

Food Share has distributed 26M pounds of food in past year

By Christina Cox
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The ripple effect of the pandemic can be seen in the endless rows of cars that line up at Ventura County's food pantries each week. Those in need include residents from all walks of life, including teachers and farmworkers.

Many in these lines are returning to the food banks for help, but even more are visiting them for the first time.

For Food Share of Ventura County, a regional hunger-relief organization, the growing need is staggering. In the past year, the nonprofit doubled the number of people it serves each month and nearly doubled the pounds of food it distributes to the community.

"It hit really fast and was almost immediate that we saw our lines and need double," Food Share CEO Monica White said. "In the beginning, we weren't sure how long it was going to last. . . . Now we're looking at a minimum 24-month period beyond this that we're going to see this additional need from everyone who has been impacted by COVID. The economic impact runs deep."

During normal circumstances, about 1 in 6 residents are considered food insecure, or without access to affordable and nutritious meals. They seek additional support from organizations like Food Share about three times per year.

In the past 12 months, though, the organization saw a large uptick in continuous need, especially among families who bore the brunt of pandemic-related layoffs in the hospitality and service sectors. White said that although people received unemployment benefits or stimulus checks, much of those subsidies went to pay for other essentials like rent and utilities.

"The people we are helping were already in a precarious situation financially. If you don't have a nest egg to pay for your rent and your car, the one thing that can make a difference at the end of the month is to go visit a pantry and get food for your family," White said. "COVID furthered that difficult situation, and it hasn't gone away."

To supplement the work of local pantries, Food Share hosted more than 330 emergency drive-thru food distributions to provide shelf-safe items, produce and groceries to residents six days a week. The agency estimates that it has distributed more than 26 million pounds of food in the past year, or the equivalent of 21.6 million meals, the largest number in its 43-year history.

The high demand put a strain on the organization.

When the pandemic first began and residents rushed to the store to buy shelf-stable items, food sourcing became a problem for the organization, which relies on supermarkets' surplus items to supplement its donations.

"There was almost 50% less food available to pick up from stores," White said.

Food Share also had to cancel its two biggest food drives



Courtesy of Food Share

BIG LOAD—The need for services provided by Food Share has increased as residents deal with the economic fallout of COVID-19.

of the year run by the National Association of Letter Carriers and ABC7 Los Angeles due to shelter-in-place guidelines. White said about 400,000 pounds of food are usually collected at those events.

But the agency made do with donations from the U.S. Department of Agriculture, grocery stores and local farmers, as well as bulk purchases from wholesalers.

Ventura County provided additional funding to Food Share to cover about 30% of its monthly purchases.

The California Air National Guard also stepped in to pack

food boxes and bags for the nonprofit's drive-thru distributions and for locals experiencing homelessness.

"To have those capable pair of hands has been a huge piece of the puzzle," White said.

As Food Share continues to support those facing economic hardships, the agency said it could use three things from the community: money, food and volunteers.

"We need all three things. We can use your cans, we can use your dollars and we can use your hours," White said. "It's been a long, hard year, and we're just pleased we're able to make a difference in so many lives."

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