North Fork Foodbank volunteers

In the light of the COVID-19 pandemic, many in our communities have suffered joblessness. More than ever, people are seeking out charity to survive. The Central California Foodbank offers relief to many hungry residents. But the food donations would never get to the local communities without the hard work of volunteers who collect, sort, box, and hand out the commodities. Most people are lucky enough never to have needed the foodbank. Even those who have collected commodities from a Foodbank handout give little thought to the work that goes into it. You show up, sign the list, grab a box, and go.

Figure 1(About Central California Food Bank, n.d.)

The Central California Food Bank Started in 1992, originally housed at a warehouse on the Fresno Fairgrounds. The organization grew rapidly and moved multiple times, settling in its current location on central avenue. (*About Central California Food Bank*, n.d.) With the help of many volunteers and full-time staff, food is brought to this location and sorted into boxes for distribution. Trucks are loaded and sent into the communities, where local

volunteers further sort food and organize handouts. The North fork group engage in both sorting of food at the warehouse and running the local handout.

Distribution of food in North Fork is done through Grace Community Church. (*Central California Food Bank > Food Locator Map*, n.d.) As early as 1946, members of the church assembled in the Forest Service Club House. Soon after, work started on the church building. (*About Grace Community Church UCC, North Fork*, 2021) There are about five regular volunteers in North Fork, with others who come and go, who run the food handouts. They silently do the challenging work of making sure no one goes hungry.



Figure 2 HANSEL KERN runs the Gnarly Carrot, an organic market in North Fork, Calif., that recently celebrated its first anniversary. (Photographs by Tomas Ovalle For The Times) (Marcum, n.d.)

A local organic greengrocer, The Gnarly Carrot, helps the cause by offering its cold storage for fresh produce. Run by Hansel Kern they, collect this product from the foodbank and bring it back for the handout. (Marcum, n.d.) The fresh produce is then added to the boxes throughout the day by the volunteers to ensure that it stays fresh.

Usually, on the first Saturday of the month, a line of locals collects on the porch of an outbuilding next to the church. Most people seem in good spirits in the queue. Grateful for their commodities. Some even exited like a child waiting for a gift. They are excited to see what goodies they'll get this month. An extensive collection of boxes is neatly stacked, waiting as volunteers add the fresh food, they had kept cool at a local business.



Figure 3 (About Grace Community Church UCC, North Fork, 2021)

As a California State program, there is always record keeping requirements. [redacted], a regular volunteer, is ticking off names, updating information, and signing up newcomers in her spot. [redacted] she comes out to help her community. She says she loves to get to see the locals, her friends. Especially now that COVID-19 has forced us to keep contact to a minimum. She is like a kind mother to North Fork. Not the coddling type of mother but instead the straight-talking tough love kind. Don't complain too much around her; she will quickly set you straight and tell it how she sees it. ([redacted], personal communication, January 25, 2021)

Unfortunately, where there are paperwork and bureaucracy, there are all sorts of complications. Sometimes the line slows down as someone's detail needs to be updated. Most people take it in their stride. They often find a friend to keep them company as they wait. Sadly, there is often the wrong side of humanity. "When people come and get their boxes, you never know what they'll say or do. Some of them aren't very nice sometimes." ([redacted],2021) People get rude and verbally abusive towards volunteers when they don't want to comply with paperwork. It is hard to comprehend why a person looking for a handout would be this way. One expects gratitude. After all, the rules are set by the State of California, and volunteers are helpless to alter them. "I [just] do the paperwork, and I have a lot of things that I have to make sure everybody does…I can control it because I have worked with the public most of my life. I try not to let it get to me, but it's the same people every month… I know how to deal with them." ([redacted],2021) [redacted] says it is rare to show someone away, but when it happens, it is usually because of their stubbornness to comply with record-keeping, not because they do not meet requirements.

Yet, the volunteers have a positive attitude. They are not discouraged by the few ungrateful. The mood is that of friends helping friends. "We are mountain strong; we will get through it together." This mantra that originated during the devastating creek fire embodies the spirit of the region. It had echoed again in the lattermath of the more recent Mono Wind event when many residents suffered damage to their houses. Just days before a severe winter storm. Most of the community knows each other. They wait patiently for their turn. The volunteers care to ask how everyone is doing. They are always ready to help a single mom or an older person carry the boxes to their car. They also seem to have developed valuable friendships in the group of volunteers. Playfully and

cheerfully serving the community. "We give each other a bad time and tease each other… we get to visit and see people." ([redacted],2021)

As if running the handout is not already a lot of work, the five regular volunteers will also volunteer at the food bank warehouse and mobile trucks to help sort food. It is hard work breaking up pallets of food and sorting it down into boxes. Their dedication is truly admirable.

In these challenging times, it is more important than ever to recognize volunteers' hard work and do all we can to help others. The Central California Food Bank distributed 40 million pounds of food in 2017. (reference) With the economic downturn, this number is expected to be higher for 2020. I salute the volunteers for persisting despite the difficulties they face, the hard work, and sometimes difficult recipients. The friendship and sense of community they exabit are inspiring, and much more than I expected. When asked how someone could help, [redacted] said, "Show up…someone will show you where we need help," referring to the monthly handouts. ([redacted],2021) For information on the Central California Food Bank visit ccfoodbank.org. Or to find your local Food Bank go to www.feedingamerica.org.() Here you can also find out how to donate, volunteer, or where to find food if you're in need. For information on north fork handouts, visit gccuccnf.org/?page_id=411.



Figure 4(Feeding America, n.d.)

References:

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