



COMMUNITY COLLABORATION Los Osos Cares Executive Director Linda Quesenberry (left), Yes We Can Peacebuilders Director Ruth Ann Angus (center), and Morro Bay Resource Office Director Sharon O'Leary (right) are working to help the underserved workforce from Morro Bay to Cambria.

BY BULBUL RAJAGOPAL

Seeking solutions

Attending the Undocu Summit at Laguna Middle School on April 2 presented **Los Osos Cares** Executive Director Linda Quesenberry with a startling thought.

"As I was sitting there in my little booth and talked to people, I realized that our area here—from Morro Bay to Cambria—doesn't have a lot of farmworkers," said the longtime farmworker advocate. "So I asked somebody about what happens to the people who are service workers. A lot of the undocumented and documented [service workers] who live in our area are low-income. Are they getting served?"

Though it's common knowledge that the pandemic is disproportionately affecting lower-income communities and people of color in the service industries, little has been done in the Morro Bay, Los Osos, and Cayucos area to assist them, according to Quesenberry. A proponent of Dolores Huerta, United Farm Workers co-founder, Quesenberry especially noticed the lack of resources afforded to Latino workers.

"There isn't any outreach really directed to this particular group of people. For me, because my background is in Latino outreach, I felt like I needed to start something or have an awareness of this," she said. "A lot of them are living in poverty even though they have a job. I found that out through my sister. She was making too much money to buy insurance but not enough money to make Medi-Cal."

Quesenberry and Los Osos Cares aren't alone in their efforts. Joining her are Ruth Ann Angus and Sharon O'Leary, the directors of **Yes We Can Peacebuilders** and the **Morro Bay Resource Office**, respectively. Both Angus and O'Leary noticed problems of invisibility. Even years before COVID-19 hit, O'Leary realized that the Resource Office couldn't reach out to enough Latino people.

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That's why the trio plans to team up to assist those in need. Currently, they're workshopping plans of action ranging from establishing a team of volunteers for door-to-door canvassing to developing a membership of domestic workers.

Angus said she was inspired when she came across two grassroots labor groups called the Western Service Workers Association and the Eastern Service Workers Association (based in Sacramento and Philadelphia, respectively) through a volunteer guide presented by her niece who runs the Commission on Voluntary Service and Action. The associations encourage volunteers comprising low-income workers and others to permanently improve working conditions and fight for their long-term economic interests, including government policies such as workfare, enterprise zones, managed care, and the privatization of public health care resources and school systems. In fact, O'Leary contacted the Western Service Workers Association for organization advice and awareness.

"It turns out they're close by. They sent out a newsletter and publications. They're very interested to come down and visit with us, maybe doing something together because they mostly serve migrant farmworkers," O'Leary said.

Los Osos Cares is presently looking for volunteers to help with their cause. Those interested can meet Quesenberry at Sunnyside School, Room 18, in Los Osos, or reach out to wecareinlososos@gmail.com or (805) 592-2701. Success, according to her, means that underserved individuals will find a safe space in Los Osos Cares and trust the team of volunteers.

"A lot of the underserved don't feel like they're underserved. They don't feel like they're unhoused if they're living in a garage," Quesenberry said. "For me, if they're parents and they can get to the school [Sunnyside], that's good. If they're not and they're working, how do you reach them?"

“We went door to door to motels in Cayucos. I would speak to the people at the front desk and Mayra [Valencia, her colleague] would speak with housekeeping. That’s when we started getting an inkling of what was being missed,” O’Leary said. “At the food bank’s Monday night community dinner, we do have Latino involvement. We have families that come and are growing gradually. But still, they’re maybe half a dozen of the 60 or 70 people that we serve.”

O’Leary said she told the Morro Bay City Council that the city needed to examine poverty conditions. According to Department of Labor data that she found, one-third of the coastal city’s population falls into one of the “three lumps of poverty”—federal, state, or the United Way’s Real Cost Measure levels.

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