Hunger an issue, even as economy improves

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Cars snaking through parking lots and seemingly endless lines of people waiting for boxes of groceries were poignant symbols of hardship as the pre-vaccine pandemic chewed up 2020 and ground into 2021.

Now, those scenes of desperation have diminished — if not disappeared — as the economy has started to recover. Because it’s not as visible, it might seem that food insecurity is no longer a problem.

Not so, say people who feed the hungry in Orange County.

Operators of the county’s two food banks and others who provide fresh produce and shelf-stable items such as canned goods and grains, say the number of people still seeking help remains more than twice as high as it was before the coronavirus pandemic. That’s true even though some emergency resources, such as the USDA’s Farmers to Families food boxes, have stopped.

On Saturday, the weekly Love Community Outreach drive-thru food distribution in Santa Ana attracted more than 300 recipients. People started queuing their cars at 5 a.m. in a line that eventually stretched about two miles.

“That tells you where we’re at as a community,” said Ralph Magana, director of Love Community Outreach, a nonprofit that gets pallets of food from the Orange County Food Bank and donations from private supporters.

There’s reason to think more people will be in need of assistance in the immediate future.

Federal unemployment extended benefits ended this month, leaving many with less money in their pockets. And the state’s eviction ban ends Sept. 30, prompting fears of people losing their housing.

“We are unsure and a little bit nervous about what that will mean for demand,” said Claudia Keller, chief mission officer for Second Harvest Food Bank of Orange County, the largest food bank serving the county. Leaders at the OC Food Bank, run by Community Action Partnership Orange County, and others in the food distribution network share that concern.

Also fueling worry is people giving less money to food banks than they were when the pandemic was in full swing. Federal and state emergency money has stopped or been reduced, even as the delta variant of the coronavirus has sparked a new wave of infections and death.

That’s why local food providers are seeking county money, hoping the Board of Supervisors will allocate some of the county’s $616.8 million slice of the federal American Rescue Plan to feeding the hungry.

Last year, the county earmarked $6 million — in two separate $3 million allotments from CARES Act stimulus funds — to the county’s two food banks. Another request for $3 million was made in April by the OC Hunger Alliance, which consists of Second Harvest, OC Food Bank, and Abound Food (formerly known as Waste Not OC).

Last week, the group provided updated information on local food insecurity, answering a request from Orange County Chief Executive Frank Kim. Food provider representatives also spoke with at least three of the five supervisors, including a sit-down with Board Chairman Andrew Do, to make their case.

Combined, the two food banks supply about 400 distribution programs — a complex network that includes food pantries, schools, senior centers, soup kitchens and houses of worship. They’ve both been in operation since the 1980s.

Mark Lowry, director of the Garden Grove-based OC Food Bank, said there is less need today than at the height of the pandemic. But, he added, “by any measure, (the need) is still greater than anything else in the history of the food banks.”

Tough times continue

A look at how much food OC Food Bank supplied in the month of July for the past three years tells part of the story: The 2.2 million pounds of food distributed in July 2019 tripled to 6.7 million pounds for July 2020. This past July, it dropped to a little over 3 million pounds.

Because of lingering COVID-19 fallout, “need is higher today than two years ago,” said Lowry, who points out that the official unemployment rate in Orange County for July — 6.3% — is more than twice the 2.8% rate in February of 2020, before COVID-19 issues were fully crashing the economy.

To be sure, the county is rebounding and “now hiring” signs are common. Some economists predict the loss in unemployment benefits will prompt more
people to go back to work (though that hasn’t played out in states that already reduced benefits). And while the delta variant continues to be an issue, the local case rate is starting to drop again, according to the Orange County Health Care Agency COVID-19 dashboard.

Still, Second Harvest is sending about 3 million pounds of food a month into the community, said Keller, who is helping to oversee food bank operations.

Looking at the amount of food given out is one measure. More telling is how many people still need it.

One of the recipients of food from Second Harvest is Family Assistance Ministries, or FAM, a faith-based nonprofit in south Orange County that also provides help with utilities, housing, job search and other services. In July, FAM supplied food to about 10,000 people, well under the 21,000 who got food through the organization in July of 2020 but much more than the 4,800 people fed in July of 2019, said Elizabeth Andrade, FAM’s chief executive.

Who were those 10,000? Andrade said four in 10 were children and two in 10 were senior citizens.

The food is meant as a supplement to other resources, such as CalFresh food benefits. But where people were coming to FAM for food about once a month, they now are coming twice a month.

Many of those people, Andrade added, are struggling to pay rent.

“What we are seeing is how extremely burdened the families coming to us are,” Andrade said.

**Trying new things**

While the food network is making sure people simply stay fed, the emphasis is on good nutrition.

The state is partially filling the void left following this year’s end of the federal Farmers to Families food box program, which included fresh produce, meat and dairy products. But delivery of the state’s version has been delayed as contracts and logistical issues are finalized. And while $400 million in funding for California’s food bank network was included in this year’s state budget, 60% of that is targeted toward beefing up the infrastructure — refrigeration, forklifts, trucks — that’s used to store and move food.

As a result, local food suppliers are innovating as they try to provide fresh food and encourage its consumption.

Last week, volunteers began planting cabbage at the new 45-acre Harvest Solutions Farm in Irvine that Second Harvest is operating in collaboration with Solutions for Urban Ag and South Coast REC, which owns the Irvine Boulevard property. When harvest arrives next spring, the farm will have squash, zucchini, cucumbers, mini bell peppers, and summer corn. OC Food Bank has had a similar Giving Farm at Westminster High School since 2017.

South County Outreach in Irvine has partnered with Bracken’s Kitchen to create nutritious, individualized frozen meals, and soon will issue videos showing people how to make simple but healthy dishes from items in the nonprofit’s food pantry. The videos feature Bill Bracken, the chef who founded Bracken’s Kitchen to feed those at risk of going hungry, and two other supporters, Wing Lam, co-founder of Wahoo’s Fish Taco, and Charles An-tis of Antis Roofing and Waterproofing.

Where access to South County Outreach’s food program used to be based on income, the pandemic largely erased that, said LaVal Brewer, its president and chief executive officer.

“No, it’s ‘Are you hungry?’” Brewer said. “We don’t believe anybody is going to come to steal our free food.” He added that people are still asked about their income as a way to help identify if they qualify for additional assistance programs.

South County Outreach went from purchasing $25,000 worth of fresh food in 2019 to about $40,000 last year. So far this year the tab is $54,000, Brewer said. But fundraising is $300,000 behind where it was at this time in 2020.

The organization works closely with Family Assistance Ministries in helping people find ways to meet rent.

“Here’s the thing we know — if they can’t pay their rent, they’re probably hungry,” Brewer said. “Or, they are using the money that they have to pay for food.”

South County Outreach also is starting a new partnership with Saddleback College and Irvine Valley College to add to their on-campus food pantries for students. At Saddleback, 200 to 300 needy students a month rely on the school’s food resource center, said Jeanne Harris-Caldwell, dean of wellness, social services and child development.

Students, who returned to campus Aug. 23, will be able to come once a week to the school’s new and larger food resource center to get several days’ worth of groceries. They can also grab a quick snack — a nutri-
A food pantry volunteer asks a woman if she also needs diapers during a drive-thru food event in Santa Ana on Saturday. Orange County food suppliers worry that the still-high need will spike again as extra unemployment benefits end.

Staff writer Mindy Schauer contributed to this article.
A.G. Kawamura, chairman of Solutions for Urban Ag and the former California Secretary of Food and Agriculture, helps Gavin Slavik, 5, plant cabbage at the University of California’s South Coast Research and Extension Center in Irvine on Aug. 31. Second Harvest Food Bank is expecting to receive 40,000 pounds of cabbage a week starting in mid-November when the plants mature at the Harvest Solutions Farm. The South Coast Research and Extension Center has 45 acres that will be planted with a variety of crops.