



Sarah Ramirez

Food System Change Not Charity

Former Executive Director, FoodLink Tulare County

Co-founder, Be Healthy Tulare

WORKS: Lost Hills & Delano (Kern County) | LIVES: Pixley (Tulare County)

FIELDS: Food Access, Education, Food Waste

The daughter of agricultural workers from the Central Valley, Sarah Ramirez spent four years as the executive director of FoodLink Tulare County, a food bank and anti-hunger non-profit in an impoverished community in California's agricultural salad bowl. An epidemiologist by training, Ramirez earned an undergraduate degree from the University of California, Davis, an MPH from Columbia University, and a PhD from Stanford, where she studied medical anthropology and the history of public health. In partnership with her husband, she began an all-volunteer produce gleaning program, Be Healthy Tulare, out of their mobile home, to ensure produce that would otherwise go to waste found its way to people in need.



The unfortunate irony that many in California's farming heartland, the Central Valley, are food insecure, hungry, and dealing with chronic illness, is not lost on Sarah Ramirez. It's long been her mission to make a difference in this area. It's been the focus of her academic research. It's where she's chosen to work; in May 2018 she accepted a position at [The Wonderful Company](#) to work on health and wellness concerns in Kern County, one of the poorest counties in California. Formerly an epidemiologist for Tulare County, from 2014 until March 2018 she served as the executive director of the food bank [FoodLink Tulare County](#), located in Exeter, about an hour southeast of Fresno.

“My family worked in the fields, in agriculture and irrigation, and I witnessed seeing the people I loved and cared about dying of preventable diseases,” says Ramirez, whose mother is from Mexico and father is from Texas. “That stays with you.”



It's also deeply personal. Her family has struggled with health problems that she says were preventable and rooted in place. Her paternal grandmother believes she went blind due to chemical sprays in the fields. An uncle died from diabetes, but not before enduring dialysis, blindness, and amputation. Her father has struggled with both diabetes and heart disease since his 30s. “My family worked in the fields, in agriculture and irrigation, and I witnessed seeing the people I loved and cared about dying of preventable diseases,” says Ramirez, whose mother is from Mexico and father is from Texas. “That stays with you.”

She vowed to be a doctor. But after working in a free clinic in Sacramento during her undergraduate years she saw similar kinds of health problems in people who were getting medical care. She realized that her community's problems went beyond access to care. That's when she decided to focus her academic research on environmental, cultural, and structural issues around food access and health.

“This is one of the most impoverished counties in California, yet it's so rich in agriculture like dairy, citrus, and nuts,” says Ramirez, 44. “It's such a stark contrast. I wanted to help here because there is so much need.”

In 2012, she co-founded [Be Healthy Tulare](#). The grassroots group collects excess or imperfect produce from backyard gardens and local farms that would otherwise go to waste and distributes it to the hungry via the food bank. The organization is named for the county where her hometown, Pixley, is located. Two to three times a month, depending on the season and bounty, volunteers harvest fruit and vegetable crops. For Ramirez, this was a no-brainer. She'd see fruit trees all around her weighed down with produce that was ripe for the picking. She and her husband also started a community food garden, cooking classes, and fitness classes for residents.

Hunger is an issue in her community, where four out of 10 residents are considered food insecure. Obesity is a problem, too. Many low-income residents lack a local full-service grocery store—and lack transportation to seek out fresh produce for their families. At the food bank, Ramirez conducted cooking classes to help educate residents about simple, healthful eating. Hers is a multi-pronged approach to wellness that's dispensed with kindness, compassion, respect, and love.

As a food bank director, she says she had to debunk myths about such services—for starters, that her clients are fat and lazy. Not so. Or that all the funding for the program comes from the government. Also incorrect. She wore many hats, including the job of raising the bulk of the funds for the food bank's budget. The food bank distributes 7.2 million pounds of food and serves around 305,000 people annually.

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In her hunger relief work, Ramirez wants to instill hope and dignity among her clientele. Seeking their input is crucial to success, she says. “You really need people to get down in the trenches and engage with community members,” she says. She also believes that food banks need to do much more than dole out canned goods. She’d like nothing more than to put food banks out of business. “We need food system change, not charity,” says Ramirez. “We’ll always need some kind of food bank service for emergency situations—job loss, recession. But food banks aren’t the answer to what ails us. We need more equitable access and education for low-income residents.”

She’s not looking for a savior. She has faith that her community has the internal resources and inner resilience to heal itself. “With a different approach, we can make our communities healthier,” she says. For instance, she thinks community co-op models and social enterprise businesses could help. What if residents were able to process a lot of that surplus fruit and create products for the greater community? What if residents were trained in batch cooking to feed hungry field workers a nutritious meal during peak harvest season when they’re working long hours and pressed for time to cook?

Ramirez bucked conventional thinking in her approach to food banking and intervention innovation. Since 75 percent of the children in her community are eligible for free and reduced-price lunch, she looked for ways to improve nutrition at local schools—including partnering with community sponsors to create school “farmers markets;” a summer meal program; and “smart packs” of healthy lunches, breakfasts, and snacks

during the school year—which she says is in keeping with a food bank’s mandate to serve the poorest among us.

Like many in the non-profit sector, Ramirez found herself juggling limited resources, whether financial, staffing, or infrastructure. Among other things, she would like to see academics prioritize health disparity research in the Central Valley, which has proved more challenging than she anticipated. “So much health equity and disparity research is focused around the Bay Area, since a lot of the universities are there. But given the conditions in the Central Valley, there’s a great need to do that kind of work here.”

Ramirez thought that she might serve as a bridge to partner with academic institutions, bringing the skill set and brain trust of a university to her community—that hasn’t materialized either, despite her efforts. “The closest four-year college to here is an hour away,” she notes. “It’s challenging to get the kind of resources to do that kind of analysis here.”

In her food bank days, she found obstacles at every turn. But Ramirez also finds joy in teaching cooking classes in both English and Spanish—whether a vegan tailgate table or a Friday taco potluck—sharing skills for cooking on a budget with flair, fun, and flavor.

And she remains hopeful that systemic change is possible. “We need creativity in this world; we shouldn’t get pigeonholed into doing things one way. Sometimes in this line of work I have to bite my tongue. We need to look for broad support for food access programming. There is so much need.”—Sarah Henry