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Anti-hunger advocate is making a difference

Goal is to find more people eligible to get food stamps

By Rebecca Go
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The statistics are daunting, but anti-hunger advocate Tia Anzellotti still manages to smile.

The 32-year-old San Diego resident knows that more than 160,000 people in the county who qualify for federal food stamps are not receiving them. She knows that with just 31 percent of eligible residents collecting food stamps locally, San Diego County has the worst participation rate in the country.

But Anzellotti remains cheerful, taking one step at a time and recognizing that she is not alone in the battle to help the poor get a benefit they need.

“There's so much potential for positive change,” she said.

Indeed, the tide seems to be turning. Two years ago, the participation rate was just 27 percent.

Anzellotti is often credited with increasing participation and spotlighting the region's food-stamp problems. She was recognized last month for Best Performance by an Advocate by California Food Policy Advocates, which works to improve access to healthy food for low-income families.

Anzellotti shared the “Stampy Award” with actor Jeff Bridges. The awards were based on a popular vote after nominations by peers.

“She is just tireless,” said Dann Crawford, who oversees the county's food-stamp program. “I'm not a bit surprised she won the award.”

Anzellotti is executive director of the San Diego Hunger Coalition, a nonprofit that works to eliminate hunger through education, outreach, collaboration and advocacy. The group acts as an umbrella, bringing together anti-hunger advocates and organizations countywide.

In the year and a half she has been with the Hunger Coalition, Anzellotti has worked to make it easier for people to apply for food stamps. Sometimes, this means collaborating with local organizations to physically give the paperwork to those in need. At other times, it means lobbying state and local officials to change legislation. One year, she bused low-income families to Sacramento to talk to policymakers.

“I really didn't have to say much in those meetings,” Anzellotti said with a laugh.

Those who know Anzellotti praise her energy and creativity. Her trademark is her ability to collaborate with others who share her passion for improved food access.

"There's a lot of people out there who, at first glance, you don't think you should be working with them," Anzellotti said. "When you start talking with them, you realize that you both want the same thing."

One seemingly unlikely partner is the San Diego County Childhood Obesity Initiative. Parents who are forced to choose between a nutritious head of broccoli and a fattening box of macaroni and cheese are more likely to pick what will keep their child full, Anzellotti said.

"Tia and the Hunger Coalition have been amazing partners," said Cheryl Moder, initiative director. "Her dedication to this cause has been an inspiration."

The alliance builds on Anzellotti's aim to get rid of the stigma attached to food stamps. Feeding children healthy food is part of good parenting, she said.

"We should be celebrating families applying for food stamps," Anzellotti said.

Until recently, she was the Hunger Coalition's only paid employee. In December, Jennifer Tracy joined the staff, freeing Anzellotti to focus more on overall strategy and finding an office for the nonprofit.

"She's accomplished a tremendous amount in a short period of time," said Nani Au Oesterle, chairwoman of the San Diego Hunger Coalition board and a resource development specialist for Social Advocates for Youth in San Diego. "If we can keep up that momentum, we're going to do some exciting things."

Anzellotti never imagined that she would be an anti-hunger champion. She grew up in a middle-class Connecticut suburb, and her family participated in the occasional canned-food drive. At Boston College, she studied political science and spent her summers as an intern in her congresswoman's Washington, D.C., office.

When Anzellotti graduated in 1997, she volunteered for the Mercy Corps on a whim, still unsure of her future. The nonprofit placed her with Catholic Charities, a community service organization in San Diego.

Anzellotti would spend the next nine years working for and eventually managing the group's three food resource centers, where the hungry can go to get food. She began to realize, though, that the food distributors were carrying far too much of the weight.

"There were a lot of times when we had to turn people away because we didn't have enough time in the day to see everyone," Anzellotti said.

She started looking for ways to relieve the burden and felt that she could accomplish more by directly addressing government policy.

"I've known her work for more than 10 years and have been really impressed with the way Tia has brought energy and outcomes," said Matt Sharp, who went to college with Anzellotti and is now director of the California Food Policy Advocates Los Angeles office. "A lot of people bring energy, but not a lot of people get things done."

Anzellotti blushes at the thought that she is "spearheading the movement" and is quick to point out that the work is collaborative. She looks to the future, hoping to expand her focus to areas outside food stamps, such as senior nutrition.

"There's so much work to be done," she said. "It's really exciting."

■Rebecca Go is a Union-Tribune intern.