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## At 40, OC's Second Harvest Food Bank works to put itself out of business

What started as a church group giving out dented cans of soup and boxes of cereal is now a complex operation to feed the hungry



Claudia Bonilla Keller is the CEO of Second Harvest Food in Irvine, CA. (Photo by Paul Bersebach, Orange County Register/SCNG)



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“Shorten the line.”

Claudia Bonilla Keller, chief executive of Second Harvest Food Bank, used the phrase at least twice during a speech she gave Tuesday, Nov. 21 at her organization’s annual “No Lunch” Lunch, an event that drew nearly 300 supporters to Second Harvest’s 120,000-square-foot headquarters and distribution center at the Great Park in Irvine.

Keller’s meaning was simple: A shorter line, for a food bank, means less hunger. She wants Second Harvest, which turns 40 this year, to make the line of hungry people in Orange County so short that the whole undertaking “goes out of business.”

That word is apt. Though Second Harvest remains a non-profit, same as when it opened in a former citrus packing house in Orange, and feeding people remains the only measure of its success, the 2023 version of the organization is very much a business. While Second Harvest isn’t trying to turn a profit, the basic idea is that it also can’t actually lose money, as financial collapse at one of two local distributors of free food would be disaster for tens of thousands of needy people in Orange County.

That’s part of the reason why, over the decades, Second Harvest has evolved from what started as a give-and-take-as-needed operation into what is now an ultra-modern hub-and-spoke enterprise, similar to a huge grocery chain or an airline or a logistics giant like Amazon.

Second Harvest has 94 employees and in the last fiscal year took in food and financial donations worth about \$100 million. It has a fleet of 25 trucks, two huge refrigeration rooms, computers, software, marketing and advertising plans, a public relations agency, a government affairs strategy, lawyers, insurance and a seemingly endless supply of hand-operated pallet jacks.



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Volunteer Coordinator Malik Freeman stacks crates of apples at Second Harvest Food in Irvine, CA on Monday, November 20, 2023. (Photo by Paul Bersebach, Orange County Register/SCNG)







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A volunteer passes cabbage down the line during the first harvest at Harvest Solutions Farm in Irvine, CA on Thursday, November 18, 2021. The 45-acre farm will gather about 40,000 pounds of cabbage a week for the Second Harvest Food Bank of Orange County. It is a collaboration between South Coast Research and Extension Center and Solutions for Urban Ag. (Photo by Paul Bersebach, Orange County Register/SCNG)



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Volunteers pack apples at Second Harvest Food Bank, Orange County, at their facility in Irvine, CA in March, 2022. (Photo by Paul Bersebach, Orange County Register/SCNG)







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Claudia Bonilla Keller is the CEO of Second Harvest Food in Irvine, CA. (Photo by Paul Bersebach, Orange County Register/SCNG)



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Workers stack crates of apples at Second Harvest Food in Irvine, CA on Monday, November 20, 2023. (Photo by Paul Bersebach, Orange County Register/SCNG)





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Volunteers load bins with cabbage during the first harvest at Harvest Solutions Farm in Irvine, CA in November, 2021. The 45-acre farm will gather about 40,000 pounds of cabbage a week for the Second Harvest Food Bank of Orange County. It is a collaboration between South Coast Research and Extension Center and Solutions for Urban Ag. (Photo by Paul Bersebach, Orange County Register/SCNG)



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Claudia Bonilla Keller is the CEO of Second Harvest Food in Irvine, CA. (Photo by Paul Bersebach, Orange County Register/SCNG)





It also has some features that aren't overtly corporate but service the operation all the same: a pair of working farms, a volunteer army of happily unpaid laborers, a cool mural.

Critically, Second Harvest, like any business, has customers. Or, rather, Second Harvest's customers have customers.

As a food *bank* Second Harvest doesn't deal directly with individuals. Instead, it delivers food – everything from milk and eggs to fresh produce and the odd cake – to nearly 300 qualified food *pantries*. Those pantries, which operate out of senior centers, universities, hospitals, churches and dozens of other venues, provide food directly to people who need it.

But the whole operation – pantries, suppliers, drivers, volunteers – has to meet stringent standards of food handling and workplace guidelines and insurance. The rules protect the entire chain from the financial calamity that might come if a client is sickened by poorly kept food or a volunteer hurts herself in a non-paying job. And like the hub of any huge logistics-oriented business, Second Harvest oversees those rules.

But unlike most businesses, Second Harvest's basic goal is bigger than money.

"Food is not going to lift anyone out of poverty; we're not in the business of ending poverty," Keller said during an interview a few days before the luncheon.

"But no one can get out of poverty without access to food."

## **Need never sleeps**

In 1983, experts used the word "hunger," not "food insecurity," to describe the problem of not having enough to eat. Second Harvest had a different name, too, The Food Distribution Center, and it was run by the Catholic lay organization St. Vincent de Paul.

The Food Distribution Center was by modern food bank standards a bare-bones affair, a 10,000-square-foot warehouse in Orange where people in need could walk in and pick up food donated by less-needy neighbors and strangers.

"Food banking, 40 years ago, was dented cans and bad packaging and food that was close to the end of its shelf life," Keller said as she walked through Second Harvest's Great Park warehouse.

"In Orange, if we got a pallet of Trix (cereal), we put it against a wall. Then, if somebody came and needed some Trix, we gave 'em Trix.

"Now, we have sophisticated inventory control systems. We know the value of what we have on hand, and the value of what is coming in.



"In the years since we started there have been a lot of changes," she added.

"The focus on working with partners; hospitals, churches, all those groups – that's become important. And the focus on nutrition, not just food, didn't exist 40 years ago. Now, it's the key."

The Food Distribution Center that opened in 1983 also filled a need that, at the time, was viewed as nothing short of a full-blown crisis.

In late 1982, months before the Food Distribution Center opened, the unemployment rate in Orange County (and the nation) was over 10%, according to federal and state records. Interest rates were high (a home loan was about 13.24%) and the national inflation rate at was about 6.2%. The economy of that era was viewed as the worst since the Depression of the 1930s, a distinction that's since been taken by the Great Recession of 2008.

Orange County in that era was only slightly wealthier than the rest of the country, with a broad swath of upper-middle-class workers whose jobs were vulnerable to market cycles in defense spending and aerospace.

As layoffs and high interest rates upended thousands of those families, the business of giving out free food became a quiet lifesaver.

"(The Food Distribution Center) was simple but great," said Mark Lowry, who in the mid-1980s started working at Orange County Food Bank, a Garden Grove agency that is a few years older the Second Harvest and mirrors Second Harvest as the county's other huge distributor of free food.

As part of his work with OC Food Bank (where he is now director), Lowry visited the Distribution Center's 10,000-square-foot operation so frequently that he can still recite the address from memory.

"They always treated everybody with respect and kindness. That's the model," Lowry said. "It's part of why we've always been partners, not competitors."

Today, their partnership – as the two primary distributors of free nutrition in a county of about 3.2 million people – is essential to a problem that simply won't go away.

Though county statistics for 1983 aren't available, news reports from the era suggest the hunger rate in Orange County – then with a population of about 2.1 million – was about 10%.

Now, the food insecurity rate in Orange County is about 12%, on par with the national food insecurity rate of 12.8%, according to a recent report from the U.S. Dept. of Agriculture.

Locally, county data and other social service agencies suggest the people most likely to face problems getting enough nutritious food are older than 65 or younger than 10. That's true nationally, as well, with the U.S. Dept. of Agriculture report finding nearly 13 million American children are food insecure — meaning they live in families where they don't know, with certainty, if they're going to get three meals a day.

Keller notes that the most recent federal food insecurity data is for 2022, when pandemic-era support programs for rent and student loans and expanded free food subsidies were still in place. Now, with most of those programs gone or drastically reduced, she believes the crisis is more dire than the report suggests.

"You'd be surprised," she said. "Are people getting help? We're still seeing increased numbers."

Last year, Second Harvest served an average of 393,000 people a month. This year, Keller said, the monthly average will easily top 400,000. In 2019, the year before the pandemic, it was about 249,000 people a month.

"It's worse than ever," Keller said.

## Different pressures

Unemployment right now, locally and nationally, is less than 4%. And Orange County's overall wealth has become, in some ways, eye-popping. The Robb Report, a magazine and website that tracks the consumption habits and real estate fixations of high-income Americans, recently produced a chart that says [eight of the nation's 100 wealthiest ZIP codes](#) are in Orange County.

Yet hunger – at least when measured as food insecurity – is higher today than when Second Harvest opened and joblessness was rampant.

Hunger, today, has a different set of drivers, and income isn't the only issue. In fact, the vast majority of people who need food in Orange County have access to at least some income, either from Social Security or because they live in a family where one or both parents work full- or part-time.

Jobs, on their own, aren't the problem. Low pay and high housing costs and recently high food inflation are.

"Hunger in this country has nothing to do with supply," Keller said. "It's about access. We have enough food to feed everybody. But we waste about 40% of our food and we don't, yet, do enough to get food to people who need it.

"The two ideas are starting to be connected," she added. "That's the good news. The next step is we have to get better."

Second Harvest, like other modern food banks, also is seeing its mission expand. If the basic goal in 1983 was to help people stave off hunger, the goal today is two-fold – to help people eat and to help them keep eating.

"Food banks traditionally have existed to provide emergency food. In the past 10 years or so, we're being looked at to end hunger," Keller said.

"Those are two totally different things."

That's why Second Harvest, like many big nonprofits, is moving beyond food. For example, the agency is participating in research that looks at how people age 65 and up are using food subsidies and might use them more in the future.

"We're about to become a county of older people," Keller said. "We have to address the problem of hunger in that community."



The idea of ending hunger, not just feeding the hungry, is also why Second Harvest, like other big nonprofits, hopes to urge lawmakers to change government in ways that would help feed people. Already, rules aimed at reducing food waste in landfills and so-called “Good Samaritan” laws that protect non-profits from some types of lawsuits, have dramatically changed who supplies Second Harvest and how for-profit companies can work with food banks.

The next step, in the view of many, is to look at laws that might expand buying power for lower-income people.

Expanded food subsidies for lower-income workers, tax breaks for families with young children – even health care rules – are all among the issues Second Harvest weighs in on.

“We’re not supposed to lobby. But we can advocate within our space,” Keller said. “So we do.”

Others interested in feeding people can do the same, she said. While giving money and food and free labor all remain key to helping the hungry, Keller suggested action also can take other forms.

“Call your elected representatives. Ultimately, that’s what will move the needle,” she said.

“Food is foundational. But having more food isn’t going to end the problem of having hungry people.

“If we’re going to reduce the line – and that is what we are aiming to do – we have to work all the angles.”