In my 20 years in food banking, I have worked at organizations in three states serving communities not unlike those in southwestern Wisconsin. 

What I have learned is that we can’t keep doing things the way we used to, and we need to innovate how we provide support to our neighbors.

The need for our work and our advocacy remains critically important, but the manner in which we work towards eliminating hunger has evolved thanks to innovative and comprehensive ideas that are led by the neighbors, partners and the communities we serve. The solutions to ending nutrition insecurity start with community voice and are achieved with adaptive partners willing to innovate together.

The type of innovation I’m speaking of is possible in large part because Second Harvest Foodbank of Southern Wisconsin is much more than a distributor or warehouse. We are a community-based service organization collaborating with more than 300 food pantries, schools, after-school programs and other nonprofit organizations across a 16-county region.

In addition to providing food support, our partners’ work may also include providing housing support, individual and communitywide health care, and much, much more. Our role is to provide food, use our infrastructure and leverage our relationships, which allows our partners to focus their resources and capacity toward prioritized programming.

Today, the team at Second Harvest and I witness and adapt to change at a scale I’ve not experienced in the past 20 years. Changes in commodity prices, supply chain, legislative policy, federal grants, community need, affordable housing, public health and educational funding are continuously in motion. All of these variables impact food insecurity in southwestern Wisconsin. That’s why we innovate. Innovation — new ideas that close the gaps — allows us to remain flexible, adapting to the changes that are out of our control.

I don’t know what food banking will look like in another 20 years. What I do know is that we’re going to keep seeking out new answers with community voices driving innovation. If there is an opportunity to support our partners more efficiently, we’re going to explore it. If our community tells us we can meet their need more effectively, we’re going to listen.

Michelle Orge
President & CEO
For 28 years, the WMTV 15 News Share Your Holidays campaign has been a critical component in our ability to provide millions of meals to those facing hunger in southwestern Wisconsin. Each year, we ask you to support the campaign by giving funds, participating in events, and raising awareness of hunger. Once again, you stepped up to make sure everyone in our community has the resources they need to thrive. Thank you!

325 volunteers
1,206 phone calls received
52,381 pounds of food sorted
4,775,174 MEALS PROVIDED!

A special thank you to our 2023 campaign sponsors:
The WMTV 15 News Share Your Holidays Sort-a-Thon at the Alliant Energy Center is the year’s largest Second Harvest-led volunteer event! It’s not only a chance for hundreds of community members to join us in sorting food for distribution to our community, but it’s also a time for some of our frequent volunteers to share their passion with others.

For the past three years, a small and dedicated team of approximately 20 Second Harvest volunteers have been “Table Captains” at the Sort-a-Thon. They are a group of volunteers who regularly support our distribution operations throughout the year. The role they play in ensuring that food is properly sorted and processed at the Sort-a-Thon is critical. This year, the team supported over 320 volunteers who joined us from dozens of our sponsorship partners and other community collaborators.

One Table Captain brings extra commitment and fun to the event by celebrating his birthday around a sorting table with friends and family. Bill O’Leary has been a volunteer at Second Harvest for 8 years. He says, “I tell my children it would mean more to me, rather than buying me a tie or something, if they came and did this.” This year, 8 family members joined the party, which always ends in a dinner outing after the sorting is done.

The weeks and months after the holiday season are some of our most needed times for volunteers in the Second Harvest distribution center. If you’d like to join our volunteer community, please visit www.SecondHarvestSW.org/Volunteer to learn more and find a shift that works for you!
KIDS CAFÉ AIMS TO BRING PEOPLE TOGETHER

As the name implies, our Youth and Family Initiatives Team focuses on community-driven solutions that support youth food security. Through programs like our school markets, Harvest Snack, and Kid’s Cafés, the team works with various organizations to understand the barriers preventing youth and families from getting the nutrition they need and implement solutions that reduce or eliminate those barriers.

Recently, we began helping the Bayview Foundation – a non-profit organization in Madison that provides affordable housing and supportive services to its residents – shift their after-school program from a Harvest Snack site to a Kid’s Café site. Both programs provide food to youth in after-school programs, but Harvest Snack sites focus on providing fresh produce and dairy products as snacks, while Kid’s Cafés provide substantive, hot meals for their program participants.

The shift in programs comes as part of Bayview’s opening of its new community center, which prioritized ideas from the community to inform the design and function of the new space. Two of the goals in mind for the new space were to double the number of children and teens participating in academic support, recreation, wellness, and employment programs and for food to be an integral part of bringing their community together.

Once the new Kid’s Café is up and running, Bayview residents will cook the meals, providing unique opportunities to build multi-generational relationships within the community. It will also be a tremendous example of the power of collaboration with other organizations to increase positive food-related experiences for young people in after-school programs.
Fiscal year 2023 – which ended on June 30, 2023 – was full of challenges, unforeseen obstacles that needed to be overcome, and, most importantly, steadfast resolve to meet the historic levels of need in southwestern Wisconsin. From our staff, vendors, and partner food providers to our donors and volunteers, we all came together to be there for those in our community who struggle with hunger.

Over the last 37 years, Second Harvest has distributed millions of pounds of food every year, but never more than the 22.9 million pounds we distributed in FY23. The days we distributed 100,000 pounds of food or more became the norm rather than the exception. And the number of times I heard from our network of food providers that they were supporting record numbers of people became too numerous to count.

What FY23 has reinforced is that food banking is not only changing but is also critically important to the communities we’re here to support. We need to constantly adjust to make sure we’re able to meet the needs of the nearly 100,000 people in southwestern Wisconsin who don’t always know where their next nutritious meal will come from. Through your ongoing support, we are adapting and innovating to ensure that everyone in our community has enough nutritious food to thrive.

Thanks to you, we continue our work towards achieving our strategic plan of engaging collaborators, strengthening our network, equitable food distribution, sourcing and acquiring nutritious food, and collecting and better utilizing data to inform our decisions.

For your trust in us to provide nutrition security and food equity to everyone in southwestern Wisconsin, thank you!

-Michelle
Since 1986, Second Harvest Foodbank of Southern Wisconsin has distributed more than 256 million pounds of food in our community.

From July 1, 2022 through June 30, 2023 we distributed 22.9 million pounds, the most we've ever distributed in a single year.

* Based on Audited Financials ending June 30, 2023