

Cooking up new ideas

Second Harvest Food Bank hopes to improve its distribution, education

LeAnn Bjerken July 20th, 2017



—LeAnn Bjerken

Second Harvest CEO Jason Luke Clark says the nonprofit's network includes 250 neighborhood food banks in 26 counties.

Second Harvest Food Bank of the Inland Northwest is moving forward with new ideas to battle hunger, as it seeks to expand its distribution and improve its nutritional education programs through its kitchen space.

Jason Luke Clark, the organization's CEO, says Second Harvest remains focused on closing the hunger gap, but it also wants to continue efforts to help families become healthier and more self-sufficient.

"We've been here over 45 years now, so we understand it's important to stay responsive to the communities' needs and continue to earn our donors' support," he says. "Part of that means being willing to reinvent ourselves and pursue new projects that enable us to do our work better."

Second Harvest is a nonprofit food bank that relies on donations from grocery stores, farms, manufacturers, and food drives.

Clark says Second Harvest has an annual operating budget of \$5.3 million.

"Our budget goal for this fiscal year is \$5.5 million," he says. "More than 86 percent of our funding comes from private donors, and we currently have about 10,000 active donors."

Second Harvest just concluded its 2017 fiscal year, which ran from July 1, 2016, through June 30.

Second Harvest's 78,000-square-foot headquarters facility here, located at 1234 E. Front, is 60 years old, Clark says. The organization bought the building in 1993, having occupied it since the late 1980s. The organization also operates a 40,000-square-foot distribution center in Pasco.

Between its two locations, Second Harvest currently has about 42 full-time employees and 26 part-time employees, and sees nearly 8,000 volunteers each year.

Clark says an area at each location that's called the volunteer center, serves as a main meeting space for volunteers and staff.

The organization's Spokane volunteer center is divided into two areas, one being a 1,200-square-foot lounge, and the other being a 2,000-square-foot workspace with tables and a conveyor belt system for processing and transporting donated food.

"In 2011 and 2012, we did some significant renovations here in Spokane, adding to the volunteer center, along with some energy-efficiency tools, and improving our freezer and cooler equipment," says Clark.

He says prior to the renovation, donated food was sorted within the organization's warehouse space. The renovation added both the conveyor belt system for ease in sorting donated food, as well as the lounge, which gives volunteers a comfortable breakroom and gathering space.

Clark says between its two locations, Second Harvest performs a total of about 23 food sorts each week. Sorting shifts last between two and three hours, with most being booked out a month in advance.

He says the renovation of the volunteer center has enabled Second Harvest not only to increase its capacity to sort and pack food, but also more than doubled its number of volunteers.

"We've come to understand that space really matters," he says. "It's added to people's ability to have a positive, memorable experience volunteering with us, encouraging them to want to keep coming back."

Clark says that about 70 percent of the food Second Harvest receives and processes is fresh or perishable, and its two warehouse locations also feature a combined total of 180,000 cubic feet of cold storage. The organization's fleet of 14 trucks, some of which also serve as mobile market food banks, also are all refrigerated.

Clark says trucks serving as mobile market food banks are designed to distribute fresh or perishable items to food bank partners that lack refrigeration capabilities, and also serve as a quicker way of getting food to more rural locations.

Previously, Clark says the organization's goal was to process and distribute 30 million pounds of food annually between its two warehouses by 2018, a goal it reached earlier this year.

"We hit that mark a bit early, so going forward we'll be at over 30 million processed and distributed each year," he says.

Clark says Second Harvest's network includes 250 neighborhood food banks and meal centers in 26 counties, 21 of them in Eastern Washington and five in North Idaho.

Partners include 100 food banks, meal sites, and other hunger-relief programs in Spokane County, as well as 120 other partner programs in Eastern Washington, and 30 more in North Idaho.

He says through this network, Second Harvest is able to distribute more than 2 million pounds of free food each month to help people in need within its service area, feeding a total of 55,000 people each week.

"We also partner with area schools, universities, the health district, and other organizations on various programs," he says.

One such program, spotlighted in an earlier *Journal* story, is called A Bite 2 Go, which provides backpack-sized food kits for middle and elementary school students to take home over the weekend.

"Through that program—even just three years ago—we were only serving about 300 kids per week," says Clark. "Now, we're partnered with about 80 public schools and are on track to serve 3,500 per week this coming school year."

While the organization's main initiatives include feeding children, seniors, and families, and providing healthy eating education, Clark says it's looking at new ways of achieving those same goals.

"Our new 10-year plan reaffirms the importance of focusing our resources on local, direct distribution that's needed today, but also looks ahead at giving people tools for tomorrow," he says.

Clark says in looking over its current distribution infrastructure, Second Harvest determined there's a larger need for services in rural areas.

"We've identified there's a need there, and we have enough food, so the challenge now is distribution," he says. "That means we'll need to organize and pay for additional trucks, drivers, and fuel, which may take some time."

Meanwhile, he says the organization also wants to begin expanding its nutritional education programs, as it's harder for low-income families to learn skills like shopping for nutritious foods on a budget, or how to cook from scratch.

"Some of these issues are interrelated, with low income leading to poor nutrition and poor health," he says. "That's where our kitchen space comes in. We see this as an exciting, new investment, and an opportunity to help people build those skills and improve their lives."

Second Harvest's kitchen is a 1,600-square-foot space located within the organization's Spokane warehouse. Constructed in 2015, the kitchen cost roughly \$500,000 to build, and was paid for entirely through private donations.

Emily Kanally, newly appointed director of kitchen programs for Second Harvest, says the kitchen is meant to serve as a fun learning environment.

"The kitchen is at the back of the warehouse, so our students get to walk through the facility and see all aspects of what our organization does," she says. "It really helps us educate people not just about our work, but about how food impacts you and the people in your community."

Born and raised in Spokane, Kanally earned an associate degree in culinary arts from the Inland Northwest Culinary Academy at Spokane Community College.

She then spent nine years working for the Olympic Hotel in Seattle, working her way up to a sous chef position before returning to the Spokane area.

"In my time as a professional chef I saw so much food waste, and ultimately I decided I wanted to be part of the solution rather than the problem," she says.

Kanally has worked with Second Harvest for four years now, and helped manage the organization's volunteer center, before moving to her current position within the kitchen space this March.

"I helped design and order supplies for the kitchen before it was officially completed," she says. "We're all very pleased with how nice the space turned out."

Kanally says the kitchen hosts free community classes, youth and group classes, public paid classes, and fundraising classes.

"We do offer some off-site classes, as well as cooking camps for kids during spring, summer, and winter," she says. "We've also just recently started a team-building option, where local businesses can engage groups of between 12 and 20 employees in a cooking challenge."

She says the kitchen's community classes are offered free to anyone who would like to sign up online. Classes are usually one to two hours each, and focus on local foods, with recipes varying based on product availability.

She says teachers for each class are usually a combination of Second Harvest staff, regular volunteers, and AmeriCorps volunteers.

Instructors need not have prior cooking experience, as each is trained beforehand and provided with a lesson plan, as well as the necessary cooking tools and materials.

"Each class includes both food and nutrition education activities," she says. "Youth classes usually host school-aged children who're bussed to our facility and take home the food they make."

She says public and fundraiser cooking courses cost \$30 to \$50 per person, with proceeds supporting free cooking courses for families in need.

"The thing about cooking is that everyone really seems to like it," says Kanally. "There's always something to learn and create, so it's always a lot of fun for everyone."