

Food bank position changes perspective

By Eddie Jimenez / The Fresno Bee

04/27/07 04:57:06

Sarah Reyes has been a television reporter, assistant to the chancellor for the State Center Community College District and state Assembly member.

But the job that has opened her eyes most to life in the Valley has been her position as chief executive officer for the Community Food Bank.

"I thought I knew everything" about those in need, Reyes said.

Instead, she found, "I didn't know anything."

Reyes is leaving the food bank after just over two years as its leader. She will become Fresno Assembly Member Juan Arambula's chief of staff. (She isn't saying she'll run for elected office again, but also isn't ruling it out.)

So I wondered -- as she ventures back into politics -- what insights her time with the food bank provided that could help her and the rest of us better understand those struggling to make ends meet.

One is that the stereotypes don't necessarily hold true.

Public perception of those seeking aid from food banks often is of someone wanting a handout.

Reyes admits that even crossed her mind.

That notion was dispelled when she saw people line up at 4 a.m. for a food giveaway that didn't start until 8 a.m.

"How many people do you know that are looking for a handout who are going to wait four hours in line?" she said.

Reyes also has a better understanding of the working poor -- those who occasionally just need a few groceries to tide them over.

She recalls during another food distribution a woman going to great lengths to avoid television cameras and the media.

"She had called in sick for work. She wasn't going to get paid for a week and a half, and she had to feed her family. It really brought home that these are the working poor," she said.

As an Assembly member, Reyes made education her No. 1 priority.

She believes that's still near the top, but her thinking has changed slightly.

"We need to do something to help people get through and survive in this world," she said.

Reyes said that to accomplish that, people must change their stereotype of a person who needs help.

She said she began to understand that issue when she took the job at the food bank.

Many people thought the position was beneath her, Reyes said. That disturbed her.

How, they wondered, could a former TV reporter, college administrator and politician find fulfillment as head of a food bank?

It was "literally the most rewarding job I've had," she said.

The food bank assists 46,000 people each week.

"I didn't serve 46,000 people when I served six years in the Assembly."

So why is she returning to politics?

"I think it's because I have a better perspective and can accomplish ... things to help people."

She vows to continue to be an advocate for those she's served at the food bank and to try to change public perceptions and judgments of those seeking a helping hand.

Though, she said, firsthand experience often takes care of that.

Once people see the need themselves when they visit or help out at the food bank, "that judgment leaves" them, she said.

Much like it left Sarah Reyes.

The columnist can be reached at ejimenez@fresnobee.com or (559) 441-6386.

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