

Daily Pilot

NEWS

OC Hunger Alliance looks to partner with more nonprofit food providers as its mission continues



Mike Learakos, CEO of Abound Food Care, at his office in Santa Ana. (Don Leach / Staff Photographer)

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Abound Food Care chief executive Mike Learakos has been in the food industry for more than three decades.

When it comes to food recovery efforts in Orange County, Learakos firmly believes that less is more.

“It is not more people served, more food distributed, more food recovered,” he said. “Our metric for success — how we know we’re going to be effective — is when we get to less, when we’ve reduced the need. That is not just through food, but food has a role in it.”

[Abound Food Care](#), a nonprofit based in Santa Ana, addresses food insecurity by examining food waste. It's the lead agency for the [Orange County Hunger Alliance](#), which also includes [Second Harvest Food Bank](#) and Community Action Partnership of Orange County's [OC Food Bank](#).

The OC Hunger Alliance [released a community needs assessment](#) last June, revealing what many industry veterans already thought they knew. Namely, that choice of pantries and good, nutritious foods are important factors for those in need.

Now, the partnership is moving forward with its mission in different ways.

In recent months Abound has partnered with Foodbuy, LLC, a North Carolina-based purchasing company, to create what Learakos calls a national enhanced procurement program.

The idea is signing nonprofit food providers to the network, ultimately raising their purchasing clout and affecting their bottom line.



Pillars of Abound Food Care's mission — food care, impact, ingenuity, connectivity, empathy, passion and accountability — are on the wall in its Santa Ana office. (Don Leach / Staff Photographer)

“They are then able to go back to manufacturers and say, ‘We have more volume so we’re going to ask you to lower that price,’” Learakos said. “Ultimately, what Abound is trying to do on behalf of the Orange County Hunger Alliance is provide that discount so that these nonprofit agencies can be leaner, can be more efficient, can save money. Our job is also to track what happens with that savings. Can they identify what they’re doing with that savings?”

“I had one agency tell me, ‘If you can save me \$40,000 a year on the purchase of products or services, I will add on-site medical care for our recipient clients.’ Now, we’re providing other wraparound services that ultimately goes beyond food. That’s how we try to elevate people out of their condition.”

This is just one of many ideas possessed by the energetic Learakos, who lives in Orange. He said logistics efficiency plays another key role, as well as pantry mapping.

Much of food recovery is done by volunteers, which can ultimately turn out to be inefficient, and Abound is tracking some of that data through private grant funding from the Samueli Foundation.

“I think what we’re going to find is that when you have 85 people in their passenger cars, driving all over the place and picking up food at restaurants or grocery stores, it’s probably less efficient than running a professional route with a refrigerated vehicle,” he said.

He added that a more streamlined process would also increase donor participation.

“There’s a comfort level of knowing that food is being handled safely,” Learakos said. “It’s not somebody in a Subaru picking up their food.”

Cooperation — sometimes a challenge among nonprofits — is key too. South Coast Outreach has a refrigerated truck that it uses Monday through Thursday, Learakos said. On Saturday, another agency, Laguna Food Pantry, uses that truck.



Mike Learakos, CEO of Abound Food Care, at his Santa Ana office. (Don Leach / Staff Photographer)

The main challenge is increasing demand but decreasing supply. California passed [SB 1383](#) in 2016, mandating that food companies of a certain size donate all of their excess, edible food. That has come with unintended consequences.

“Right now, we’re clogging the system recovering excess edible food that no one’s going to ever eat,” Learakos said. “That’s where our role, on behalf of the county, is to be able to identify a baseline process that any donor can participate in. We want to identify the cost of food recovery done right, meaning it’s focused on food safety, and then identify the impacts of this excess food.”

Anne Belyea, executive director of the [Laguna Food Pantry](#), said the pantry serves about 275 families with its weekday morning drive-through service in Laguna Canyon. On the Tuesday before Thanksgiving last year, that number rose to a record 407.

Before the pandemic, the pantry was rescuing groceries at seven local markets, a number that has ballooned to 25.



Seniors choose food from the Second Harvest Food Bank “Granny’s Market” in April, 2024. (James Carbone)

“Our volunteers are taking their own vehicles, picking up groceries and bringing them back,” Belyea said. “It’s challenging. It’s a lot to ask a volunteer to do. Through the Orange County Hunger Alliance, we’re really encouraged and excited about this new pilot program that will hopefully launch soon. We’ll see what we can do with more coordinated efforts in the recovery process.”

Elia Perez is the program manager of Buena Park-based [Giving Children Hope](#), a nonprofit that provides for families in need with its “We’ve Got Your Back” backpack delivery program but also a Friday community distribution program.

She said the increased demand has put Giving Children Hope in a tough position. The availability of fresh fruits and produce has decreased.

Still, she knows that programs like the OC Hunger Alliance offer more hope through collaboration.

“It’s just comforting to know that you’re not alone, a lot of times,” Perez said. “It’s an Orange County problem. We’re all going to come together, and there’s no competition. That’s the only way we’re going to survive a food cliff, by all coming together, sharing all of our resources and being one.”

Learakos said he knows that change is difficult. The nonprofit network often doesn’t factor in efficiency as part of the equation, but the rewards can be massive as the food recovery business continues to evolve.

Right now, he said 30-40% of all food in the U.S. is ultimately wasted, but that percentage is expected to drop dramatically because of tools like robotics, AI and predictive analytics.

In turn, less food will be donated — but again, less can be more.

“The focus is not on recovering more food,” Learakos said. “The focus is on making sure that the right food that’s going to be able to feed somebody, [that] there’s an outlet for it. If someone is not going to eat that food, it should not be considered excess edible food. It should be considered food waste, and it should be disposed of the right way.

“When we recover food that no one’s going to eat, we ultimately just become a waste hauling partner for the food industry. No one wants that, including the food industry.”