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‘The pandemic has changed us forever’

East Bay food bank overcomes myriad challenges to feed residents during the crisis

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Like everything else, the coronavirus pandemic has disrupted nonprofits and forced them to change the way they've traditionally operated in order to survive.

And because many of the people they serve are among those hardest hit by COVID-19's economic fallout, it's more important than ever that nonprofits innovate on the fly to continue providing relief to those who need it most.

It's a challenge that requires navigating through unimaginable logistical challenges. For example, many have lost volunteers who themselves have caught the virus or chosen to stay home for their own safety. And front-line workers have had to carry out the task of delivering food essentials while trying to avoid being infected or transmitting the virus.

Alameda County Community Food Bank Executive Director Suzan Bateson sat down with the Bay Area News Group to discuss how her staff and the agencies they partner with have tackled these challenges.

Q What are the biggest ways in which the pandemic changed the way you operate at the food bank?

A The pandemic has changed us forever. We knew in early March that a pandemic was approaching, and we felt like we had a little bit of a leg up, because during the government shutdown the year before, we had gone into emergency mode to create emergency food bags to distribute at IRS offices, the airport, Santa Rita prison, and other places. So we had some practice running our incident command system in preparing for an emergency.

We imagined that's how we'd start - enact the incident command system, shift operations from distributing food by pallets to providing food by the bag.

We had immediate conversations with public officials about keeping our facility safe, our staff safe.

Then there was the big question of volunteers - what would we do about that? On any given day, 100 people would come through and volunteer, and we had to stop that. It was too much of a liability.

I'm really proud of our team; everyone just dug in. We deployed workers to remote working, so the IT team was buying laptops and converting people to at-home workers. The goal was to keep workers on the front line as safe as we can.

But our helplines started to get more and more calls. Our call volume had increased by 1,000%. We don't usually serve people from our facility on Edgewater Avenue; we serve organizations (such as local food pantries). So Alameda County gave us a site to do drive-thru, contactless pickup. That took the pressure off some of our network partners who were seeing more and more people come to them.

Q Losing that volunteer force for a time must have been difficult. How did you do without them?

A We did have the help of Civicorps, which was great, since they sort of worked in a pod, and the Alameda County Disaster Service Workers were



Photo by Aric Crabb - staff photographer

“We do want people to find us and find support,” says Bateson.

deployed to help us. And then we were able to open more drive-thru sites, such as one in collaboration with Chabot College and with help from Hayward city officials, one at the municipal golf course there - another high-need area where unemployment was starting to spike. And then in Pleasanton, they opened the Pleasanton fairgrounds, deployed people to get emergency help there. In Fremont, Wells Fargo gave over a parking lot and we were able to do contactless drive-thru pickup.



Photo by Aric Crabb - staff photographer

Volunteers Jon McTavish, left, and Aaron Cole place boxes of food into the trunk of a car at the Alameda County Community Food Bank's Oakport distribution center in Oakland on Nov. 16.

In huge numbers typically, we help children and seniors. It turned out that schools were providing free lunch and breakfast, so we started with Oakland Unified and packaged bags of food and produce that school staff were able to hand out. So, we were able to serve families that way.

And we have many member organizations that serve seniors, so one of them, Mercy Brown Bag, already was taking great care of seniors. They figured out ways to work with various delivery systems, like the Oakland At Risk group, where people could volunteer and deliver to seniors.

We worked with the county and through Amazon Flex to deliver food to people who were COVID positive and isolating at home. All these things were happening simultaneously.

Q It sounds like many have stepped up, but what are your biggest concerns and the concerns of others who operate food banks or similar nonprofit services in the Bay Area?

A Many things. I'm worried about the health and safety of our staff and our agency partners. I wish them great health and time to rest. They're carrying so much weight on their shoulders. I'm concerned we're not reaching everyone who needs our help, and that's a huge burden if we're not reaching every family who needs food in the county. We do want people to find us and find support.

We cannot lessen our guard. Winter is coming, and it's going to be long. People are surviving from COVID but there are plenty more COVID cases now, so we must remain vigilant.

I'm concerned, too, that people don't have transportation to get food in the manner we're giving it away (in the drive-thrus), so transportation will always be a challenge, as well as language capacity.

Q How do you grapple with those challenges - reaching people who may face barriers like a lack of transportation, or who don't speak English or who remain unaware of your services?

A We're bringing on new member

agencies; we just brought on 12 new members. So we're looking for agency partners that can (reach more people), like maybe they're open for different or more hours. We're also offering grants to help member agencies reach people. If you're running a food pantry and didn't have enough refrigeration, for example, you could apply through us to get a grant to increase refrigeration or more shelving.

Q What can people do to help, or to get help from, the Alameda County Community Food Bank?

A What I would love to invite people to do is provide monetary support. Because we can take your \$1 and we can provide \$7 worth of food. We have great buying power. If they do want help that way, they can go to our website, www.accfb.org. If someone needs help, we invite them to contact us either through that website, or they can call us at our helpline, 510-635-3663. We love for people to call us, because their household may be eligible for CalFresh benefits, and we can do a screening and help people apply for that, but they can also go to foodnow.net.