

CELEBRATING 25 YEARS OF FEEDING THE HUNGRY

Pajaro Valley kitchen sees increasing food insecurity in Watsonville

Food Banks

9.7.14

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WATSONVILLE » The face of hunger is changing, says Kristal Caballero, the new executive director of Pajaro Valley Loaves and Fishes pantry and kitchen.

Five days a week for 25 years, the nonprofit has served hot lunches and distributed groceries to thousands of hungry citizens, serving as a barometer for the local economy.

"It's no longer homeless people living under levees," said Caballero. "It's working middle-class families."

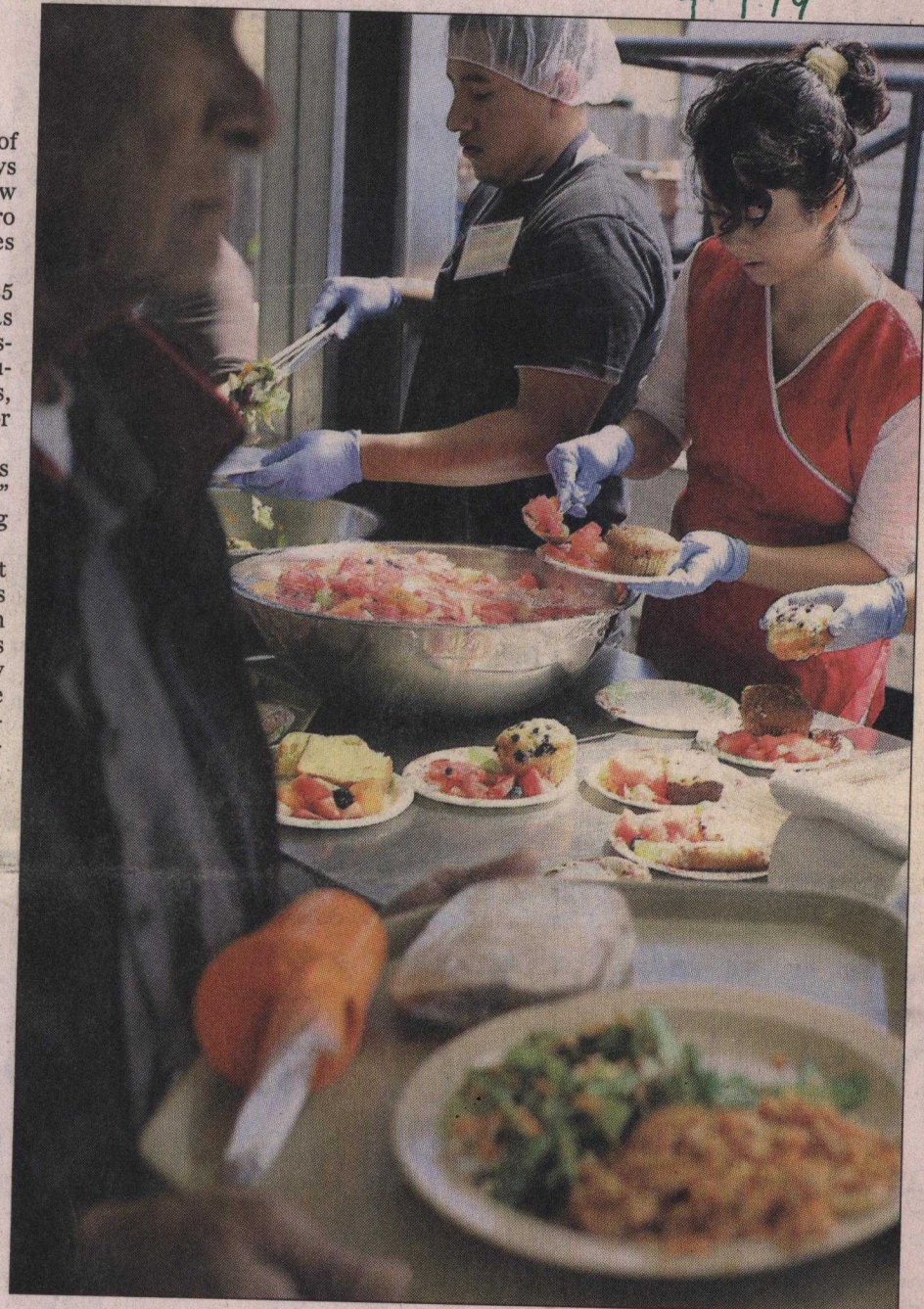
Since its beginning at Watsonville's St. Patrick's Parish in 1989, the program has served more clients each year, peaking at nearly 37,000 in 2012. This year, the staff expects record numbers because the peak winter season has not yet hit, and the number of clients is already up about 15 percent compared to last year.

Volunteer Bob Montague, who since 2000 has played a number of roles including board president, said client demographic has changed, from almost exclusively seasonal farmworkers and their families to include the elderly, disabled and mentally ill.

"Their costs are going up and income isn't going up," Montague said. "It's just getting tougher to get by."

The nonprofit, which receives less than 6 percent of its \$250,000 annual budget from government sources, raises the rest through donations and its annual Empty Bowls fundraiser set for Sept. 20 at Pajaro Dunes.

The program operates out of a refurbished house at Second and Menker streets, serving many who live in the neighborhood and some who are referred from other social service groups. When Watsonville's primary crop



Pajaro Valley Loaves and Fishes is busy with lunch activity Friday as volunteers serve hot meals to a long line of clients.

KEVIN JOHNSON — SANTA CRUZ SENTINEL

+ **Online:** To view a video about Loaves and Fishes, visit santacruzsentinel.com and click on this story.

Montague said.

Faces of hunger

Barry Martinsen, 64, worked full time as a handyman in Santa Cruz for 22 years before losing stable work in 2008. Refusing to accept Social Security or a

military pension, Martinsen now lives at a Watsonville shelter and eats lunch at Loaves and Fishes a few times each week.

"I'm here by my own choice," he said. "I'm living this ultra simple life."

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His last contractor job was a year ago, from which he made \$6,000. He occasionally fixes cars and does odd jobs, but income is minimal, he said. He lives frugally and his main expense is laundry, he said.

"When I had the truck and tools I had more work. Now that I lost them, it's harder," said Martinsen.

He said he's concerned about radiating back pain that is worsening.

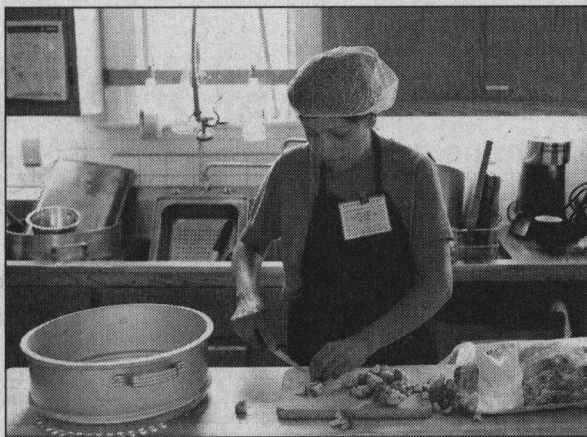
"That's what homeless life is like for people who don't do drugs or drink alcohol," Martinsen said. "They have problems with health."

Lupe Ortiz, 52, worked a minimum-wage seasonal job at a Watsonville squid packing plant before a stroke disabled her last summer. Ortiz has attended lunch and received groceries at Loaves and Fishes for four years.

"I can't fix my own meals very well, so it's good this is open," she said.

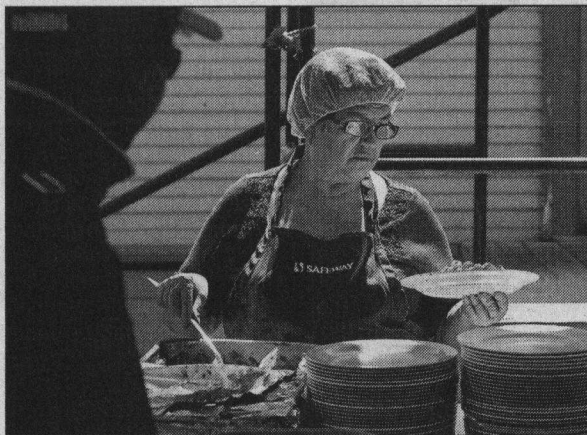
On a \$700 monthly income from Social Security, Ortiz pays \$375 a month to share a two-bedroom Watsonville house with her son and three others. She visits two other food pantries, but still has to buy her own milk, eggs and meat.

Ortiz, who is pre-diabetic, said she's up to her ears in white rice — she will occasionally make "arroz con leche" when she receives evaporated milk, but



PHOTOS BY KEVIN JOHNSON — SANTA CRUZ SENTINEL

Pajaro Valley Loaves and Fishes Kitchen Supervisor Maria Gonzalez helps prepare the afternoon lunch in Watsonville on Friday.



Volunteers serve hot meals to those in need at Pajaro Valley Loaves and Fishes on Friday. The Watsonville organization is celebrating its 25th anniversary this month.

otherwise jars it, saying it's not healthy.

After phone and Internet expenses, laundry and a bus pass to attend Cabrillo's Stroke and Disability Learning Center classes, Ortiz said she has nothing left for savings.

"By the end of the month, I have to stretch," Ortiz said.

Volunteer support

Maria Gonzalez, Loaves and Fishes' kitchen supervisor for 11 years, is one of the program's three paid staff members. Every day, she cooks and serves a meal for 100, with help from a handful of volunteers.

"It makes me feel good,

EMPTY BOWLS

What: Dinner and auction supporting Pajaro Valley Loaves and Fishes kitchen and pantry

When: 5-9 p.m. Sept. 20

Where: Pajaro Dunes Shorebirds Lagoon House, 105 Shell Drive, Watsonville

Cost: \$80

Tickets: Visit www.pvloavesandfishes.org, email treasurer@pvloavesandfishes.org or call 831-722-4144. Limited number available.

GROCERIES MEMBERSHIP PROGRAM

What: Monthly donation supporting groceries for low-income households.

Cost: \$25 per month buys one week of groceries for a family of four, \$50 per month buys 2 weeks, \$100 buys one month.

To donate or volunteer:

Visit www.pvloavesandfishes.org or call 831-722-4144.

I can cook for 100 people," Gonzalez said. "It's important for them. Some people only eat once a day here. The weekends, they're hungry."

Gonzalez said she listens to clients' stories and many call her "sister." She's attended about 10 funerals of clients who died from street violence or health issues, she said.

"A lot of these people I feel are part of my family," she said. "Sometimes they don't show up for one or two weeks and I worry about them. I go home and I say 'I hope they're OK' and I pray."