

Bridging the gaps: Nonprofits are collaborating to meet sharp increases in the need for food, housing and more amidst funding cuts

By Nicole Gregory,
contributing writer

Orange County nonprofits that provide food and housing support for low-income residents are finding new ways to address an increase in need while state and federal funding sources are reduced or eliminated. Pivoting quickly to work collaboratively is one way they hope to ensure food and other services are available for people who need them.

"The landscape right now is incredibly challenging," said Taryn Palumbo, executive director of Orange County Grantmakers, a membership association for funders and philanthropists. "So many of our nonprofit partners get their funds from both private donors and government and state contracts."

As a result of the funding cuts, the need for food in particular has risen sharply, said Liz Andrade, executive director of 2-1-1 Orange County, known as 211OC, a 24-hour, free information and referral service of United Way, which helps people get food or housing support.

"Data is showing an increase of 492% in request for food," Andrade said, referring to the last few days of October 2025 compared to the same period in 2024. She went on to explain that in that three-day period in 2024, 211OC received 1,367 calls from people who needed access to food. That same three days in 2025 "we were at 8,086 calls for food," she said.

A call or text to 2-1-1, or a visit to 211oc.org, can connect someone in need to thousands of programs across Orange County—including about 400 food pantries and soup kitchens. "This is the first time since the pandemic where food outnumbered the requests for housing," Andrade said, adding that overtime has been approved so that operators can handle the high volume of calls.

More than 310,000 Orange County residents—mostly older adults and children—receive CalFresh food every month. CalFresh is the state version of



PHOTO BY MARK RIGHTMIRE, ORANGE COUNTY REGISTER/SCNG

Nicole Suydam, president and CEO of Goodwill of Orange County, stands in the store at the headquarters in Santa Ana on Wednesday, Oct. 2, 2024.

Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program, or SNAP, and has been drastically reduced. Only people whose monthly income is at or below 100% of the poverty line are eligible to receive CalFresh food.

In response to this crisis of need, 211OC has collaborated with nonprofits to create a plan to fast-track food access: As soon as any food pantry or soup kitchen runs out of food, they now contact 211OC and are removed from the agency's referral list until the next

day or their shelves are restocked. This prevents pantries from becoming overwhelmed and 211OC callers from wasting time traveling to a location for food that is no longer available.

Nonprofits are also connecting with partner organizations to fill programs that they've had to cut for budget reasons. "For instance, if a group used to provide immigration services internally, now they are partnering with a nonprofit that only does immigration services,"

Palumbo explained.

Working together is not new for Orange County nonprofits. "A lot of collaborations have actually already been in place," said Palumbo, "but as they say, necessity drives innovation and so we're seeing some of these collaborations being amplified simply because it is the best way to get things going, and because nonprofits cannot respond to the challenges on their own. We need the

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Advertorial

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care children are targeted by traffickers because of their need for love, affirmation and protection.

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Collaboration

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public to know about those collaborations, and we need people to know that there are resources and organizations in Orange County here to support them as we all deal with whatever is going to come our way.”

At Goodwill of Orange County, leadership strives to keep operating costs low in order to deliver services such as workforce development. “I am personally seeing a growing spirit of trust and collaboration among nonprofits in Orange County, and an openness to share resources, partner on grant opportunities, and make accessing help easier for those who need it most in Orange County,” said Nicole Suydam, president and CEO of Goodwill of Orange County.

“There is a collaborative nature here,” agreed LaVal Brewer, president and CEO of South County Outreach, a nonprofit which works to prevent hunger and homelessness by providing food and housing support. “Partnerships al-

low us to create greater access to our clients for the services they need and closer to where they are,” he said. “It’s like, ‘You do this well and I do this well, so let’s reduce unnecessary redundancies and duplication.’ When we can partner together to do this type of work, then we’re all stronger in making it possible for those who need our services to have greater access to those services.”

South County Outreach shares one of its refrigerated trucks with a food pantry to pick up food on Saturdays, Brewer said. “How this helps me is that if they have more food, that means that their clients don’t need to go looking for food somewhere else—and my lines will be shorter,” he said.

Brewer also helps out Bill and Molly Bracken, founders of Bracken’s Kitchen, a culinary training and a community feeding program using rescued food sources. “Bracken’s Kitchen has provided us and other nonprofits with freshly made nutritious meals which we give to our clients,” Brewer said. In return, his South County Outreach drivers make

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PHOTO BY JEFF GRITCHEN, ORANGE COUNTY REGISTER/SCNG

LaVal Brewer, president and CEO of South County Outreach, in Irvine on Thursday, May 22, 2025.



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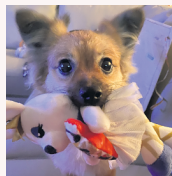
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PUBLISHING DECEMBER 5

Outreach

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runs to pick up rescued food and deliver it to the kitchen.

The needs of low-income people in Orange County have been more evident since the pandemic, said Brewer. “And then inflation has dealt a crushing blow to the middle class and the lower class,” Brewer added. “You’re losing every day.”

One valuable connector is the OC Hunger Alliance, which arranges regular meetings among local nonprofits to share information and help procure and dispense food to organizations that need it most. “There’s a lot of coordination that is happening that I’m not sure would have happened without the Orange County Hunger Alliance,” said Andrade. “We are leaning on the OC Hunger Alliance structure for communication, donations, support in reaching the food pantries and sharing data for decision-making,” she said.

Still, nonprofits are financial fragile, said Lindsey Spindle, president of Sam-

ueli Family Philanthropies, and strategic collaboration such as joint planning, systems or finance, is difficult, especially under duress. “I believe now we’re going from financially fragile to seeing many organizations teetering on the edge because it’s the perfect storm of increased consumer demands and potentially decreased funding.”

The Samueli Family Philanthropies was founded by Orange County residents Henry and Susan Samueli. “This year our grant making budget is about \$130 million and sixty percent of that is staying here locally—a substantial amount of philanthropic support,” said Spindle, who added that her group is tracking the challenges currently facing nonprofits in the county.

One silver lining, Spindle said, is remembering a positive outcome of the pandemic: People unified to help each other in that crisis.

“Something that was once totally unimaginable happened virtually overnight—every part of society had to transform itself to meet this horrific moment.” Some nonprofits have built



PHOTO BY MINDY SCHAUER, ORANGE COUNTY REGISTER/SCNG

Volunteer Marion New, left, assists Navy E4 Julie Ayala at the expanded Pendleton Pantry on Wednesday, February 12, 2025.



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a reserve, planning for such an emergency—though no one knows how long this funding decrease will last. “Good planning only covers a certain gap,” said Spindle. “If the gap turns into a chasm, very few organizations are built to address that.”

This makes the call for private donations more urgent than ever.

“We hear about these problems, and they feel so big that people discount their ability to make a difference. But every single person has something to give that’s a value,” said Spindle. “It might be monetary, it might be volunteer hours, it might be expertise, it might be a connection, it might be compassion, it might be a phone call to an elected official.”

Getting involved can unleash a whole new sense of possibility, said Spindle, which can lead to the will to change society for the better. “Almost all of the world’s biggest problems can be solved by a combination of three things—creativity, capital and will,” she said. “Once that will is there, it is a very, very powerful and infectious force for change.”



PHOTO BY PAUL BERSEBACH, ORANGE COUNTY REGISTER/SCNG

Taryn Palumbo, executive director of Orange County Grantmakers, reacts during the announcement of the Orange County Immigrant and Refugee Liberty Fund in Santa Ana on Wednesday, Aug. 27, 2025.

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