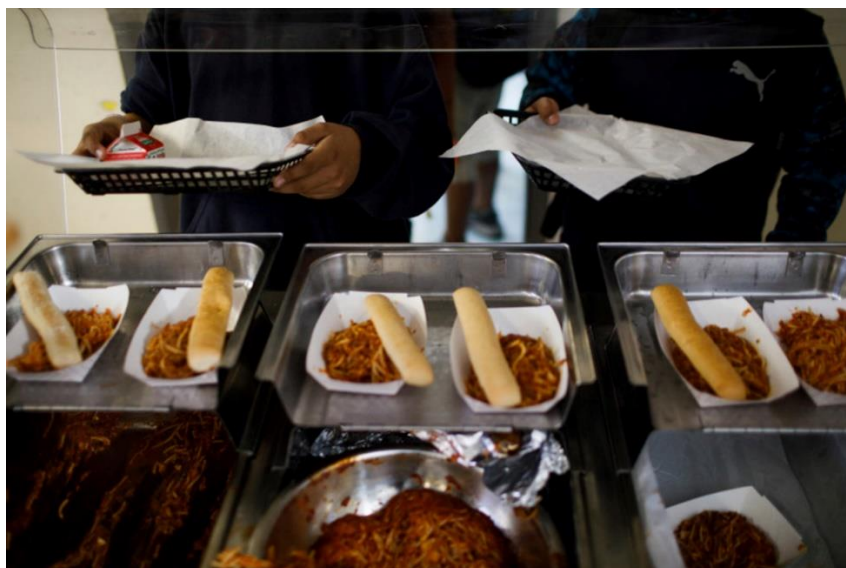
“To be candid, we’re not meeting all the need right now anyways,” Ash said. “We’re going to move from an imperfect system to a little less perfect system.”

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 Wednesday in the U.S. House of Representatives that would give food banks \$400 million.

Also, as schools close, many families can still receive free and reduced-cost meals. The U.S. Department of Agriculture approved a [waiver](#) that allows closed California schools to continue to serve the meals, for which nearly 60% of the state’s K-12 students are eligible.



Ravenswood Middle School students wait in line for lunch in East Palo Alto, Calif. Photo by Dai Sugano, Bay Area News Group

According to an [EdSource tracker](#), 47 California schools have closed, with more closing each day. After Elk Grove Unified in southern Sacramento county shut down all 67 of its schools on Monday, it started [offering a drive-thru lunch service](#) to all families every day that schools are closed.

The volunteer void

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 has 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."

On Tuesday, the 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."

Several other food banks said they were looking into hiring temps to fill the volunteer void as well.

At the Alameda County Community Food Bank, just four people showed up to a Wednesday morning shift where there are usually 40 to 50 volunteers. So the entire staff, including leadership, deployed to the warehouse to sort produce into boxes. As of Wednesday, 350 volunteers had cancelled this month, including 219 since Monday, said Michael Altfest, director of community engagement and marketing.

Many cancellations come from companies that regularly send volunteer groups but have asked employees to work from home or avoid large gatherings. Others are individual volunteers, who are often seniors and may be on high-alert because of the heightened risk of coronavirus for the elderly.

Volunteers have good reason to take precautions. On Wednesday, 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.

Without staffers at the food bank's multiple distribution sites, Floros is concerned that more of San Diego county's estimated 450,000 food-insecure residents could have to travel to pickup locations out of their area, if they can reach them at all.

All food banks contacted said they are taking heightened safety precautions to keep volunteers and clients safe. At the San Diego Food Bank, new protocols in the food bank's warehouse call for everyone to wear gloves and sanitize every surface repeatedly throughout the day, Floros said.

"Prepare for the worst," Floros said, "hope for the best."



Alameda County Community Food Bank is facing volunteer shortages as coronavirus spreads. Photo by Anne Wernikoff/CalMatters

Preparing for the worst

Food banks across the state are preparing for the worst-case scenario, including the possibility that many people will lose wages or even jobs or be unable to leave their homes and partner organizations that normally host weekly distributions will close.

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.

The food bank covers a wide swath of Northern California, and with just 10 regular drivers, such an effort would require resources well beyond the food bank's current 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 to the tens of thousands of clients it serves if sites close or clients have to quarantine, and is hoping to secure additional funding that could reimburse those costs. Organizers are also weighing how to deliver the food. The food bank does not typically collect addresses, but has begun to ask for contact information in the event that they would need to deliver food to clients' homes.

The CDC has urged people to prepare for the possibility of self-quarantining for two weeks, causing many households to stockpile food, medicines and sanitization supplies. But for millions of Californians, that's just not feasible.

That's why last week 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.

Before the week's end, the Alameda 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. The food bank first used emergency bags during the government shutdown last

January, because they could be easily distributed in unusual places, like, for example, the breakroom for employees at the Oakland International Airport.

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. However, in Orange County, the Second Harvest Food Bank is “increasing our inventory of shelf-stable food above and beyond our normal supply... to meet the anticipated rise in demand,” said CEO Harald Herrmann.

Food banks may look to a food bank in Texas for an innovative plan to help low-income residents prepare. The San Antonio Food Bank has started to deliver [coronavirus preparedness kits](#) stocked with 14 days of food, hand sanitizer and cleaning disinfectant to as many as 300,000 households.

All of these efforts, however, require volunteers. Bacho at Second Harvest of Silicon Valley urged healthy people not in risk groups to consider volunteering.

“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.”



A warehouse worker walks through giant cartons of watermelons and nectarines at the Alameda County Community Food Bank. Photo by Anne Wernikoff/CalMatters

More emergency funding for food banks?

Food banks are hoping for more funding from state and federal lawmakers.

Last fall, the California Association of Food Banks [requested](#) \$32 million in state funding to respond to emergencies. Though aimed mostly at wildfires and power safety shut-offs, the budget request has taken on new urgency, said Cheyne.

Meanwhile, Democrats in the U.S. House of Representatives introduced a [legislative package](#) Wednesday night that would set aside \$400 million for local food banks to meet increased demand from low-income Americans during the emergency, including \$300 million to purchase food and \$100 million to store and distribute it.

Called the Families First Coronavirus Response Act, the legislation also would bolster nutrition programs for pregnant women, mothers with young children, seniors and school-age children. It would guarantee free coronavirus testing, paid leave and unemployment insurance, and temporarily put the Trump administration’s [proposed food stamp cuts on hold](#).

However, the U.S. Department of Agriculture [confirmed this week](#) that it will move ahead with its plan to begin cutting food stamp benefits on April 1 to able-bodied adults without dependents who work or train for fewer than 20 hours per week.

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