
In moneyed Marin County, demand grows for food bank's services

By **Kevin Fagan** | February 20, 2016 | Updated: February 20, 2016 5:00pm

1



School started with a long line two hours before the first bell rang at Laurel Dell Elementary in San Rafael.

It wasn't schoolkids in the line, but their moms. Thirty-nine of them. And they weren't there to help read storybooks.

They were there on a recent morning because they needed food — and the San Francisco-Marín Food Bank's weekly distribution is the only way they can get enough of it. In Marin County, which the U.S. Census Bureau lists as the 17th-richest county in the U.S. by median income, poor people go hungry every day, even while they're working two jobs with backbreaking hours.

People like Esperanza Martinez. Her two children were still asleep as she stood in line, and after she went back home with her box of potatoes, frozen chicken, carrots and tortillas, she circled back to school at the west edge of town to drop off the kids. Then she spent all day working as a babysitter and a house cleaner.

“My husband paints houses, does construction, he remodels houses, and we still barely make the rent,” Martinez said, cradling the food box in her arms. “We work so hard, so hard. But this food — this food will feed my family for three days. We will be OK with this.”

5-year increase

Workers and volunteers at the food bank say they are hearing of harsh realities like Martinez's more often than ever. The organization is marking its fifth anniversary as a two-county operation, and a look at the numbers shows that rather than getting better, hunger is only biting deeper among the people it serves.

Since San Francisco's food bank was combined with Marin's in January 2011, the total food given out in both counties has increased from 39 million pounds a year to 46 million pounds today.

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San Francisco's bigger population of 805,235, compared with Marin's 252,409, means that the bulk of the need is in the city. But for those who run the food bank, the most surprising increase in demand has been in that tree-studded land of spacious houses, top-draw musicians and famously liberal politics, Marin County.



Photo: Leah Millis, The Chronicle

Volunteer Ann Haenggi arranges the potatoes at the SF-Marin Food Bank in Whistlestop Feb. 12, 2016 in San Rafael, Calif.

The annual distribution of food in Marin jumped by 50 percent, from 4 million pounds five years ago to 6 million pounds now. In 2007, just before the recession, the total was a little over 2 million pounds.

“This really started changing in Marin in some places you might not expect, particularly during the recession — more people started asking for help,” said Leslie Bacho, chief operating officer of the food bank. “There is more poverty in the county than I think

people realize or want to see.”

The growing need might have been expected in historically low-income areas such as Marin City. But the food bank says it's also turning up in Tiburon, Fairfax and other affluent towns.

Before the merger, the Marin food bank had 18 spots where it handed out food once a month. Now there are 47 such sites, and they operate every week.

“In just about all of our communities now, we have pockets of need,” Bacho said.

Rich-poor gap

According to the Silicon Valley Institute for Regional Studies, inequality has increased more rapidly in the Bay Area since 1989 than in California or the nation — and Marin is leading the way. It has the highest disparity between rich and poor in the Bay Area, a yawning gap of \$397,296 annually between the average among the top and bottom 20 percent of earners.

San Francisco, with a gap of \$300,000, ties for second in that distinction with San Mateo and Santa Clara counties.



Photo: Leah Millis, The Chronicle

Concepcion Chavez (left), Elsa Hernandez and Wenceslao Bojorquez at the San Francisco-Marín Food Bank at Whistlestop in San Rafael.

Overall, the food bank estimates that 1 of every 4 people in Marin and San Francisco goes hungry at times. Dignity usually keeps that food struggle out of view, though.

“You’d think you’d see it all the time, but you don’t,” said Goldie Pyka, spokeswoman for the food bank. “You pass someone on the street, they don’t wear T-shirts saying they are hungry. But they are. And there are so many different types of people in need.”

About 15 percent of those who use the food pantries are homeless, Pyka said. “The rest are working, unemployed, disabled, elderly, you name it. They’re bus drivers, teachers, receptionists, gardeners. They are your neighbors.”

Out of public eye

The principal at Laura Dell Elementary School, which has hosted a food-bank pantry since 2012, said distributions before dawn fit parents' schedules and let them pick up their food privately, away from prying eyes or the bustle of a full schoolground.

"I am shocked at how many people are squeezed here in Marin, where when you read about the county it usually just talks about million-dollar homes and affluence," Principal Pepe Gonzalez said as he helped unload a pallet of food for the giveaway the other day. "But there's not so much of a middle class here anymore.

"To stay afloat in Marin, you have to most likely have a dual income, or someone in the house is raking it in," Gonzalez said.



Photo: Leah Millis, The Chronicle

IMAGE 1 OF 4

Volunteers, from left, Edith Struss, Arnold Luber and Dolores Duarte hand out food at the SF-Marín Food Bank in Whistlestop Feb. 12, 2016 in San Rafael, Calif.

Seeing a neighbor

Across town at the Whistlestop senior center later that morning, 120 elderly people picked up their food. As at the elementary school, most of it was produce — 60 percent of the food bank's supply consists of fresh fruits and vegetables.

Even after having volunteered for several years, Ted Sempliner found a surprise waiting for him as he helped with the distribution.

“I looked up, and there was my neighbor,” Sempliner said. “He was a little embarrassed that I saw him there. He lives on an \$800,000 houseboat just off Sausalito, but just doesn't have much money. That's how it is sometimes, house-rich but cash-poor. So here he is, in line for free food.

“Things happen to people, that's all I can say.”

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