

# Safety Net Services—Produce Mobile Program

BEVERLY WARREN

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In a county often referred to as “Santa Claus County,” the Santa Clara County region is known for its high cost of living. In fact, a growing number of Santa Clara County residents are forced to decide whether to spend their money on food, housing, utilities, gas, or medical care. Second Harvest Food Bank estimates that one in four people in Santa Clara County faces periods of hunger. As a way of addressing hunger in their county, Second Harvest Food Bank rolled out its Produce Mobile program in 2006. The Produce Mobile program is a refrigerated truck that brings high-quality fresh fruits and vegetables to people in need at various community agencies in San Mateo and Santa Clara Counties.

Produce Mobile provides produce to approximately 6,000 households per month and approximately 20,000 persons are serviced at 55 distribution sites.<sup>1</sup>

The Santa Clara County Employment Service Department is one of Second Harvest’s distribution sites. The department offers its CalWORKS and General Assistance clients this program as a Safety Net program. On the fourth Wednesday of every month, Second Harvest Food Bank delivers fresh fruit and vegetables to Santa Clara County’s Employment office where over 250 families pick up fresh produce. The program is supported 100% by volunteer staff who donate their time monthly to provide this service to clients.

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## Introduction

Since First Lady Michelle Obama launched her “War on Obesity” campaign in 2010, it seems like every day one hears predictions in the media of the high incidence of obesity in this country. The overall poor health of many Americans today is being emphasized on a daily basis. We are encouraged to eat a minimum of six servings of fruits and vegetables each day. But how realistic is this for many Americans? Oftentimes, the struggle to pay for housing and/or keep the lights on presents more of a challenge for many families than simply making healthier choices for providing food for their families.

“Access and affordability are two common and significant obstacles for many families in our region when it comes to providing fresh fruits and vegetables. Even if a household is near a store or farmers’ market, they may not have the access due to economic limitations.”<sup>2</sup> Many studies have shown that low-income individuals live in areas known as “desert areas,” where accessibility to grocery stores and produce stands are not an option for them. In fact, most low-income individuals are eating less healthy food, that is full of sugar, preservatives and less nutritionally dense because it is cheaper and more accessible for them.

Like most low-income residents, residents “in Alameda County, one in six residents visits at least one of the county’s food bank’s 275 soup kitchens, food pantries, after-school programs, senior centers, shelters or other community agencies annually—the vast majority on a repeated basis. There is hunger in virtually every neighborhood.”<sup>3</sup> Due to this fact, most county food banks are committed to not only

distributing food staples to those in need, but distributing fresh fruits and vegetables to low-income individuals because they know they may not otherwise have any other option or means of getting and eating fresh fruits and vegetables.

## Overview of a Produce Mobile Truck

Second Harvest Produce Mobile operates three refrigerated trucks. Each truck has two stops per day. Each distribution site is visited a minimum of once a month or more frequently if requested. Criteria for eligibility include:

- Clients are not pre-screened because the sites they service are already Second Harvest Community Partners. Most individuals are serviced in low-income neighborhoods or at locations that provide services to low-income populations.
- Clients are obligated to sign a declaration declaring themselves as households meeting the federal poverty guidelines.

Santa Clara’s Second Harvest Mobile Produce monthly truck projections are:

- 55 sites are serviced
- Approximately 6,000 households are serviced
- Approximately 20,000 persons are serviced a month
- Every partner / agency are responsible for providing its client needs quotas to the food bank
- Average of 25 lbs. of produce is distributed to each household per month
- Average of 50% of all food distributed consists of fresh fruits and vegetables

## Observation and Participation in the Produce Mobile

Second Harvest provides **all** fresh fruit and vegetables to distribute. Upon collaboration with Second Harvest, Santa Clara County signed an agreement with Second Harvest in March 2009 and provided paperwork covering liability while distributing produce on county property.

Before Santa Clara Social Services Agency (SSA) decided to participate in the Produce Mobile project, surveys were provided to CalWORKS and General Assistance clients to determine clients' interest level. Agency staff wanted to gauge whether or not there was an interest among their clients for a successful participation rate.

Prior to the produce mobile's monthly distribution date, handouts are posted for volunteers and to remind clients of the upcoming produce mobile.

On the fourth Wednesday of each month, volunteer staff from Employment Services foregoes business attire for comfortable clothing to literally roll up their sleeves to distribute cases of fresh produce to their clients. Two shifts of workers are needed to complete the task. Hours of distribution are 9:30-11:00 A.M. and 11:00 A.M.-12:30 P.M. From the time Second Harvest drops off the day's distribution, volunteers eagerly and literally get busy setting-up tables, registering clients, and breaking down food into smaller quantities to be distributed into individual packaging for the clients.

Santa Clara SSA requires clients to show some form of proof of receiving aid in order to participate. At the check-in table, for example, clients show their EBT cards. As required by Second Harvest, clients being served have to certify the following: "I certify my household income is not more than the posted monthly guidelines and number in my household is true and correct. Food is for my personal home use and will not be sold." Clients are also required to state the number of individuals living in their household. All of this information is provided monthly to Second Harvest for their reporting needs.

The Santa Clara County staff has taken the produce mobile to another level. On the day following the distribution, staff sometimes provide cooking demonstrations to clients using the same vegetables and/or fruits distributed the previous day.

Items that are needed to set-up for Mobile Produce include:

- Tables and canopies on warm days
- Plastic gloves
- Step ladders—needed to get down into large produce boxes
- Plastic bags—Clients are encouraged to bring recyclable bags
- 10-12 volunteers

Colorful flyers are placed around the workplace close to the distribution date to encourage employee participation (volunteers). Creative sayings are included on flyers: "Making a Difference through Service" . . . "People Helping People."

Average amount of produce distributed each month to clients:

Winter 5-6 items around 30 lbs.

Summer 6-8 items around 40 lbs.

### Volunteer Day—March 28, 2012

Since participating in the program, Santa Clara County has been lucky and their produce mobile has never been "rained out." Of course that was until I decided to volunteer. The weather forecast predicted rain showers in the morning on March 28, 2012. On this particular day, the site coordinator decided not to take a chance and decided to host the Mobile Produce event indoors at their Employment Connection Center instead of outdoors in the parking lot.

For the distribution, Second Harvest packaged food for 150 members/clients and the following items were distributed: 83 cases totaling 3,824 pounds, allowing clients to leave with approximately a total of twenty pounds of fresh fruits and vegetables each (see *Table 1*, next page).

After participating in the produce mobile distribution, I left the facility feeling like I had contributed to families getting nutritious food to prepare

**TABLE 1**  
**Second harvest Food Distribution**

<b>Produce</b>	<b>Amount to Distribute</b>	<b>Amount Distributed to Clients</b>
Potatoes	50 Bags—15lbs each	5 lbs. per member
Onions	9 Cases	3 lbs. per member
Green Cabbage	855 Pounds	2 heads of cabbage per member
Cucumber	38 Cases	3 items per member
Cauliflower	39 Cases	1 item per member
Celery	6 Cases	1 item per member
Pears	17 Cases	5 lbs. per member

healthy meals for their families. Although the work was somewhat strenuous, especially when I literally had to climb into a bin of cauliflowers in order to reach the remaining produce in the bottom of the large case, I felt a sense of satisfaction and an excitement for wanting Alameda County to participate in an innovative program in a similar capacity.

### **Recommendations**

Alameda County Food Bank (ACFB) launched its version of a Produce Mobile in July 2011. Although not on the large scale of the Produce Mobiles in Santa Clara County, Alameda County's Food Bank understands the magnitude of getting fresh fruits and vegetables into the hands of the individuals who do not have accessibility to getting fresh fruits and vegetables easily on their own. In Alameda County, over 80 percent of all food outlets are fast food chains, corner stores and liquor stores. Many neighborhoods are known as "food deserts. Food deserts are areas that do not have grocery stores or other outlets selling fresh produce and other healthy foods. The Food Bank brings that food to them. Alameda County Food Bank delivers fresh fruits and vegetables in a variety of ways: distribution at schools located in food deserts, as well as at a Children's Weekend Backpack program. It also distributes to their 275 community partners who in turn distribute directly to their clients.

Alameda County Food Bank, like other food bank's partners with the California Association of Food Banks and brokers excellent prices on fresh fruits and vegetables that would otherwise get "plowed under" by the farmers. Food banks pay growers a small handling fee to purchase their produce that would otherwise get destroyed. Currently ACFB is purchasing and distributing over ten million pounds of fresh produce annually. As a way of participating in a version of a Produce Mobile project, Alameda County could provide funding to ACFB for as little as an average of 11 cents a pound. Just imagine how little this cost would be for low-income residents in Alameda County.

Since deciding to study Santa Clara's Produce Mobile project, I learned Alameda County has taken advantage of a recently released pilot project for CalFresh Nutrition Education, titled "Innovative Ideas Project." Funding for this pilot project is available through September 2013. Alameda County's grant was recently approved by the state to partner with ACFB, the county's Health Department and Community Partners. Together all of these groups will be able to increase media outreach services and provide nutritional educational services designed to increase fruit and vegetable intake among CalFresh participants and other identified low-income individuals.

## Acknowledgements

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## References

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