

# Second Harvest receives federal grant to promote food stamps

## Local food bank is the only California agency to receive funds

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OF THE REGISTER-PAJARONIAN

Second Harvest Food Bank was one of 19 agencies, and the only one from California, to be awarded grants for a federal food stamp outreach program last week.

More than \$5 million will be distributed to organizations across the nation to implement outreach efforts for assisting the working poor, the elderly, legal immigrants and low-income families. The federal grants aim to improve access to and awareness of the U.S. Department of Agriculture's Food Stamp Program. Second Harvest will be receiving a grant of \$287,680, to be used over the next two years.

"We've never applied for a federal grant before, so this is pretty big," said Willie Elliot-McCrea, the food bank's executive director.

And the Watsonville-based food



bank is wasting no time putting those funds to work. They plan to begin implementing the new program today, applying the funds to eventually hire a total of four half-time community-based outreach workers who can explain and help enroll families in the food stamp program.

The workers will serve on Second Harvest's food hotline and at local partner organizations La Manzanita Community Resources, Salud Para La Gente and the Familia Center.

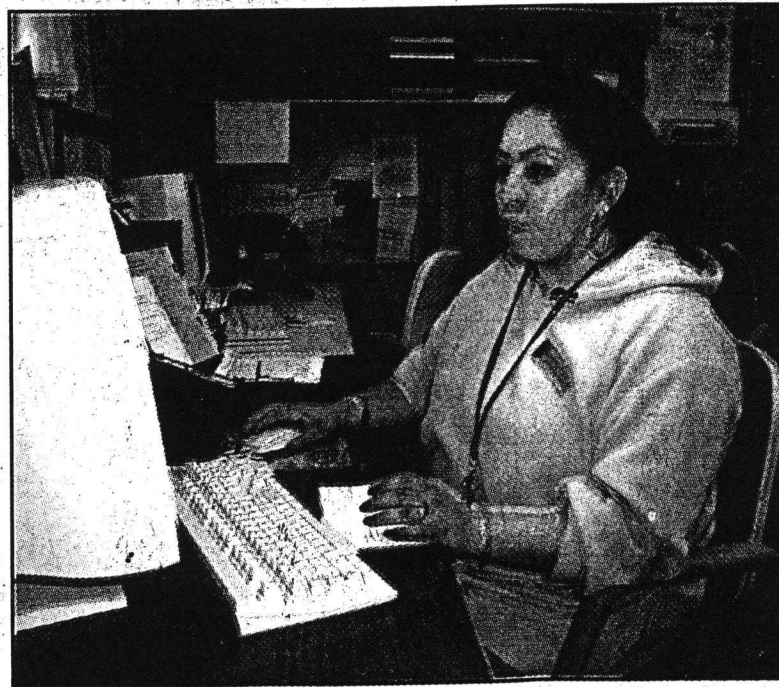
"It's an outgrowth of our Community Food Hotline," said Elliot-

McCrea of this new service. "We've been doing a lot of food stamp outreach this past year. When someone calls for food we also talk to them about WIC vouchers and food stamps."

Hotline workers discovered that many callers are eligible for the federal food assistance programs, but aren't participating. That puts more of a burden on Second Harvest, which was intended to complement, not replace, existing programs. Case in point: the USDA's food stamp program.

The program is supposed to serve as a cornerstone of federal nutrition assistance by providing help to needy households and the working poor. Last year, says the USDA, it provided participants with an average of \$1.3 billion a month in benefits.

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Tarmo Hannula/Register-Pajaronian

Sandra Lopez, hotline technician for the Second Harvest Food Bank, has been helping local residents sign up for food stamps. Many people qualify but do not receive the aid.

# FOOD

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But the social stigma associated with food stamps, along with a lengthy application process that involves 13 pages of initial paperwork and three trips to government offices, have dissuaded poor working families — for whom the program was intended — from participating, said Elliot-McCrea. Although hunger is a growing problem, the number of Food Stamp Program participants in California has decreased by a full 50 percent over the past few years.

“Our job is to be the safety net,” he explained. “Our mission is to end hunger, and a critical piece is to support the food stamp program. We’re not the front line of defense against hunger; Food Stamps is. And if the front line’s not working, that means we have to run defense ... One of the things that makes it really hard for the food bank is that we’re feeding a lot of people that used to get food stamps.”

USDA Food Stamp Outreach grants like the one Second Harvest just received are designed to help local food programs improve people’s access to food stamps through education and the use of new technology.

Last year, the USDA awarded \$3.7 million in similar grants to 14 community organizations across the country. This year’s 19 recipients were selected from among more than 100 proposals submitted by states, nonprofit groups and other organizations.

“We want to ensure that everyone who is eligible for food stamps knows about the program and knows where to go to participate,” said Eric M. Bost, federal undersecretary for food, nutrition and consumer services. “State and local organizations provide unique approaches to reach eligible people, and that’s what these grants are all about.”

“Providing nutrition assistance to eligible families is a top priority for the Bush administration,” said Agriculture Secretary Ann M. Veneman as she announced the grant recipients. “Partnerships among local organizations and state and federal governments will help provide the nutrition assistance families need.”

Coupled with other streamlining efforts that will be put into effect by the end of the year, the hope is that the programs funded by the USDA grants will make food stamps more accessible to those who need them, and expedite the process of getting into the program.

Among other improvements on the way is a new application that has been trimmed to just four pages. The workers funded by Second Harvest’s USDA grant will be available to help area residents acquire and fill out the shorter form.

Food stamps themselves will also soon be a thing of the past. Starting Dec. 1, the paper coupons will be phased out and replaced with a new system of Electronic Benefits Transfer cards. EBT cards will look and work much like a bank debit card. Participants will be able to simply present their cards for scanning at the checkout stand to have their qualifying purchases deducted from their food assistance program allocation.

“That will remove the social stigma,” predicts Elliot-McCrea. “In addition, it’ll eliminate trafficking in the coupons and greatly strengthen the program. This will really streamline things.”

Second Harvest also plans to apply a portion of their USDA grant money to the production of several “high-quality public service announcements” and development of a corps of volunteers and outreach workers that will inform Central Coast residents about the options available locally for meeting their hunger

several "high-quality public service announcements" and development of a corps of volunteers and outreach workers that will inform Central Coast residents about the options available locally for meeting their hunger needs.

Staff at the Santa Cruz County Human Resources Agency, which handles many local assistance cases, say they were pleased to hear that Second Harvest has garnered the grant, and look forward to how it can assist their efforts to help area people.

"HRA is pleased to partner with the food bank to ensure that eligible residents of Santa Cruz County receive food stamps," said Claudine Wildman, director of the agency's Benefit Services Division. "We look forward to working together on the outreach efforts."