

TL's Open Hand joins nonprofit trend to unionize

Workers seek protections while they maintain social safety net

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friend suffering malnutrition along with battling HIV, in 1985 began delivering home-cooked meals to seven neighbors. The Study Center, which publishes Central City Extra, was Open Hand's fiscal sponsor for the first three years until it got its own tax exemption and governing board of directors. Thirty years later, the mission statement of the organization that arose from Brinker's efforts is "to nourish and engage our community by providing meals with love to the sick and elderly."

CEO Mark Ryle said Open Hand has an \$11 million budget, a fourth of it from government agencies. The remainder is raised through private donations. Half of the federal money are Ryan White dollars, the other half is through the U.S. Department of Aging, Ryle said.

Ryle told The Extra that for 20 years, Project Open Hand has had the city's senior congregate meals contracts and now feeds seniors from 23 locations. In District 6, the sites are Curry Senior Center at 333 Turk, Downtown Senior Center at 481 O'Farrell and the Alexis Apartments at 390 Clementina.

Recently, Open Hand began offering breakfast on a trial basis at four sites, including Curry and a Swords to Plowshares service at the Stanford Hotel on Kearny Street.

The nonprofit's financial statement shows last year's budget was \$10.4 million, with \$5.8 million spent on personnel, and \$1.7 million on food-related purchases. The organization says \$4 of every \$5 it spends goes toward program, with 21% devoted to development and management.

Those newly represented by the SEIU at Project Open Hand, Carvallo said, include drivers, cooks, porters and grocery clerk workers who acquire and manage the supplies required for the organization's signature work, providing meals to seniors and the disabled. About 30% of the new union members are senior lunch specialists, who oversee meals alone or in pairs, supervising up to four volunteers at Open Hand's 23 senior lunch sites throughout the city, Carvallo said.

'GROWING EVERY DAY'

"It seems like we're growing every day," Ryle said. Besides HIV, Open Hand now serves people with "nine other critical illness diagnoses to provide medically tailored meals" through its wellness program, he said.

The other half of Project Open Hand's work, its senior program, serves clients who may be diagnosed with diabetes, heart disease, hepatitis C or cancer, he said.

"The significant commonality among all our clients," Ryle said, is that "disease or symptoms are significantly impacted by nutrition."

Between the two programs, Open Hand says, its services are available to people battling: HIV, multiple sclerosis, ALS (Lou Gehrig's disease), diabetes, forms of heart disease, lupus, cancer, hepatitis C, end-stage renal or liver disease, recent major surgery and serious neurological conditions.

"We're the best" at working with HIV patients, he said, and "we got really good at learning to work with other diseases." With HIV patients now surviving longer and becoming seniors, he said, "our client populations are merging."

The contract would cover 4 in 5 of the nonprofit's workforce, Ryle estimated, while cautioning that the agreement as to who is actually management is still being negotiated. But Open Hand has 113 full- and part-time employees, he said, and all but about eight of them work from its four-story 730 Polk St. headquarters, which it owns. Open Hand operates a much smaller program in Oakland.

Project Open Hand occupies the basement, first, second and half of the third floor to store food, prepare meals and distribute groceries. The agency rents out the rest of the building.

Jessica Avalos, Open Hand vice president of human resources, told The Extra that at least three managers and 25 employees are assigned to the Senior Lunch Program. Twenty-seven more are dedicated to running "food operations," which she said includes food production and distribution, which means drivers, cooks and porters.

"The number of employees at Project Open Hand varies from day to day," Carvallo wrote The Extra. "There is a high turnover rate and constant flux with the hiring and retraining of replacements. This is an example of the type of issue the employees are trying to address by having a union and a contract."

"Having a constant turnover ... adds to the stress level in an already stressful environment," Carvallo said. "Generally speaking, workers can come in on day one and make more than someone in the same position who has been employed for several years; in addition there is not a set wage scale for specific job functions. With a union contract, wages are negotiated and set for entry level and go up with time for merit raises — something currently not available."

COMPENSATION ISSUES

"Many of the porters and senior lunch program coordinators, which are mostly part-time positions," SEIU nonprofit organizer Clark said, "were working two jobs during the organizing effort. There was a definite trend of longer-term employees, those working 10-plus years, that were making less per hour than new hires. With the exception of the city minimum wage increase, the majority of frontline staff had not had a pay increase in several years and were told 'there is no money in the budget.' Management was able to pick and choose who received raises and who did not."

And the mission continued to expand, Clark said, citing Open Hand's breakfast program, which nearly doubled in scope last year at Curry when the menu went from providing coffee and toast with peanut butter to adding oatmeal and other hot cereals, scrambled eggs, granola and yogurt. The 100 breakfasts a day soared to 189, the Open Hand Website says.

"The addition of the breakfast program did not affect the hourly pay of the senior lunch program coordinators, though their work duties increased," Clark wrote The Extra. "They were not included in the decision process nor given additional volunteers to support the programs. One coordinator was hurt on the job due to having to lift all of the heavy equipment and serve meals alone. The combination of increasing work duties while remaining understaffed has a significant impact on safety in the workplace."

"The SLP coordinators constantly made complaints to management of not having enough support and gave feedback on what was not working in their programs, and their feedback was not taken into account. I heard several instances of employees being disciplined on the floor in front of the coworkers."

In a management move in early 2015, after years of professing the organization couldn't afford raises for the rank-and-file, the board decided that, when \$200,000-a-year CEO Kevin Winge left, they'd promote Associate Executive Directors Ryle and Simon Pitchford to co-CEOs and pay each \$165,000. That's what Open Hand spokeswoman Maria Stokes told the Bay Area Reporter last March.

Pitchford had been at Open Hand about three years, tasked with opera-

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Jacqueline Carvallo
ORGANIZER SEIU LOCAL 1021

tions, Ryle with "client experience." Ryle previously had been clinical director at Huckleberry Youth Programs. The unusual management model meant that Open Hand was willing to pay its two execs \$330,000 a year to run the organization, though many employees had not had a raise in more than five years, according to Carvallo.

"I would say that having multiple CEOs was not the best decision made," she wrote The Extra.

"Changes come from the bottom, the front-line staff," said Jesse Hunter, a residential counselor at Baker Places — a longtime SEIU unit, but one whose relief workers were only brought into the fold in September. "The people on the front lines really have the perspective" on organizational needs, such as "identifying changes to our intake and orientation process to better support clients in the transition from acute diversionary units into transitional facilities," he said.

Hunter, who's leaving Baker Places for the East Bay public sector, described what he perceives as a three-tier labor force in social work: public sector civil service workers, unionized nonprofit workers and nonunion nonprofit workers.

'CITY IS SAVING MONEY'

"As more and more contracts are gravitating from city employees to nonprofit contractors, the city is saving money," he said. "But if they don't adequately fund the nonprofits, what they're doing is hollowing out the safety-net services."

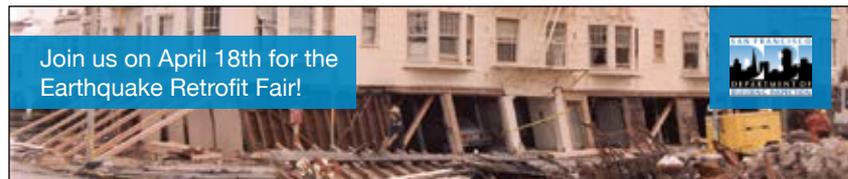
City workers, he said, are well-funded and have negotiating power. Unionized nonprofits have to compete with non-union nonprofits for city contracts.

It's been "nearly impossible to retain staff or maintain staffing" at pay scales they were forced to offer, of less than \$10 hourly.

"I've seen case managers at Health

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