

In the heart of the Salinas Valley, with its verdant fields and bountiful year-round crops, there are people who do not have adequate access to food. This is sometimes due to financial hardship, but not always. Being elderly or disabled can also prevent people from shopping or cooking on their own. That's where Meals on Wheels of the Salinas Valley comes in: serving the community with food and friendship for nearly half a century.

Regina Gage is the executive director of Meals on Wheels of the Salinas Valley. Regina leads a lean yet exceptionally effective staff of seven, about whom she speaks very highly: "These are amazing, competent, and caring people."

A loyal team of 80 volunteers helps deliver 1,000 to 1,500 meals every week. Regina refers to these volunteers as "True blue: rain or shine, pandemic or not, they show up." While Meals on Wheels has implemented additional safety protocols in response to the pandemic, the organization has continued its essential work, serving people who are 60 or older who have disabilities or other impediments to shopping or cooking on their own.



Regina recalls when she first took the helm of the organization, six years ago. "I didn't realize how many seniors in our county were vulnerable and alone," she said. "Sometimes we would be the only people they would see in a week."

The human connection is fundamental to the organization's work. These days, there is less interaction, but always a wave or smile from a safe distance. "It's been a big change for clients and volunteers," Regina explained, "but it's a temporary situation. People have been wonderful."

Meals on Wheels also delivers food for their clients' pets. Through a 20-year partnership with the SPCA of Monterey County, the "AniMeals" program provides food for dogs, cats, and birds, to help clients provide for their cherished four-legged (and two-winged) companions.

Asked if she has advice for others who lead nonprofit organizations, she said, "Yes, it's important to have lofty ideas. But a nonprofit is still a business. You've got to sustain it with the funding to support those ideas going forward."

Meals on Wheels of the Salinas Valley has lofty ideas and staying power. The organization's 50-year anniversary is just around the corner, in 2022.

