



Episode 14: Fighting Hunger, Feeding Hope

Let's be honest -- REALTORS face an ever-changing industry. With emerging tech, growing trends, and a booming market, it's vital to keep up. Join me, Gilbert Gonzalez, CEO for the San Antonio Board of Realtors, as I get real with experts on what REALTORS need to know about this industry. It's time to get real.

GG ([00:23](#)):

We are joined today by Eric Cooper, President and CEO of the San Antonio food bank. In the past few years SABOR has partnered with the San Antonio food bank for food drives and volunteer events. And we're so grateful to the many members who have volunteered with the food bank. While the food bank is widely known organization, many people may be unaware of all the services they provide. So, we're going to talk today with Eric about his wonderful organization and how he, and as well as our members can continue to get involved. So welcome, Eric. Thank you for being with us today.

EC ([00:53](#)):

Yeah, great to be with you Gilbert

GG ([00:54](#)):

I took the mission from the website, so I hope I picked the right one. The mission of the San Antonio food bank is to fight hunger in Southwest Texas, through food distribution programs, education and advocacy. Southwest Texas, you are the San Antonio food bank, but you do not just serve as San Antonio.

EC ([01:11](#)):

Yeah, thanks for helping people understand that misconception. I think because our brand carries the name, San Antonio, people assume we just serve San Antonio, but it is actually 16 counties throughout South Texas. And we just added an additional 13 counties in the Texas Hill country up towards San Angelo to make sure that all of those counties have access to good nutrition. You know, we don't do this alone. We have hundreds of partner pantries that the food bank supplies food to where families go and get food right in those counties, right in the neighborhoods throughout the city. In addition to our pop-up distributions, which, I think, a lot of families are now seeing in the news media, where families literally drive through and get groceries loaded in the trunk of their cars. But it is a comprehensive approach, and it takes a lot of resources to make sure these things happen.

GG ([02:15](#)):

So, food distribution, would you say that that takes up the majority of y'all's focus as an organization?

EC ([02:22](#)):

You know, it, it, it takes up quite a bit, but you know, we frame our work into kind of three areas, which we call food for today, food for tomorrow and food for a lifetime. And it is those food for the day strategies that is the distribution. And I think what most people, when they think of the food bank, it's what comes to mind. We oftentimes call it our feed the line strategies, and those feed the line strategies are the pantries. They're the pop-up distributions. It's when a family is out of food, their cupboards are bare the refrigerator's empty and they're desperate. They're either going to walk into the food bank, they're going to call us, they're going to visit our website and we're going to connect them immediately, either one of our pantries or our distributions and get them groceries or even prepared meals to really satisfy that need for today.

EC (03:21):

But just as big is our response for tomorrow and lifetime work. And what we do with our tomorrow is, is really helped to stabilize households. There's a lot of federal programs like the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program, SNAP, which was formerly food stamps or WIC women, infants and children. Sometimes these households lack health care, so Medicaid or the children's health insurance program, or if they're a senior long-term care, there's a program called temporary assistance to needy families, TANIF. These are all household stabilization strategies, which for us, we call food for tomorrow. And our staff are helping families in need navigate that application process so that they can actually get that as an additional benefit, which is actually mostly a bigger benefit than the food that we give out is that food for tomorrow. And then, you know, in going through that process, we learn who's working and who's not working and really try to have that conversation around food for a lifetime.

EC (04:30):

Ultimately, that means that being towards self-sufficiency and self-reliance and becoming independent you know, meaningful employment is a, is a big need. And so, you know, for individuals that are unemployed and skilled, it might be just getting connected to a job. But some are unskilled and so it's being connected to a training program where they might be able to learn a skill that can then get them a job. And for us here at the food bank, we actually teach culinary arts and warehousing. So, we have students that are learning those skills to then get employed, but we also then refer out to about 40 different other skills through our partnership with the Workforce Solutions, Alamo WSA, and then we also work with Project Quest around just trying to get families connected to meaningful employment. Now our city struggles with livable wages.

EC (05:32):

And so, you know, employers that pay a livable wage are just heaven sent. I mean, ultimately that's what it's about. It's about being able to provide for yourself and have access to healthcare. And you know, unfortunately, a lot of the families we provide food to they are working, they, they got a couple of jobs, but, you know, it's 20 hours here, 20 hours there without access to those fringe benefits. And unfortunately, we become a part of their fringe benefit. We at the food bank end up kind of filling those gaps for those low wage workers that are struggling to meet all the demands of their household.

GG (06:16):

If somebody comes in for services, that today is going to be the food, but tomorrow is you'll offer services for benefits to help them find government benefits. They'll come in and talk to a counselor, that kind of thing. And the same thing for job assistance.

EC (06:32):

That's correct. And sometimes they are just coming for the job assistance sometimes, you know, it's because, you know, they submitted an application to the state and were denied for food stamps. And

so, they, they want, you know, some help with filling out that application. You know, it really, there's no wrong door, but it typically starts with today, moves to tomorrow. And then those lifetime services, which ultimately helps to move families to a better place.

GG (07:06):

How have you, I mean, when I think of the San Antonio food bank, we've already cleared the misconception that is not just San Antonio. How do you help educate the community that you provide these other resources, like job assistance, like benefits applications?

EC (07:20):

Hey, I take every opportunity to do a podcast like this. You know, it is a challenge, cause I think like I mentioned earlier, people know our feed the line strategies, but they don't know our shorten the line strategies. And, and, and you have to do both you know, it's kind of wrapped in that parable of, you know, give a man a fish or teach them how to fish. I like to respond, you know, if you don't pack a tuna fish sandwich, she won't meet you at the dock. Right. she, she wants to learn how to fish, but, but her babies are hungry and she has to meet that need today before she can really, strategically approach tomorrow. And so, you have to do it in tandem. You have to do both. It's not a, it's not a, or situation it's an and, and you know, you just do both and, you know, that's what the food banks trying to do.

EC (08:21):

You know, we've got to feed the line while we're working to shorten the line. Otherwise, the line just gets longer and longer. And sometimes the line gets longer because of, you know, a natural disaster or a pandemic. You know, there's enough seasons of struggle that come our way with loss of job or divorced or you know, a medical crisis. But you know, these exterior events that occur, that you know, happen. it's really being able to, to be nimble and respond and help anyone that's in that moment of struggle and, and realizing that it's, there's so many families that pivot with help and, and then no longer need help that come back as volunteers or donors to the food bank. And we see that all the time. I think it's been in the COVID-19 space that unfortunately I've seen more people that knew the food bank from volunteering or donating that now are in our lines getting food. And that's been pretty humbling to see

GG (09:36):

What do you think? I think most people would be surprised at the people who are going through your line and going and asking for services. What has been the one surprise for you seeing the people who used to come in and volunteer and support the effort now have to rely on it services?

EC (09:53):

Yeah, so, I mean, we fed about 60,000 people a week before COVID, and now we're feeding about 120,000 people a week. And that additional 60,000, many of those are people that have never asked for help before. Never imagined that they would be in the line at a food bank. And, you know, I think it's not surprising to me how frustrated they are as they assumed there was some level of government safety net that would help catch them and they're in their fall. And they're realizing that it's much more difficult to get SNAP and that there's you know, exclusions that keep them from participating because maybe they own a vehicle and the vehicle keeps them from being able to get on SNAP. And it's not until that vehicle is repossessed by the bank that then they would be eligible. And they're like, I don't want to lose my car.

EC (10:54):

I need to get a job. And, and, and the food banks, the only place I could get food, and I'm a taxpayer, I, I paid into this and they're just, they're, they're frustrated. And but I think what, what surprised me is, is

how widespread and, and, and sector specific when you think of kind of our, our humble Riverwalk economy and the travel and tourism and, and, you know, restaurant hotel mean just some amazing people that, that know hospitality and, and, and supported us in our fundraisers and, and, you know, the, the, the free, you know, staycation giveaway, you know, our silent auction, all of that stuff, you know, we've always been supported by, you know, this amazing you know hospitality industry, you know, and to see them struggling, It, it's been heartbreaking. I mean, just and, and no one wants to ask for help. It, it just, it's, it's, it's a tough thing. And to see them overcome the pride, the stigma and be in a situation where, you know, they're, they lost their jobs, they lost their savings. You know, they, some of them lost loved ones, their spouses you know, and, and to see such devastation. And just to be able to try to provide some hope through a warm meal, or, you know, a trunk full of groceries it's the least we can do to help them through this crisis.

GG (12:42):

You know? And what would, if somebody's looking for help, you mentioned how if you have a car, you can't get this, and what does it take for, cause I know that in order to participate to get some food, you still have to submit an application or just let the food bank know. Like what's the process to get the benefits of food.

EC (13:02):

Yeah. Gilbert, great question. As I mentioned, I mean, typically families either walk in, or they'll call us on our helpline, which is (210) 431-8326, again, (210) 431-8326. Or they'll go to our website and you just hit the get help button. And there is a registration and pre qualifications that are, that are in that process. You know, which is, is typically around, you know, who you are, name, address, phone number, household size, how many kids, you know are you working? Are you not working? What's your income? You know, right now we're, we're trying to find out who is impacted by COVID. So there's a couple of questions that just helps us better understand who we're serving. But that's the eligibility side. And, and, and obviously right now, there's just so many people that are now eligible to receive food.

EC (14:08):

We estimate now in the COVID-19 environment for our 16 County service territory there's about 900,000 people that are food insecure and of the 900,000 we've actually delivered services to about 625,000 unique individuals. Again, I can say that easier than it was done, but we've provided services to 625,000 unique individuals. And so that just says, you know, San Antonio, there's about 1.5 million people Bexar County about 2 million, there's an additional half a million in our 16 counties. So, a total of about 2.5 million people and of the 2.5, 900,000 are eligible right now to get food from the food bank because of COVID-19,

GG (15:04):

That's a lot of people. What is, would you use the word food insecure? What does that mean? I know we've heard it a lot, but

EC (15:13):

Yeah, no, it's a great, again, another great question. I, you know, I've been doing this work for 27 years and when I started, we actually used to just say people were hungry. And then you know, I guess the, the, the the intellects got involved and but I tell you it's, it's food insecurity is defined as, as someone that doesn't know where their next meal is coming from. So if you are not able to provide for yourself, you your socioeconomics are such that you're not in control of that. You just don't, you don't don't know where your next meal is coming from. Therefore, you're dependent on either public benefits

or you're dependent on the charitable food system. And the fragility of that, the uncertainties of that you are now food insecure, the, the opposite of that would be that your food six year, right?

EC (16:13):

That your, your resources are sufficient. You you're able to provide your own food, you're able to plan, you know and on the food secure side, you, you know, you, you think you want to be stronger, right? So, we at the food bank have some strategies around, you know, local food and farming and agriculture, and all of that's about building a food system that you can count on and rely on. And I think, you know, you want to make sure you're protecting your land and your water and in your local farmer, you know, I always think who, you know, who could you live without, right? Your doctor or your grocer, you know, it's, it's food is medicine, food is life. And if we don't look after those things, potentially we could all be food insecure, right. Disasters tend to create more food insecurity hurricanes you know, if your power's out, if your house is flooded if you're stranded you know, it's, we all need food. And the food bank will make sure that anyone that's hungry can get a meal and, you know, long term. And I say that in the sense of a crisis in a disaster we'll feed anyone that's hungry, but in, in the long-term, it's about feeding those that are economically disadvantaged and don't have the resources to put food on the table.

GG (17:51):

How do you use when you talk about feeding for a lifetime, how do you use farmer's markets and community gardens to help effectuate your plan?

EC (18:01):

Yeah, so there's, there's basically four big barriers to good nutrition. The income is the number one barrier, you know, depending on how much you make determines, how well you eat. Geography is the second big barrier to nutrition. So, where you live, urban, rural, do you have access to a grocery store? You know, do you have transportation? If you're living in a food desert, which is defined as is a geographical area, where one has to drive more than eight miles to a grocery store that stocks, you know, 60 or 70,000 items. So, you know, think about, you know, downtown San Antonio, think of some of the housing authority complexes where, you know, someone might not have transportation and there's a local convenience store, and that convenience store becomes the source of their food because it's close. And so, it's not gonna have the selection.

EC (19:06):

It's not going to have the pricing that you might see elsewhere, and therefore it impacts your nutrition. You know, the third big barrier is education. You know, do you know how to prepare healthy food? You know, you might have access to fresh fruits and vegetables, but you don't know how to cook and, and prepare a meal. And so again, the food banks, teaching nutrition, education, and, and cooking skills, and then the fourth, big barrier is really about commerce. It's a weird reality that unhealthy food tends to be less expensive and it tastes like wonderful. Right. and it's, it's, you know, items on the dollar menu, right? If it's a lot of snacks, cheap belly fillers that you know, moms are tempted to get for the kids because they love it and it fills their stomach, but it it's causing in our community high rates of diabetes, heart disease, hypertension. And when we think of the Hispanic community you know, they're targeted, right. I mean, low-income communities oftentimes are full of what is sometimes referred to as a food swamp, right? So, I think food desert lacking access to a traditional grocery store, but then it's, it's over populated with, with cheap fried foods, you know, unhealthy food items. And so, the long-term effects of eating on the cheap have been detrimental to our health here in San Antonio.

GG (20:54):

So, would you say San Antonio has food deserts? The metropolitan area has food deserts in it?

EC (21:00):

We do. Yeah. We've got both through deserts in our urban settings and our, on our rural communities. And so you know, the opportunity to really encourage the growth of grocery stores, the strategic placement of those grocery stores. We've got a wonderful grocery retailer in HEB, and they do a lot. Walmart's a big player, obviously, Target, Sam's Club, Costco, Trader Joe's, you know all of them are, are incredible organizations. But they all need to be thinking about being accessible, right. And, and sometimes you know, the, the revenue model you know, doesn't allocate a store in a community that might not be able to sustain it, but the people need the food to sustain themselves. And so, you know, I'm just a big advocate for making sure people have access. And so, the starting of those Farmer's Markets and our mobile Mercado, we're really efforts to, just to try to bring in, you know, alternative food sources of healthy food, to those food deserts, to those areas that lacked access. And so, if a grocery store is not going to be built, you got to eat in the meantime. So, what could we be doing to do something that could create access? And those are just a couple of strategies. They're small, but they're impactful to the families that participate in those programs and get access to that healthy food.

GG (22:42):

So, when you say how well you eat, what you're, what you mean is, you know a kid's hungry, are they going to eat an Apple and have access to fresh fruits and vegetables, as opposed to here is a big red and some Cheetos, right? Because that's convenient. It's right at the end of the, and it is 50 cents, for both, as opposed to having to go to the grocery store, to buy the food, that's going to be more substantive for them.

EC (23:08):

You nailed it. I mean, I, I always think of this experience that I had, well, distributing food at the San Antonio Housing Authority and, and a woman with her, two kids was receiving a watermelon as a part of the distribution. And she took the watermelon and she broke it open out, out there on the parking lot and gave her kids a chunk of it. And the kids both looked at the watermelon, like it was an alien. I mean, they were picking at it and I'm like, and I asked the mom, I said, you know, do they not like watermelon? And, and she said, well, they've never had it. And I'm going, are you serious? I mean, you know, he looks like he's like nine and she goes, he is, and she's seven. And, and and, and I'm like, and they haven't had watermelon. And, and she just said, you know, I don't have a car.

EC (24:02):

And I'm like, yeah. And she's like, well, a gallon of milk weighs eight pounds. I mean, you know, she's carrying these groceries home. And so, you know, a watermelon now becomes, you know, logistically impossible, right. To, to carry home a watermelon, to, to give your kids that experience. And so, when you think of our palette and the variety of foods that, that we're able to eat, you know, access transportation, literally a trunk can determine, you know, how, how you eat. And, and so we're trying to make sure that that's equitable. And in a lot of situations, we're trying to introduce foods, the families to build that palette, you know, to get kids, to try broccoli and cauliflower and, and, you know, enjoy some of those vegetables that, you know, that sometimes are more expensive for the family to purchase. And for, for that single mom, she worries because she's only got a few dollars and, and she doesn't want to buy something that our kids won't eat, because now they're going to go even more hungry. Right. So, she's, she's betting on the things that they love. And those tend to be more carbs and more starches, you know Mac and cheese goes a long way, but it's really a, sometimes food it's okay to eat every once in a while, but you shouldn't be eating that for every meal. And sadly, for a lot of these families, that's the reality,

GG (25:49):

Eric, before I switch over to COVID, I do want to ask you if one last service that y'all provide it's y'all have program for pets, which I was thoroughly surprised about.

EC (26:00):

Yeah. So, you know, it is about serving the entire household. And for so many families, a big part of their family is a four legged animal. And, and whether it's a cat or a dog you know, for our seniors it can be their only companion. And, you know, when times get tough and families have to make tough decisions, oftentimes they'll surrender their pet to an animal shelter because of a loss of job, or the economics are such that they can't afford to keep it. And, you know, with a little bit of logistics coordination and, and asking our community to donate, we're able to add Pet food into the family food box that allows for the pets to get fed along with the people food. And it's really been a great program. I mean, we just I, you know, it means so much to families and I tell ya, we've been doing it for about a decade now.

EC (27:07):

And, and when I first started, I was like, what am I getting myself into? Like, you know, we're, we're collecting dog food. And and then I was at one of our child feeding programs and at the site I'd taken a couple of our donors to see their dollars in action. And and we were feeding kids. And one of the kids that came in to the after-school program was really upset. And the caseworker at the site was saying, yeah, her parents are going through a real struggle and the husband had lost his job. And, and so we went over to cheer her up and, and, and she just started to explain how, you know, the mom and dad had told him that they were getting rid of cable and, you know, they, they couldn't afford television. And they were making all those tough choices just to try to, to make ends meet until he could get another job.

EC (28:03):

And, and, and then she said that they had to give up their pet and, and so their dog, and she was just, just in tears and just bawling. And, and so, you know, I was consoling her and letting her know that, you know, her parents were just making the decisions they needed to make and, and it was going to be okay. And, and then she looked at me and she says do you think that my parents are going to have to give me up to and you know, I'm like, Oh, no, sweetheart. I mean, no, no, no, no, no. And, and, and, but if from a child's perspective, right, it was like, well, you know, they had to get up our dog, you know, so am I next? And, and it just, it, it confirms to me you know, pets are loved ones too. And, and, and, and they're a part of the family. And so anything that we could do to help families stay together. That's a good thing

GG (29:05):

That is such a hard story to hear that poor little girl, what she must've been thinking. You have become somewhat popular on the internet ever since some drone footage showed one of your food assistance and distribution centers that, that photo, that video footage went everywhere, viral. How did that change what you all do?

EC (29:31):

Well, my, my joke is I'm still Jenny from the block, right? For our local media who have blessed us and told our story and, you know, this podcast, I mean, it, it is, it is about helping people understand and, and giving people the opportunity to respond. And, you know, it was a photographer by the name of William Luther who took that photo, that, that went around the world that, that put me in front of Dr. Phil you know, the New York times, the London times, New Zealand, Japan, Israel, you know, today show and so on. And, and it was it was humbling to be an ambassador for what was happening around

the world. But it was that photo that captured maybe what the data couldn't tell. And it was just the image of need that COVID-19 ushered in a crisis for food.

EC (30:43):

And that we can all know like that pay, you know, you're just a paycheck away from a crisis, but that photo captured what that crisis actually looks like. And you know, I, I just, words, can't express the gratitude to a city that's enabled us to respond to that kind of demand. And it's been inspiring and heartwarming to see that, but then on the other side, then you're looking at these lines and it's heartbreaking to see the individuals and families. And, and whether it's me, you see taxi drivers, you see Uber drivers, you see, you know, minivans and trucks, and, you know, I've met so many of these families who you know, say they didn't know where else to turn and, and all of them so grateful that we were there and that they could get food. And you know, some of them feeding their, their aging parents that live with them, some of them, you know, struggling to feed their kids who now are doing virtual learning and not participating in the national school lunch or breakfast program.

EC (32:10):

You know, we're delivering, in addition, home-bound deliveries to seniors with disabilities or lack of transportation. And, you know, one really cool program that most people don't realize is via does such an amazing job of transporting people, but during COVID a lot of those via trans that transport seniors to doctor's appointments you know, nobody was traveling. Everybody was sheltering in place. And so they had those vehicles, they had the drivers and they said, we want to keep them busy. So, we partnered with them and they pull out every team and we'd load them with food boxes and they drive our routes, delivering senior food boxes to, to shut ins. And I mean, just an amazing partner. And I, you know, I can't highlight every organization because there's just been so many amazing companies, purchases and individuals and foundations all stepping up to help make sure a neighbor gets a nourishing meal. And it's, it's just pretty, pretty inspiring.

GG (33:24):

So Eric, you've been doing this now for 19 years, supporting the community in this way. What keeps you going

EC (33:30):

Well, it's it's, it's always a privilege to be useful. And many people know my personal story about when my parents got divorced and I became estrange from my dad and ultimately found him homeless on the streets in Portland, Oregon. It changed my life. It, it made me realize that we're all family, that we're all connected. And my dad had actually gotten fed from a woman who had a catering business and at the end of the day, rather than throwing that food away, drove the streets of Portland and fed the homeless. My dad would say he was the beneficiary of her generosity. And, you know, knowing that a stranger fed my dad, you know, challenged me to, to think what was I going to do to make sure that brothers, sisters, moms and dads got food. Food is fuel.

EC (34:35):

Our bodies need it to grow healthy, to, to really thrive. And, you know, it's, it's always been a privilege for me to, just to be a part of, of helping to, to, to really serve the city I love. And, and, and I love the city. I mean, I love every aspect of, of our city. I I'm frustrated at the inequity, the, the, the, the, the, the gaps when it comes to opportunity and, and, you know, we struggle, right? It's, it's, it doesn't feel right when we think of San Antonio with the highest poverty rate, it doesn't feel right when we think of San Antonio with such segregation between those that have, and don't have, and we think of issues like

racism. I mean, we've got to do more, we've got to do better. And we've got to have a destiny that, that every resident of our city has more opportunity and everybody thrives.

GG (35:39):

How can our members, the community helped you on this mission?

EC (35:46):

It's easy to go to our website SAfoodbank.org, again, SAfoodbank.org. You can give food through hosting a food drive. You can give time through volunteerism, and we need volunteers on the front lines, giving out food. We need volunteers in our kitchens, making meals in our warehouse, packing boxes, or in our farm, helping the plant harvest, maintain the crops. You can always get financially for every dollar we take in. We can put out seven meals. So, an incredible multiplier effect. And then the last thing is giving voice. I mean, like your podcast share this link. I mean, you've learned a little bit about the food bank. Use your social media to help people better understand the issue of hunger. I'm always telling people we're not gonna solve hunger with a canned good. We're going to solve it with understanding and compassion, and we need more understanding and to educate legislators about good policy, you know, even prayer is needed. So, everybody, raise your voice for those that are struggling and tomorrow will be a better day for us all.

GG (37:06):

Well, Eric, from the block, we appreciate you feeding the community for today, tomorrow, and the lifetime, and doing your part to shorten the line. We greatly appreciate what you do for us.

EC (37:17):

Thanks, Gilbert. Good to be on.

GG (37:23):

Thanks for listening to Get Real! Be sure to subscribe for future episodes and share us with your friends on Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter. More information on this episode can be found at sabor.com/getreal. Until next time!