

NEWS: [COUNTYWIDE](#)

On a Mission to End Hunger in Orange County



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Groceries at a free food distribution by Seva Collective in Santa Ana on Dec. 16, 2023. Credit: ERIKA TAYLOR, Voice of OC.

Local food bank leaders, food pantry organizers, the groups that fund them, nonprofits and government officials are sitting down together for the first time ever to map out how best to tackle hunger in Orange County.

The [Orange County Hunger Alliance](#), made up of both local food banks and [Abound Food Care](#), is hosting a meeting this summer to go over the results of a \$250,000 county funded survey aimed at finding key barriers to meeting the community's food needs.

The survey has been sent out to hundreds of people struggling with hunger as well as hundreds of organizations on the frontlines trying to ensure residents across the county have enough nutritious food to eat.

Claudia Keller, head of the Second Harvest Food Bank of OC, said the information gathered will help inform the alliance’s strategies to fight food insecurity.

“That is really the next step of the journey for the alliance is how will we expand its membership and what will be those initiatives outside of the ones we’ve already identified as founding members that will help us move the needle on hunger,” she said in a Zoom interview.

Keller said there was a need for the survey to paint a more accurate picture of the hunger in OC – which continues to remain high, even after the height of the COVID pandemic.

Mike Learakos, CEO of Abound Food Care – a nonprofit aimed at tackling food insecurity by addressing [food waste](#) – said the survey will also help strengthen the system currently in place to address food insecurity in OC and fill any gaps.

“What we want to do is not be here in 37 more years having the next set of circumstances being costs are exceeding the increase in wages and all of a sudden, poverty is increasing and we don’t have a system strengthened to make adjustments or to have an impact,” he said.

“One of our goals in this planning process is to identify how we improve the system so that we make long lasting adjustments.”



Volunteers prep grocery bags for the Feb. 10, 2023 Latino Health Access food drive in Santa Ana. Credit: JULIE LEOPO, Voice of OC

The survey comes after food banks leaders like Keller last year warned that the county is heading toward a food cliff – sparked by the increasing cost of food and the end to increased COVID-19 food assistance and other benefits for families.

Food bank leaders said at the time it would impact 300,000 residents – nearly 10% of the county’s population – ability to buy food.

[**Read:** [The 2023 Food Cliff: Orange County Continues Confronting High Food Demand](#)]

Breaking Down the Barriers to Food in OC

The alliance held their first meeting with local food pantries and nonprofits in March to go over the preliminary findings of the survey which identified a lack of protein in food pantries and a need for language services to help reach communities.

Mark Lowry, director of the OC Food Bank, said that while California’s network of food banks has done a good job in recent years of getting produce like fruits and vegetables to people across the state, distributing protein like meat and eggs has been a challenge.

“If we want things like milk and chicken and eggs, by and large, we have to pay for it and the cost of milk, chicken and eggs is substantially more than the cost of the produce that’s available to us. So it’s a real challenge to us at the moment,” he said in a Zoom interview.

Keller said there is also a need for multi-lingual services to help connect them to food whether through.

“We often get Ukrainian and Russian refugees. We’ve seen refugees from the Middle East probably coming here as a result of the conflict in the Middle East. So it is all kinds of languages that stand between them and access to food,” she said.

Meanwhile, there is a significant chunk of food that gets wasted in the county.



People line up for food at the Santa Ana Unified School District office on Nov. 19, 2022. Credit: HOSAM ELATTAR, Voice of OC

Learakos said that about 30-40% of food is wasted every year in OC, but the state and the county are making headway on reducing food waste.

“In just a five-year period, we were able to recover 125 million pounds of food that, prior to our collaborative efforts, would have gone to landfill. And that’s food that actually fed people,” he said, adding that it’s a rough estimate.

Beyond those challenges, the Keller, Learakos and Lowry – along with the rest of the groups they’re meeting with – are looking for ways to help address the high need for food.

Lowry said hunger is a symptom of poverty and to address poverty there needs to be increased wages, affordable housing and universal health care.

“But those are big and contentious and expensive issues to struggle with. So in the meantime, we apply bandages in emergency situations,” he said.

Lowry, Keller and Learakos point to state and federal programs that can help people get food on the table as well as save income by providing rental assistance or supplementing health care costs.

Keller said the [county should continue to get more people enrolled in the CalFresh food stamps program](#) to help reduce hunger, adding for every meal the local food banks supply, the federal program provides nine meals.

“That really is a force multiplier, and it’s a [resource](#) that’s underused in Orange County.”

Hunger in Orange County



A line forms for a neighborhood food pantry in Huntington Beach on Aug. 12, 2020. Credit: JULIE LEOPO, Voice of OC
Since the pandemic, the demand for food has remained high in Orange County.

Currently, the OC Food Bank and Second Harvest each feed about 400,000 residents every month.

Prior to the pandemic in 2019, Second Harvest fed on average 249,000 residents a month.

That same year, the OC Food Bank fed on average 220,244 residents a month.

The food insecurity rate in OC is projected to be close to 13.7% as compared to 8.5% in 2018, according to the [OC Hunger Alliance](#).

And leaders say the need may continue.

“The trends do not portend well, for hunger being reduced unless something changes,” Keller said.

She adds that many families are just a couple food pantry visits away from homelessness.

“If we cannot figure it out in one of the best resourced counties in one of the richest states in the wealthiest country in the world – it just gives you something to think about,” she said.

“We need to figure out a way to make sure people have a place to sleep and food to eat at the very least.”