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Orange County's charitable food network shifts into new, streamlined era

Version 2.0 of the OC Hunger Alliance merges groups involved in housing, health care and data. Leaders say food soon could connect people in need to many social services.



Volunteer Esther Brooks helps Belinda Gutierrez pick out hummus at South County Outreach food pantry in Irvine, CA, on Thursday, Aug. 1, 2024. Clients can get fresh veggies and fruits, some proteins, eggs, milk, bread – from the grocery-style pantry South County Outreach runs in a business park near the 5 freeway. (Photo by Jeff Gritchen, Orange County Register/SCNG)

Late last year, during an event to celebrate the [40th anniversary of Second Harvest Food Bank](#), the nonprofit's director, Claudia Bonilla Keller, told hundreds of donors and volunteers that someday she'd like to put her organization – *their* organization – out of business.

"Let's not just shorten the line," she said, referring to an image of needy people queuing up on foot or in cars as they await food baskets. "Let's end it."

On Wednesday, Aug. 7, Keller and others in the charitable food world hope to start doing exactly that.

That's the scheduled launch date for a new version of the [OC Hunger Alliance](#).

Though Keller and [Mark Lowry](#), director of the [Orange County Food Bank](#), and Mike Learakos, director of [Abound Food Care](#) (a nonprofit that collects charitable food from restaurants, groceries and farms, among others), have been meeting about once a month since 2019 under the name OC Hunger Alliance, version 2.0 of the group will be a lot bigger and about a lot more than food.

The kickoff meeting, at the Orange County Food Bank's offices in Orange, is slated to include the three original Hunger Alliance members plus representatives from a variety of non-food organizations – the county's [Social Services Agency](#), [CalOptima](#) (which provides health insurance for low-income people in Orange County), [Meals on Wheels](#), [Orange County United Way's 211OC](#) (a [phone-in service that connects people in need with nonprofits that can provide help](#)) and [OC Grantmakers](#) (which connects philanthropists and nonprofits).

Keller and the other food leaders readily admit that's a lot of different groups with a lot of different, and not always complementary, missions.



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Volunteer Sam Gouron helps One Bahena at South County Outreach food pantry in Irvine, CA, on Thursday, Aug. 1, 2024. Clients can get fresh veggies and fruits, some proteins, eggs, milk, bread – from the grocery-style pantry South County Outreach runs in a business park near the 5 freeway. (Photo by Jeff Gritchen, Orange County Register/SCNG)

But they also suggest their long-term, two-prong goal is straightforward:

They're hoping to start the process of stamping out hunger by streamlining what is, for now, a dizzyingly complex world of charitable nutrition. And, as they do that, they hope to turn food into a lynchpin for connecting people to social services of all types.

The concept is quietly backed by county officials and local philanthropists, including the Samueli Foundation. It's also already received financing in the form of \$250,000 federal pandemic money, which was used earlier this year to conduct a survey looking at some causes of food insecurity and hurdles to food access in Orange County.

Still, as goals go, the food leaders concede stamping out hunger – as opposed to simply feeding people when they're in need – is more than a little audacious.

“What this new model does is raise the bar so we can say, ‘Let’s try for something bigger and better,’” said Learakos, a former restaurateur (Katella Grill) before he transitioned to the business of collecting excess food from industrial sources, like restaurants, as a way to feed people.

“If we fail, we’ll learn from it,” he said. “If we’re trying to track outcomes, let’s see where the data takes us. Let’s just not repeat the same thing. If something doesn’t work, we’ll pivot.

“What we can’t do,” Learakos added, “is not try.”

Revelations

Feeding people who are hungry but can’t get food on their own is a complex, expensive, labor-intensive undertaking.

Locally, the process is centered around the two big food banks (Second Harvest and Orange County), which collect or buy or grow most of the food distributed to roughly 480 local food pantries. These are the pick-up spots – often but not always in senior centers or churches or schools – where hungry people go to get something to eat.

In Orange County, the people using food pantries run an unpredictable gamut, including the very young or very old, college students, disabled adults and the unhoused, among others. Increasingly, that world also includes people who are none of those things – locals who appear to be solidly middle class but are, in fact, facing financial distress dire enough to threaten their ability to eat regularly.

Since the end of the pandemic, the local charitable food network has been collecting, cooking, packaging and delivering more than 3 million meals a month to a county of about 3.2 million people.

That process – feeding hungry people every day – is what’s been happening in the county for at least 50 years. It was an offshoot of the “war on poverty” era of federal help in the 1960s, and it has waxed and waned during recessions and boom times in every decade since.

And it was a particularly big deal during the pandemic.

As COVID-19 surged, killing hundreds of thousands across the country and briefly pushing millions into unemployment, the county's charitable food system was tested on two fronts. First, it became clear that a lot more locals than anyone previously imaged live close to a financial cliff, just a paycheck or two away from needing free nutrition. Second, food providers learned the power of simplicity; when they worked collectively, under a single goal, they managed to meet a lot of needs under even extreme circumstances.

"The pandemic revealed a lot, good and bad," Keller said.

"And we probably wouldn't be doing what we're about to do if the pandemic hadn't happened," she added.

The pandemic prompted Keller, Lowry and Learakos to lobby county officials under the unified banner of OC Hunger Alliance, seeking money they needed to keep feeding locals. That unified effort, according to all three, pleased county officials who were happy they didn't have to sort out competing requests.

It also prompted the county to suggest to the Hunger Alliance leaders that they apply for federal grant money, as a stand-alone group, and to use that money, together, to get a detailed look at the state of hunger in Orange County.

But, this time, their marching orders were new. Instead of focusing on how to feed people, they were charged with figuring out how to stop needing to feed so many people in the first place.

This year, they took a step to do just that. They hired a company to survey about 900 people working in nearly 150 nonprofits that work in Orange County to sort out the causes – and possible solutions – connected to local hunger.

The [survey revealed](#) some basics that seem pretty obvious.

For example, the survey shows that hunger is a symptom, typically one of many, of poverty. Also, people who aren't sure how and what they're going to eat on any given day tend to struggle with other basics, such as housing and health care. And, the survey found, some (though not most) of the people who struggle to eat also suffer from some form of mental illness or physical disability.

But other findings in the Hunger Alliance survey, which concluded in May, weren't so obvious:

- Most people who are struggling to eat in Orange County don't use all of the resources available to them, usually because they don't know about those resources.
- More jobs and cheaper housing can help reduce food insecurity.
- Though statistical differences exist, there is no single group that is overwhelmingly more or less

likely than all others to struggle with food. Hunger touches people of all ages, races, genders and sexual orientations.



But, above all, the survey revealed the fragmented nature of the county's charitable food ecosystem.

"There were things we knew, or thought we knew, that didn't surprise us," Learakos said.

"But a lot of the findings pointed us to the idea that there are a lot of ways – a *lot* of ways – for us to work more efficiently."

Hunger data

Costco and Walmart use their size as national retailers to negotiate lower wholesale prices for a lot of the products they sell. Other huge, national retailers do the same.

Learakos believes Orange County's charitable food network is big enough to do something similar. If he's right, more people could be fed with fewer dollars.

"There's no coordinated purchasing system" for food nonprofits in the county, said Learakos, whose Abound Food Care collects excess food from restaurants and groceries and converts them into meals for hungry people in Orange and several other California counties.

"That is something we could change."

Likewise, he said, newer technologies already being used locally – including shrink-wrap freezer packaging to quickly preserve food for long-term use and solar-powered freezers that reduce storage costs – could be expanded. Again, the goal would be to feed more people with less money.

And, he said, he's curious about numbers.

Just as baseball has been revolutionized by the new use of statistics, Learakos believes data could help families know how close they might be to needing charitable food.

It's not an outlandish idea.

Consumer creditworthiness is already measured in a single score, offering a quick-hit way to rate an individual's ability to repay a debt. Credit scores – created by a handful of companies using everything from credit card histories to electric bills to mortgage rates – are predictive enough that they're the center of a multi-billion-dollar industry.

Learakos believes similar data could be used to predict how close a family is to needing help with dinner. Knowing that number, he believes, would prompt people to get help in other ways – job training, mortgage refinancing, debt restructuring – before they need to seek food at a pantry.

"It could be a big change for people."

It also could be big part of the Hunger Alliance's new mission.

While feeding people when they're in a moment of need is about reacting to conditions as they play out, preventing them from ever needing that free meal is about planning and strategizing. A predictive data point for hunger (which Learakos said is something that might be developed with information tracked by the call centers at Orange County United Way's 211OC, among others) could be a weapon in that new battle.

It's exactly the type of question that'll be discussed by the new version of the Hunger Alliance.

Bringing non-food leaders into the Hunger Alliance will work two ways:

- The food leaders hope to learn from people involved in other social programs;
- And food – they all believe – could become the centerpiece for providing social services of all types.

"Look, even somebody with severe mental illness doesn't need medical care every day. But they do need to eat every day," Keller said.

"Our thinking is that the efficiencies flow out of that," she added. "Everybody will benefit from looking at how we can work together."

For Lowry, who started in food banking in the 1980s, the new goal is reflective of a shift that's played out in recent years in Orange County. Once, he noted, a person seeking food assistance locally had to fill out a 28-page questionnaire before they could get any help. It was one of many, similar hurdles that, combined, seemed to reflect hostility toward people in need.

"The thinking always was, 'If they're hungry enough, they'll do it,'" Lowry said.

"But," he added, "that was a very different attitude, I think, from what you see now."

Today, he said, the goal is to help people in a way that helps secure a future, not just a meal.

"The help comes up to the point that they don't need it anymore."



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Jacob Vindiola, left, and Victor Alvarado, right, package together the ingredients for chicken fajitas in the kitchen at the Monkey Business Cafe in Fullerton on Thursday, Aug. 1, 2024. Abound Food Care collects surplus food from grocery stores, restaurants, and growers, then repurposes it into dishes at their kitchens for distribution to food banks. (Photo by Mark Rightmire, Orange County Register/SCNG)



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One Bahena picks out food at South County Outreach food pantry in Irvine, CA, on Thursday, Aug. 1, 2024. Clients can get fresh veggies and fruits, and some proteins, eggs, milk, bread – from the grocery-style pantry South County Outreach runs in a business park near the 5 freeway. (Photo by Jeff Gritchen, Orange County Register/SCNG)





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Volunteers sort incoming food at South County Outreach food pantry in Irvine, CA, on Thursday, Aug. 1, 2024. (Photo by Jeff Gritchen, Orange County Register/SCNG)



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Jacob Vindiola scoops chicken into a container for chicken fajitas in the kitchen at the Monkey Business Cafe in Fullerton on Thursday, Aug. 1, 2024. Abound Food Care collects surplus food from grocery stores, restaurants, and growers, then repurposes it into dishes at their kitchens for distribution to food banks. (Photo by Mark Rightmire, Orange County Register/SCNG)





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Volunteer Esther Brooks helps Belinda Gutierrez pick out hummus at South County Outreach food pantry in Irvine, CA, on Thursday, Aug. 1, 2024. Clients can get fresh veggies and fruits, some proteins, eggs, milk, bread – from the grocery-style pantry South County Outreach runs in a business park near the 5 freeway. (Photo by Jeff Gritchen, Orange County Register/SCNG)



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Roy Reid places a label on a package of chicken fajitas after vacuum sealing the food in the kitchen at the Monkey Business Cafe in Fullerton on Thursday, Aug. 1, 2024. Abound Food Care collects surplus food from grocery stores, restaurants, and growers, then repurposes it into dishes at their kitchens for distribution to food banks. (Photo by Mark Rightmire, Orange County Register/SCNG)





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Roy Reid uses a vacuum sealer as he packages the ingredients for chicken fajitas in the kitchen at the Monkey Business Cafe in Fullerton on Thursday, Aug. 1, 2024. (Photo by Mark Rightmire, Orange County Register/SCNG)



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Colorful artwork on the walls in the dining room at the Monkey Business Cafe in Fullerton on Thursday, Aug. 1, 2024. (Photo by Mark Rightmire, Orange County Register/SCNG)





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One Bahena leaves South County Outreach food pantry with her groceries in Irvine, CA, on Thursday, Aug. 1, 2024. (Photo by Jeff Gritchen, Orange County Register/SCNG)

