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ECAP: ON THE FRONT LINES OF EMERYVILLE'S BATTLE AGAINST HOMELESSNESS & HUNGER

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The latest **point-in-time count** shows that Emeryville's homeless population increased by a staggering *513 percent* this year accounting for 178 individuals. In troubling times like these, there are organizations working tirelessly to find ways to help preserve humanity for our homeless and low-income communities. One such organization – the only one of its kind in Emeryville – has been a staple of the community for decades.

The entirely volunteer-run **Emeryville Citizens Assistance Program** (ECAP) has been operating from its current location on San Pablo Avenue since 1997. ECAP collects and provides fresh fruits, vegetables, meats and packaged food to those in need.

The nonprofit recently paired up with a local artist and a nonprofit art gallery to cook hundreds of tamales for ECAP's customers. The event aimed to cultivate dialogue about the Bay Area's most pressing issues, while feeding the communities most affected by them.

Founded by former Emeryville Councilmember Nellie Hannon

Five full-time volunteers and up to fifty part-time volunteers spend long hours, without pay, to ensure people receive the services they need. They work day in and day out to feed hundreds of under-resourced and disadvantaged people including our region's homeless population.

"It's really worth it just to know that you've helped somebody," noted ECAP founder Nellie Hannon who runs the operation along with her brother Bobby Miller who serves as the Operations Manager. "I had no idea where it would get to and how long it would last. These last few years we've gotten busier and busier."

"We're giving them the feeling of being at a grocery store and

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choosing what they want," said Miller.

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According to Miller, a former Berkeley Police Captain, an average of 250-300 people receive food on a daily basis. On their busiest days, up to 400 families can be fed.

"We're giving them the feeling of being at a grocery store and choosing what they want," said Miller. "I know people will take more than they can eat, but if they can distribute it to others then that extends our reach."

From Mondays to Thursdays and Saturdays, they collect food donations from the Alameda County Community Food Bank and local stores like Trader Joe's and Pak 'N Save. On Saturdays, meals are hand delivered to 26 homeless encampments along nearby freeway corridors.

Every third Saturday of the month, ECAP distributes meals to enrolled families who are a part of the **USDA Temporary Emergency Food Program**.



The line for food donations often extends under the MacArthur Freeway into West Oakland.

An Organization Based On a Labor of Love

ECAP was founded in 1989 by former Emeryville councilmember Nellie Hannon.

"We know what it's like to be poor," said Hannon. "I've always had a passion for people, I guess."

Hannon was born in Austin, Texas. Her family moved to New Mexico before they landed in Emeryville in 1959. There, she raised three children who all attended Emery High. She then served on City Council for one term. After volunteering in Oakland, she thought about doing the same for Emeryville's impoverished population.

"We had none of the services," said Hannon. "If they needed food, they had to go someplace else."

So she began donating food out of a friend's garage.

"I've always had a passion for people, I guess," said Hannon. "We're from a family of ten. We know what it's like to be poor. We're blessed because all of us went to high school and went on to do something."

The wheels started to really turn when Hannon attended a meeting hosted by an Emeryville business association. There she met a couple of contacts from GE Capital interested in providing financial resources to assist the community. The operation had outgrown her friend's garage and was ready for a larger space. Her contact from GE Capital wrote a letter to the then city manager and Hannon lobbied the city council for their help.

She was successful in receiving a \$2,000 donation to fund ECAP's first food bank.

"If it weren't for the city, there would be no ECAP. They help us tremendously," said Miller, who is 75 years old. "I'm really appreciative of what they've done."





Nellie Hannon shared how wonderful it feels to see the smiles on people's faces when they experience ECAP's services.

Hannon, now 82 years old, stated that the city sponsors ECAP's work by subsidizing rent and utilities.

According to Hannon, the current landowner is reportedly having financial difficulties – which means ECAP could be forced to relocate. But she expressed confidence that the city would assist in finding another place for ECAP to transition to.

Emeryville City Councilmember John Bauters, who has volunteered at ECAP for more than four years, has pushed to include ECAP in potential plans to build **supportive housing** units at that current location. Supporting housing is targeted towards low-income and homeless individuals.

In May 2017, the Emeryville City Council voted 5-0 to look into opportunities to acquire and develop the property, including as many as 39 supportive housing units and 3,000-5,000 square feet of operational space for ECAP.

"I don't think as many people in the community know much of



an asset Hannon is," said Bauters.

"I don't think as many people in the community know much of an asset Hannon is," said Bauters. "If ECAP were to close, that would be unacceptable. Right now we're in a legal process; we paid the lease and continue to try to become the owners of that property to benefit both ECAP and the needs of that location."

The city has paid for ECAP's lease until June 2020. In the meantime, Bauters said city staff are continuing their discussions with nearby property owners to potentially house ECAP's operations, in the event that the property is sold or transferred.

"We've been blessed to keep going all this time," said Hannon. "I can't imagine just shutting the doors. There would be a lot of people hurt."

Techno-Tamaladas: Sharing Food & Dialogue

Last Saturday, July 27, ECAP co-hosted a new event series called the "Techno-Tamaladas," with Oakland-based nonprofit **Pro Arts Gallery** & COMMONS.

"I envision contributing to collective approaches that address the imbalances of wealth," said **Praba Pilar**, the scholar and artist behind Techno-Tamaladas.

Pilar is an Emeryville resident who lives just two blocks from ECAP. She has seen first hand the urgent need for their services.

"Locally, the cost has been wealth inequality, increasing poverty, increasing homelessness of children, gentrification, displacement and extremely damaging impacts on low-income communities," she said.

"I envision contributing to collective approaches that address the imbalances of wealth," said Pilar.

Techno-Tamaladas is the project that Pilar developed during her residency at the Grace Exhibition Space in New York. As part of her residency, she made tamales for her fellow residents. The tamales took almost five hours to make, but it was the resulting conversations that spurred her into action.





Praba Pilar conversates with attendees at Techno-Tamaladas, where she cooked and served over 500 tamales.

"We talked about emerging and different technologies and how they are working and not working," said Pilar. "I wanted to talk about the technologies we use in relation with maize in the Americas as early hybrid technologies."

She wanted a way to take her specialized knowledge and information about technologies and the resurgence of Indigenous, Latinx and African-American communities and share it with the public.

She approached ECAP in late January 2019 with her idea to bring Techno-Tamaladas to their site.

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It all came to fruition in April when Pilar was awarded a grant from the City of Emeryville's Community Grant Program to host her project.

The event on Saturday attracted over 300 people: a mix of low-income folks from the area, individuals from homeless camps, city councilmembers and local artists. More than 500 tamales were



made and served to the community – a worthy contribution to the 200,000 total meals that ECAP will have served by the end of the year.

"I think it's such a vital part of civic and community life here in Emeryville and Oakland," reflected Pilar. "We live here with such heartbreaking mass displacement of people from housing."

ECAP plans to host two more Techno-Tamalades at their site on **August 24** and **September 29**.

Positive Community Reaction to Event

Paul Bosky, a meditation coach living in Oakland, found out about the event through a friend connected to Pilar. He thinks this is the first step people can take to get acquainted with more of their community.

"An event like this is a great place to start because you're not going to start by having somebody [homeless] move into your home, right?," said Bosky. "You're not even gonna start by bringing strangers into your home. You have to start with the dialogue.

"Somebody who's wearing an \$1,000 outfit and somebody who's homeless might both be feeling a little uncomfortable about interaction. But if they eat, they're able to engage and then the humanity shines through."



Mayor Ally Medina and artist-scholar Praba Pilar engage with event attendees on a day that attracted hundreds to ECAP.

Embracing All Technologies to Assist Needs of the Hungry

On the horizon for ECAP is more technology, but not of the edible kind. Hoping to expedite the sign-in process for their customers so that they only need to sign up for their services once, ECAP has begun to digitize. With funds and equipment provided by the Alameda County Community Food Bank, ECAP has made scannable identification cards which are accepted at different community organizations around Alameda County.

This is perhaps one way to marry existing and emerging technologies for a cause helping people who need them most.

Miller is grateful for people like Pilar, who strive for such creative ways to contribute to their town.

"I like people who come here and talk about developing something that helps us become a community and brings us together," said Miller. "We need to coordinate with other organizations – people need two meals a day. Let's see to it that our people get fed every day."

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This story is our contribution to the annual **SF Homeless Project** where dozens of Bay Area media outlets team up for a day of coverage focused on people living on the streets and in shelters.



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ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Sarah Belle Lin has been writing for the better part of her life. Now she is finishing her journalism minor at Cal, reporting for a community newspaper, and freelancing for local media outlets. Sarah has written stories on local government, education, transportation, homelessness, and climate change. Sarah aims to highlight POC narratives and is excited to contribute a fresh perspective to The E'ville Eye.

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