

Karen Ross and Andy Souza: Hunger in Fresno County — how local farmers are helping

By Karen Ross and Andy Souza

Food donations tend to spike this time of year, as holiday volunteers readily distribute meals to their neighbors who are working hard for a better life but need a little help putting food on the table.

Hunger isn't a seasonal issue in Fresno County — a place where food production is plentiful. The Community Food Bank and its partner agencies provide food to more than 300,000 people each month, including more than 100,000 children.

Farmers can make a difference through the California Association of Food Banks' Farm to Family program whereby local farmers connect with their local food bank in need of the vegetables, fruit, nuts and animal products that provide families with well-balanced, nutritious meals. The program makes it trouble-free for farmers and ranchers to share surplus foods, or donate equally tasty and nutritious foods that for one reason or another don't meet market standards. The Farm to Family program even offers reimbursement for modest picking and packing costs, making it not just a charitable choice, but also a viable business decision for farmers and ranchers.

Local farmers provide tremendous support to the Community Food Bank throughout the year. So far in 2014 local farmers have donated more than 12 million pounds of fresh fruit and vegetables, which the Community Food Bank has distributed to families here in the Valley.

One in four adults in the San Joaquin Valley regularly goes hungry and food insecurity trends are daunting. Those facing food insecurity are forced to make hard choices between buying food and meeting basic needs like housing, medicine, transportation or childcare. Thankfully, many in California's agricultural community have committed to improve the well-being of their neighbors — 100 farmers already contribute to the Farm to Family program bringing with them more than 50 varieties of wholesome fruits and vegetables — but there is plenty of room to grow. Locally, NuCal Foods Inc., based in Ripon, generously donated more than 380,000 eggs as part of the Farm to Family Program.

The California State Board of Food and Agriculture is partnering with the California Association of Food Banks to double farmer contributions to food banks, including the Community Food Bank, from 100 million pounds to 200 million pounds annually.

"It's as simple as one phone call," says Bryce Lundberg, a rice grower with Lundberg Family Farms who sits on the State Board of Food and Agriculture.

Lundberg co-chairs the Farm to Family initiative with board member Miles Reiter of Driscoll's. According to Lundberg, the program's convenience — the fact that a truck arrives at a donor's farm within 24 hours of a phone call and hauls truckloads of food to local food banks and beyond — makes it uncomplicated for farmers to participate. On the eve of Thanksgiving, Lundberg donated 100,000 pounds of rice to the Farm to Family program.

How can you help?

Contact Steve Linkhart at stevlinkhart@cafoodbanks.org to arrange a donation. You can also call him at 510-350-9916. You can also help by contacting the Community Food Bank at communityfoodbank.net for more information on opportunities to provide financial or volunteer support

Non-farming folks can help by participating in a social media campaign supported by California Grown. Every time someone shares a picture of a California grown product on Facebook, Twitter or Instagram with the hashtag #CAGrown, a one-pound food donation will be made to a California food bank.

Every pound of vegetables, fruit, nuts, dairy and lean protein donated to local food banks lifts someone's spirits and provides nutrients needed to overcome the obstacles blocking the way to a better tomorrow. Just as produce and protein nourish bodies, the generosity of farmers who contribute to the Farm to Family Program strengthens communities.

Join us in offering our Fresno County neighbors a helping hand. Make a donation this month and pledge your ongoing support all year long.

Karen Ross is the California Secretary of Food and Agriculture. Andy Souza is the president/CEO of Community Food Bank in Fresno (www.communityfoodbank.net). Phone: 559-237-3663.

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