



Dear Friends,

I appreciate this opportunity to share with you a behind-the-scenes story of how your SLO County librarians and library leadership served our community during our most challenging times. To say that the SLO County Libraries has a special place in the hearts of SLO Food Bank staff and clients is a major understatement, and you'll now learn why.

What you likely learned from the news is that when unemployment soared in SLO County following the start of the pandemic, food insecurity also soared to historic levels of need. Prior to the pandemic, on a monthly basis, the SLO Food Bank provided food to approximately 30,000 of our neighbors in need. One-in-six of our neighbors faced the hallow pain of hunger as part of their daily existence before the pandemic. Approximately one-quarter of those we serve are seniors and almost one-third are children. From San Miguel to Nipomo and California Valley to the coast, the SLO Food Bank serves the entire county by providing direct food support at 60 locations and by supporting the feeding programs of 81 partner nonprofits that source food from our warehouse for their clients in need.

We've been serving SLO County for 31 years, and then the pandemic hit. In the first six weeks of pandemic hunger relief, our warehouse inventory dropped by 73%! We couldn't order food fast enough, and fortunately we never ran out of food or were forced to ration, but there were some unbelievably tense weeks as our warehouse inventory thinned.

The other thing that thinned was our volunteer base. Many of our long-standing volunteers are retirees, and therefore at higher risk of succumbing to COVID-19. We rely on over 2,000 volunteers annually to help our very small staff package and distribute food. You may have seen stories in the news about other food banks calling in the State and National Guard to help keep their operations humming. We didn't need the military because *we had librarians!*

So how did that come to be? All County employees are designated as Disaster Service Workers (DSW). This means that in a declared emergency any County employee can be reassigned to meet the highest needs of the community. So, when libraries closed due to the pandemic, library staff were reassigned to other duties, and we were fortunate to have many of them reassigned to the SLO Food Bank for several months. Library staff integrated into our workforce to support an unprecedented need for hunger relief in SLO County.

We provided three times as much food during the first months of the pandemic, and none of that would have been possible if not for our amazing library DSWs. DSWs packaged food, covered administrative duties, and assisted with keeping our facility safe and sanitized. At the peak of support operations, County staff accounted for approximately 25% of our total workforce hours.

As the reality that our County peers would not be able to stay forever sunk in, SLO Food Bank staff and our Board of Directors sought to celebrate our partnership with the County. At a breakfast celebrating our COVID-19 operations success, SLO Food Bank staff and County DSWs signed a banner that now hangs proudly in our warehouse as a memento of our partnership. Perhaps, if you wanted to volunteer or swing by to make a donation, we could show you the banner!

On behalf of the staff, board, and thousands of clients whose health and hope were enhanced by County DSWs, I extend our sincere thanks to the County of San Luis Obispo, to Director of Libraries Chris Barnickel and his leadership team, and to our librarian heroes, whose hard work, incredible initiative, smiling faces, and genuine friendship brightened a very challenging chapter in our community.

Sincerely,
Garret Olson, CEO
SLO Food Bank