

Groups find solutions to local food insecurity

BY CHRISANNA MINK
cmink@modbee.com

PART 2

“Our first stop is with the triplets,” said bus driver John Lundell. “They’re good boys.”

Lundell is a veteran bus driver for Hughson Unified School District, but he wasn’t picking up the triplets. He and food service staff were dropping off school meals to their house at the end of a dusty county road.

Owen Dekleva ran out of his house to meet the van, and grabbed three brown bags from the crew — one each for him and his brothers, Ryan and Logan, who are seventh graders in Hughson.

Hughson School District has adopted a unique strategy to get food to where the kids are. Instead of buses picking up students, the bus drivers are delivering food to the kids on their usual routes.

The bus drivers and food service staff know the kids by name, and the kids know them. For some students, seeing the familiar faces is a small slice of “normal,” but for others, the school meals are a welcome relief to empty stomachs.

Food insecurity, meaning not having enough food to lead a healthy, active life, is a longstanding challenge in Stanislaus County and the surrounding area. Before the pandemic, it affected more than 1 million people in the Central Valley, and the hardships could get worse.

An additional 17 million Americans nationwide could

go hungry if the unemployment rate hovers at 11.5% due to COVID-19, as projected by Feeding America, a national hunger relief, nonprofit organization.

As some Stanislaus County residents struggle with food insecurity, including in neighborhoods not typically considered disadvantaged, others are doing whatever they can to help.

RESPONSE FROM SCHOOL DISTRICTS

Pre-pandemic, about two-thirds of all K-12 students in the county qualified for the federal school lunch program. Since last spring, nearly all of the county’s public school districts have pivoted to provide “grab-and-go” meals to their students, and some districts offer food to anyone 18 and younger who live in their area.

“I think it’s wonderful that they offer it,” said Sarah Dekleva, mother of the triplets. “Lots of kids aren’t able to get food during this time.”

Dekleva is a critical care nurse at Emanuel Medical Center and her husband works full time in an agriculture-related job, which means 12-16 hour days during September’s harvests.

She works nights in the ICU, and holding back tears, said the pandemic has made work emotionally and physically exhausting. During the day-time, she tries to sleep.

“With lunch delivered, I know the boys are eating better,” said Dekleva, “It puts less stress on all of us parents.”

She said her family isn’t struggling financially but she knows some families are, and the school meals are their main source of food, so the meals help decrease stress for everyone in some way.

“As our students are home with distance learning, we’re able to provide breakfast and lunch everyday,” said Brenda Smith, superintendent of HUSD, “And we have our district vans going out on the bus routes to deliver to our students in the country.”

The overall poverty rate in Hughson is 10.6%, one of the lowest in the county, but annually about half of the district’s 2,000 students qualify

SEE HUNGER, 4A

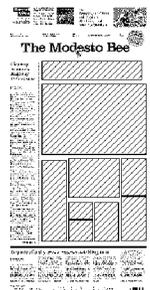
for the school meal program.

The USDA funds the school meals program and it issued waivers to allow flexibility to districts to provide food to all youth. The waivers have been extended through December, though not yet for the entire school year.

Two of the largest districts, Turlock Unified and Modesto City Schools, also have been able to provide food to all youth in their areas, using the waivers.

Jennifer Lew-Vang became the child nutrition director at TUSD in March, just before COVID-19 closed schools.

“We have new regs, new codes and waivers to follow,” said Lew-Vang, “But it’s all to ensure that families have food and



kids access education.”

The response was similar from Criss Atwell and Christine Wudijono, respectively the director and assistant director of nutrition services for MCSD.

Wudijono said they are serving about 6,000 youth, up from 4,000 in 2019.

“We’ve received a lot of positive feedback from parents,” Atwell said, “They’re appreciative of the food.”

MULTI-AGENCY PARTNERSHIP IN CERES

About 80% of Ceres Unified School District students qualify for the school meal program, and some of Ceres’ low-income neighborhoods are food deserts, which the USDA defines as not having a full-service grocery store within a 1 mile in urban areas or 10 miles in a rural areas.

The high cost and limited access to healthy foods, as well as the effects on health, motivated Ceres Partnership for Healthy Families to pilot a school garden program in five elementary schools in CUSD.

“There are places where it is difficult for people. They don’t know how to drive and they are far from a store,” said Alma Sanchez in Spanish, “We wanted to do something so the kids could learn the different flavors and colors from the Earth.”

She is a promotora, community peer educator, with the Ceres Partnership, which includes leadership training through Public Health Advocates, a statewide nonprofit that focuses on community

action to promote equity.

“Although we grow a lot of fruits and veggies, the families didn’t feel they had access to them,” said Lourdes Perez, policy director for Public Health Advocates.

She said some of the promotoras were also concerned about their own children being overweight or obese. They mapped resources in their community and found plenty of corner stores and convenience stores selling liquor, tobacco products and junk food, but not nutritious food.

To help start the garden project, the Stanislaus County Health Services Agency provided funding and the University of California Cooperative Extension provided resources and education for CUSD staff, promotoras and the children.

When schools closed due to COVID-19, the promotoras dug up the plants in the large school troughs to care for them at home. Sanchez is caring for tomatoes, chilies and other peppers.

CUSD also operates a school farm with a Future Farmers of America group, which yields 8 to 10 tons of produce every year that’s used in their cafeteria. In addition, they host the Second Harvest Food Bank truck for food distributions at Central Valley High School.

PHILANTHROPIC EFFORTS

Second Harvest Food Bank, the local partner of Feeding America, primarily serves Stanislaus and San Joaquin counties. The group is one of the main organizations getting food

to those in need. They work with about 45 agencies in Stanislaus County, including schools, nonprofits, religious organizations and food pantries.

“Prior to March, we distributed 228,000 pounds of food per week; now it’s about 350,000 pounds,” said Keenon Krick, CEO of Second Harvest.

He said the number of new visitors to food banks has increased by more than 35% since the pandemic hit.

Second Harvest Food Bank was one of the partners with Golden Valley Health Centers at an event in August to distribute food, as well as COVID-19 supplies and education, to almost 200 farm families, including Susanna Fajardo’s.

It’s hard to keep all six members of her household fed, Fajardo said in Spanish. “I have struggles with food, because it’s so far to a grocery.”

Fajardo lives with her husband, who’s a farm worker, two small children and extended family members in Westley in a Stanislaus County Housing Authority neighborhood for agriculture families.

Her agricultural community is low-income and the nearest supermarket is more than 5 miles away. Despite growing in the nearby fields, fresh fruits and vegetables are nowhere to be found.

“I do know it’s a food desert in this area. There is no actual supermarket here,” said Yamilet Valladoid, government affairs manager at Golden Valley Health Centers.

Second Harvest joined

the Westley event to serve farm workers, typically a hard-to-reach population.

“The California Association of Food Banks released funding for farm workers,” said Jessica Vaughan, development director for Second Harvest Food Bank, “So, we’re trying to get food to them.”

REACHING THOSE IN NEED

Getting food to people without transportation, in usual and pandemic times, is a challenge.

The United Samaritans does 59 stops with their “Daily Bread” food trucks, delivering midday meals to sites all across the county. Everyone is welcome to pick up a meal, no questions asked.

“We’ve seen an increase in need as people have lost jobs and have kids home with them,” said Scott Qualle, assistant director of United Samaritans. “We also have about a 20% increase in demand for meals to seniors.”

Senior citizens are a population vulnerable to food insecurity due to fixed incomes, transportation difficulties and health problems. Individuals 65 and older have increased risk of severe illness and death due COVID-19 and public health officials have recommended that they stay home as much as possible. Thus, many seniors are relying on food deliveries.

The Salvation Army also delivers meals to seniors in isolation at home, as well as to others in quarantine or isolation due to COVID-19, through a partnership with the coun-

ty. The Salvation Army has a distribution center in South Modesto that usually functions as the warehouse for their year-round food programs, but with the pandemic the site has become a drive-up location to give food directly to patrons.

“On an average day we distribute about 150 food boxes,” said Major Harold Laubach, corps officer for the Salvation Army in Stanislaus County, “We distribute food five days a week.”

Despite the unprecedented increase in demand for their services, all of the nonprofit organizations said that they’ve had to curb fundraising events because of COVID-19.

HELP FROM LOCAL GROCERY STORES

The locally based grocery chains of Raley’s and The Save Mart Companies, which includes FoodMaxx, their “no frills/warehouse-style outlets,” have increased their donations during the pandemic.

Chelsea Minor, spokesperson for Raley’s, said since January their Food-For-Families program has spent \$6 million compared to \$3.5 million in 2019 and they have also increased their food donations to Second Harvest.

The Save Mart Companies primarily operate throughout Central and Northern California and Northern Nevada. In 2019, Save Mart donated more than 7.2 million pounds of fresh food to Feeding America and its partner food banks in those areas.

“When the COVID-19

pandemic emerged, The Save Mart Companies shifted its charitable activities to focus on local food bank donations,” said Victoria Castro, communications officer, in an email.

Castro said, “FoodMaxx stores serve communities where conventional competitors abandon or don’t consider entering. We are regularly looking for future site locations, as well as potentially converting a conventional format to a FoodMaxx, to serve all socioeconomic shoppers.”

PAYING FOR FOOD DISTRIBUTION

Much of the funding to maintain and expand the food distribution during the pandemic has come from \$850 million allocated to the USDA in the CARES Act.

“Now with the economic chaos resulting from the pandemic and school closures, a lot of families are having an even harder time just getting enough to eat,” said Rep. Josh Harder (D-Turlock).

He said he asked the USDA to extend the waivers for school meals through the end of the school year.

About 15% of USDA funding goes to food safety net programs including the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP, formerly known as food stamps), Women Infants and Children (WIC) and the school meals programs.

Those funds are administered through each state and the programs are operated at the county level. Financial assessors ranked SNAP as one of the largest “bangs-for-the-

buck,” with \$1.70 return for every \$1 spent in 2009, during the financial crisis.

“My family benefited from some of these programs growing up,” said Jody Hayes, CEO of Stanislaus County, “These federal programs are very, very important as basic safety nets for our community.”

He said county agencies do everything they can to implement the federal safety net programs.

“We’ve done a lot to keep meals going,” said Hayes. “I know some seniors are relying on us just for basic meals.”

Food distribution, however critical, does not combat the root causes of food insecurity that the pandemic has splayed open. Low wages and social inequities are considered the main contributors by economists and improvements likely require government interventions.

GOVERNMENT ACTIONS

Additional funding was included in the first CARES Act for the “farm-to-families” food box program, which purchases products from area farmers that local organizations package and distribute. More than 91 million food boxes have been distributed nationwide since mid-May.

In 2009, a Roadmap to End Global Food Insecurity was developed by National Academy of Sciences, which called for a White House Hunger Council and Hunger Czar and a comprehensive strategy to eliminate world hunger. Some of

those strategies could be considered for local solutions.

“I don’t think we need a single individual to address hunger (at the county level),” said Hayes, “But we could increase the profile on the issue to increase our efforts.”

He said some approaches, such as tax breaks, are likely more effective at a state or federal level, but the county is trying some tactics.

“We’re working to take advantage of Opportunity Zones (incentives) from the federal government,” said Hayes, “These are areas of economic disadvantage, such as south Modesto, to help for their development.”

An opportunity zone is an economically-distressed community where private investments may be eligible for capital gain tax incentives.

These incentives could be used to entice full-service grocery stores to build in food deserts, such as south Modesto. Locally placed supermarkets could offer healthier food options, as well as jobs in the community.

Harder said he co-sponsored the bipartisan legislation Healthy Food Access for All Americans Act which would incentivize the construction of new grocery stores and nonprofits in areas that are food deserts.

“Tax breaks, whether they are state or federal, are a good thing,” said Heath Flora (R-Ripon), Assemblyman for California District 12, “I think the cities and counties both could get more creative on zoning issues to allow for grocery stores to

be built in some of these under-served communities.”

While long-term solutions are being developed, getting food to those in need is the pressing goal.

“The point I’d like to emphasize is regardless of where our families are, there is access to food to put on their tables,” said Jaci Westbrook from the UC Cooperative Extension CalFresh program.

Hayes, Westbrook, Harder and all of the food distributors encouraged people to put aside any embarrassment and ask for help when they need it.

For Kathie Walsh-Garcés, client at Riverbank Christian Food Giveaway, 2020 has been traumatic, including becoming homeless and dependent on food banks for the first time.

She said, “If you have the means to donate to places like this, do so, because they’re very much in need.”

To locate food resources near you, call #211 or any of the charities listed. You may also visit Feeding America food bank locator at www.feedingamerica.org/find-your-local-foodbank or Second Harvest Food Bank at

www.localfoodbank.org/ Stanislaus County Community Services Agency offers assistance with most government programs, including CalFresh (food stamps) at www.csa-stanislaus.com/cal-fresh/ or at 209-558-2500.

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ChrisAnna Mink:
@CMMink



ANDY ALFARO aalfaro@modbee.com

Lucio Cruz helps distribute food as Golden Valley Health Center, Second Harvest Food Bank, Central Valley Opportunity Center and Rep. Josh Harder joined together to distribute food, as well as COVID supplies to a Stanislaus County Housing Authority farm family neighborhood in Westley, on Aug. 11.



CHRISANNA MINK cmink@modbee.com

United Samaritan Daily Bread Food Truck serves lunch in Hughson in August.



CHRISANNA MINK cmink@modbee.com

Linda Silva and Betty Bridge, volunteer co-directors of Riverbank Christian Food Sharing, prepare donations for clients at the food bank in August.