

'Hunger is year round'



Bill Lovejoy/Sentinel

Volunteers donate unloaded food during the annual Second Harvest holiday food drive.

Second Harvest grows in response to community need

Food Banks

This is the first installment in a three-part series about the hungry in Santa Cruz County and the efforts to feed them.

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It's ironic: For many of us, the holiday season brings so many additional calories that we complain to our friends, eat another cookie, then get ready to hit the gym in January.

At the same time, thousands of people in the community struggle to get enough food to sustain life. Most heartbreaking is the fact that nearly half the hungry in Santa Cruz County are children.

"Food is probably the most basic thing that connects us as human beings," says Jeffrey Kongsle, development and marketing director for

Second Harvest Food Bank. "When we want to show appreciation to our friends, we bake them cookies; if a someone is sick, we bring chicken soup. Food — that's the one thing many families go without."

The annual Second Harvest Holiday Food Drive, which helps feed families year-round, has become a familiar tradition in the community, the barrels plastered with the prominent Second Harvest logo cropping up at schools, libraries and businesses with the regularity of decorated trees.

The organization is headquartered in an industrial section in Watsonville, adjacent to agricultural fields where much of the bounty of Santa Cruz County is grown. All 1.7 acres are a beehive of activity.

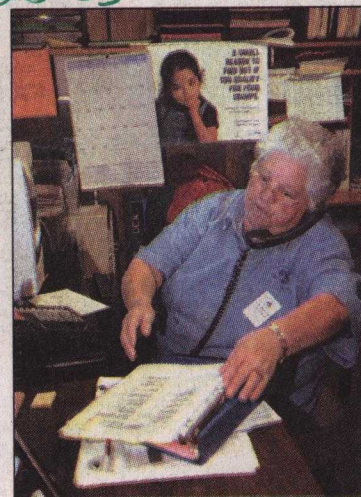
Tinny music from a Spanish-language radio station blasts outside

on the loading docks as the fleet of four trucks is unloaded and food is carted by forklift to cold storage, freezer or other areas, waiting to be sorted.

The warehouse itself is a cavernous space, about two-thirds the size of a football field. It's surprisingly orderly and spic and span, with neat columns of crates and pallets of tuna and apple sauce towering overhead, super-giant economy-size bags of pasta and grains underfoot.

'Shopping trips'

Every Tuesday, Wednesday and Thursday, representatives from the 97 "member" organizations served by Second Harvest are invited to come to the warehouse to "shop."



Dan Coyro/Sentinel

Carmelita Carranco is the hot line and outreach specialist at the Second Harvest Food Bank.

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Food bank

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Free of charge, these organizations pick up items from the food drives, bakeries, growers, dairies and other suppliers of donated surplus. In addition, there's a pantry shelf of specialty items, like mincemeat and gefilte fish, certain service groups might be able to use. Other food items, such as large quantities of pasta and flour, purchased in bulk by the food bank, can be bought by member agencies at the bargain basement price of 18 cents a pound.

Second Harvest also runs five USDA food programs and 16 Food For Children programs throughout Santa Cruz and San Benito counties.

Volunteers can receive a box containing a three-day supply of food through Second Harvest's Partners In Need program.

Second Harvest currently employs 24 full-time staff and operates as a community nonprofit, overseen by a board of directors. In addition to providing emergency food supplies to 120 local agencies and food programs, Second Harvest also offers a community hotline, a food stamp outreach program, and participates in education and advocacy on the state and national level.

Modest start

The food bank's beginnings were much more humble and quite colorful, evolving from the socially conscious and heady days of the early 1970s.

The first edition of the food bank — the second-oldest such organization in the nation — was started by Al DiLudovico who, with his wife Patti, had founded the original Catalyst, ostensibly a meeting ground for co-op members of the newly formed University of California campus and the community's intelligentsia and political movers and shakers located in the old St. George Hotel.

"There was an awful lot of organizing going on in those days," recalls DiLudovico, who ran the food bank project from 1972-78. Starting with supplies from the USDA and attracting donations from local growers and merchants, the food bank gave away boxes of food to just about anyone who asked.

The Catalyst group also put a Food For Children program in effect: three houses in three differ-

Who is hungry?

In the United States, hunger has been documented in all 50 states; 33 million Americans, including nearly 3 million children, are 'food insecure,' meaning meals were skipped or reduced in size due to lack of money.

In Santa Cruz and San Benito counties, 45,000 individuals are fed each month by Second Harvest Food Bank through its network of 120 local agencies and programs.

■ 68.6 percent of households served by the food bank have incomes below the federal poverty level, including senior citizens (10 percent of clientele), disabled persons (9 percent) and

abused women seeking shelter assistance.

■ 44 percent of all client households have one or more working adults (up in the last survey conducted in 2001 from 35 percent in 1997). The average household size is 2.6.

■ 44 percent are members of households that had to choose between paying for housing or food in the past year (up from 38 percent).

■ 36 percent have no car, 15 percent have no telephone, 87 percent have no private health insurance.

■ Nearly half (42 percent) of the hungry are children, up from 39 percent.

ent neighborhoods served kids who would be dropped off for a meal, then sent home with boxes of surplus food.

"Then the USDA said we couldn't just give it away," says DiLudovico. "But we did anyway." Eventually the group was charged with what DiLudovico calls "misappropriation of food."

Somewhere along the line the Black Panthers got involved; when the feds realized some controversial political messages might have been being served up with the fruit cups, the group started moving the breakfast program between different houses. "We were accused of serving up revolution for breakfast," DiLudovico said with a fond chuckle.

Recalling this early history makes Willy Elliot-McCrea wince. "If there's anything I've tried to do for the past 17 years," said Elliot-McCrea, the food bank's executive director, "it's to de-politicize the food bank, to move to common ground."

"Everybody cares about kids getting something nutritious to eat," Elliot-McCrea continued. "Hungry kids in Santa Cruz — everybody checks their swords at the door."

Elliot-McCrea joined the food bank staff in 1978 as warehouse manager and purchasing agent. A Lodi native, Elliot-McCrea moved to Santa Cruz at 19 and became active in neighborhood organizing and helped found the Seabright Neighborhood Association.

He arrived in a watershed year. DiLudovico retired, the food bank changed agency umbrellas and moved south to Aptos, and later to Main Street in Watsonville.

In 1986, the food bank moved to its current location in Watsonville. That year 13 food banks around the country — including the one in Santa Cruz County — joined forces to form America's Second Harvest (www.secondharvest.org), a nationwide network of certified affiliates to distribute food and increase awareness of domestic hunger. America's Second Harvest now has 215 affiliates.

Holiday food drive

The annual holiday food drive was launched in 1988. Elliot-McCrea had moved up to executive director and looked to close what he calls "a huge gap between need and the ability to serve. We knew that if we were going to feed people we were going to have to involve the community."

To that end, Elliot-McCrea applied for and got a corps of VISTA volunteers who set about the task of organizing a network of local food pantries and launching the first community holiday food drive in 1988.

The community response was at first modest — about 25,000 pounds.

Because the food bank, which had officially changed its name to Second Harvest by this time, was so well-organized, its land and warehouse became the base of operations for FEMA and the National Guard: soldiers handing boxes of food to the suddenly homeless, sorting donations of clothes, and sleeping in the loft where the food barrels are usually stored.

The holiday food drive of 1989 boasted an increase to 35,000



Bill Lovejoy/Sentinel

Plantronics workers help unload a truck of food at the Second Harvest Food Bank's 'Fill the Bus' drive.

pounds, a number that climbs every year.

In 1993, Second Harvest freed itself of government ties and re-organized as a 501 c3 nonprofit. "We are now directly governed by the community," Elliot-McCrea said.

The organization, with an annual budget of \$9 million, undergoes three regular audits: an annual financial audit and biennial audits by the USDA and by America's Second Harvest. The audit by the latter national agency was conducted earlier this month. "We passed with flying colors," Elliot-McCrea said.

If a visitor stands still long enough, a staff member is likely to start boasting about Second Harvest's low overhead, about 5 percent of expenses, so that 95 percent of the budget gets put right back into the community.

In addition to the annual holiday food drive, Second Harvest runs food drives throughout the year, including the Letter Carrier's Food Drive each May, the Fly-In Food Drive Memorial Day weekend at the Watsonville Air Show, and Dining Out, Helping Out events spon-

sored by the Santa Cruz Area Restaurant Association.

The down economy has increased the number of people asking for food but has decreased the number of businesses and individuals who are able to give. So far, contributions to the holiday food drive are down from last year. When the food bank solicited local businesses for help with the 2003 drive, a significant number had to say sorry but no, even though they had been able to help in previous years. A number of other businesses had closed up shop.

"It will be a wonderful day when we're out of business," said Jeffrey Kongsli. "Will that happen anytime soon? I doubt it. Hunger is year round, not just during the holidays."

To contact Second Harvest: P.O. Box 990, Watsonville, CA 95077; 722-7110; www.thefoodbank.org.

Tomorrow: How one man's Christmas lights display makes a major difference in the fight against hunger.

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