

In the East Bay, a fresh start for the formerly incarcerated

Dig Deep Farms, a nonprofit run through Alameda County Sheriff's Office, tackles food insecurity, grows local produce and provides on-the-job training for parolees

By **DYLAN BOUSCHER** | Bay Area News Group

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Kim Thomas knew she wanted to be with her daughter again when she was released from Santa Rita Jail.

So she talked to a case manager at the county's Youth and Family Services Bureau about her options after she finished a parenting class and a family reunification program.

"I knew that I wanted to change my life. ... I wanted something better.

"I was at the wrong place at the wrong time, did some things. How I got here was — because I was broken," she said.

She became the first intern at Dig Deep Farms, a nonprofit run through the Deputy Sheriffs' Activities League that's dedicated to growing healthier food locally and distributing it as medicine to those in need.

She completed the internship and rose through the ranks to become a "farmer" in 2019, setting up produce stands at wellness centers and filling prescriptions using MediCal and CalFresh vouchers to improve nutrition among patients. She is now food hub co-director.



SAN LEANDRO, CA – AUGUST 25: Kimberly Thomas, director of the Alameda County Deputy Sheriffs Activities League Food Hub poses for a photograph on Thursday, Aug. 25, 2022, in San Leandro Calif. Thomas, who served jail time at the sheriff department's Santa Rita facility worked her way from intern to director of the Food Hub. The Alameda County Deputy Sheriffs Activities League is currently growing food on over 90 acres at multiple sites with their urban farming program. (Aric Crabb/Bay Area News Group)

The Oakland resident co-directs 17 parolees at the food hub in San Leandro as they complete 520 hours of on-the-job training.

Some of the parolees spend their paid internships repacking produce recovered from at least seven local businesses and organizations and then delivering it across Alameda County.

"My team ... could be out there committing more crimes, robbing stores. But they're not; they're here packing food," Thomas said.

Patrick Worrell-Facey, a shift lead driver at the organization, served 15 months in jail.

"I came out here with the mindset that I wanted something different," Worrell-Facey said in a video promoting the nonprofit. "I'm making sure that I'm healing my community and making sure people get food."

Worrell-Facey is one of five drivers who deliver food to residents in need. Thomas says 24 drivers help distribute not only produce that Dig Deep grows, but also pick up food donated by local restaurants and businesses.



"Kim takes each of us on a weekly basis and has a conversation about how we can improve not only our characters but our job performance," Lewis said. "Wouldn't you rather have a job and a skillset versus going back to the streets?"



SAN LEANDRO, CA – AUGUST 25: Joe Lewis poses for a photograph at the Alameda County Deputy Sheriffs Activities League Food Hub on Thursday, Aug. 25, 2022, in San Leandro Calif. Lewis is working full time at the Food Hub while on pre-trial probation. The Alameda County Deputy Sheriffs Activities League is currently growing food on over 90 acres at multiple sites with their urban farming program. (Aric Crabb/Bay Area News Group)

Thomas shared a bit of the wisdom she imparts in those meetings: "I always tell them: Just because you have a record does not mean you are a bad person."

On a recent Thursday, while Lewis and other parolees loaded hundreds of bags with beets, carrots, collard greens, green onions and lemons to fill that week's Food as Medicine prescriptions, they also packed another 200 bags as "One More Chance" by Biggie Smalls played in the background. The groceries in those bags fed about 250 more families in a food distribution program.

Sandy and Larry Neetz, Castro Valley residents who pick up produce for three neighbors, rolled up before Lewis and the crew finished packing the grocery bags.

"Are those beets?" Sandy Neetz asked Lewis as he handed them two bags of groceries.

"Sure are," Lewis said. "Oh, we got some peaches. You want some peaches?"

"Oh yeah, I got an old lady who wants some old peaches, wants to make some jam," Sandy nodded.

The Neetzes found out about Dig Deep Farms through word of mouth.

"I think it's a wonderful thing. It's great. They do a great job. They're all nice," Sandy said. "[The parolees] need help to get back into society, too."





SAN LEANDRO, CA – AUGUST 18: Food Hub worker Joe Lewis sorts vegetables for the Alameda County Deputy Sheriffs Activities League food recovery program on Thursday, Aug. 18, 2022, in San Leandro Calif. The Alameda County Deputy Sheriffs Activities League is currently growing food on over 90 acres at multiple sites with their urban farming program. (Aric Crabb/Bay Area News Group)



SAN LEANDRO, CA – AUGUST 18: Kenny Markham, right, of Aurora Catering works with team members in the commercial kitchen of the Alameda County Deputy Sheriffs Activities League Food Hub on Thursday, Aug. 18, 2022, in San Leandro Calif. The Alameda County Deputy Sheriffs Activities League is currently growing food on over 90 acres at multiple sites with their urban farming program. (Aric Crabb/Bay Area News Group)



The food hub is one of six Dig Deep urban farms staffed by parolees, also known as AB-109 recipients. Parolees starting as interns either tend crops at one of Dig Deep's farms — the newest being a 50-acre site leased for the next five years at Ardenwood Farm in Fremont that opened in August — or pack and deliver the produce.



FREMONT, CA – AUGUST 25: Farm manager Brent Walker works on a plot of land at Ardenwood Historic Farm on Thursday, Aug. 25, 2022, in Fremont, Calif. The Alameda County Deputy Sheriffs Activities League's Dig Deep Farm is operating 50 acres of land at the park. (Aric Crabb/Bay Area News Group)

The money to pay trainees \$20 an hour is funding that resulted from a 2011 public safety realignment law. It shifted incarceration and supervision for many lower-level felons from overcrowded state prisons to county sheriffs' and probation departments.

Dig Deep Farms, which now includes almost 100 acres, was founded in 2010 to strike at the intersection of crime, food insecurity, poverty, and public health and safety issues in the unincorporated, working-class Ashland and Cherryland neighborhoods.





SAN LEANDRO, CA – AUGUST 22: Niran Bunlert, senior farmer at Dig Deep Farms harvests vegetables on Monday, Aug. 22, 2022, in San Leandro Calif. The Alameda County Deputy Sheriffs Activities League is currently growing food on over 90 acres at multiple sites with their urban farming program. (Aric Crabb/Bay Area News Group)



SAN LEANDRO, CA – AUGUST 22: Niran Bunlert, senior farmer at Dig Deep Farms harvests duck eggs on Monday, Aug. 22, 2022, in San Leandro Calif. The Alameda County Deputy Sheriffs Activities League is currently growing food on over 90 acres at multiple sites with their urban farming program. (Aric Crabb/Bay Area News Group)





SAN LEANDRO, CA – AUGUST 22: Niran Bunlert, senior farmer at Dig Deep Farms harvests vegetables on Monday, Aug. 22, 2022, in San Leandro Calif. The Alameda County Deputy Sheriffs Activities League is currently growing food on over 90 acres at multiple sites with their urban farming program. (Aric Crabb/Bay Area News Group)

Ashland and Cherryland still have higher rates of poverty and unemployment than other nearby communities, while residents also suffer poorer health outcomes, including higher rates of asthma, diabetes, childhood obesity and heart disease, according to the Alameda County — Oakland Community Action Partnership.

Martin Neideffer, an Alameda County Sheriff's captain in charge of the Youth and Family Services Bureau that administers the league's programs, grew up in these neighborhoods.

"There's a lot of overlapping health, economic, justice-related issues. If this nonprofit's going to be set up to address that, you have to address that economic element to be credible," Neideffer said, adding that the organization he champions is working to address all the issues.

The Deputy Sheriff's Activities League oversees Dig Deep and other programs. The league's programs are focused on improving people's lives in Ashland and Cherryland and include a recreational soccer league and boxing classes and other youth and family services.

Hilary Bass is league executive director.

"We believe that creating jobs for local people and making people healthy *is* the path to safety," Bass said in the nonprofit's promotional video.

What started with a quarter-acre plot of herbs, vegetables and other produce grown beside a fire station on 164th Avenue more than a decade ago is now an operation that weekly fills 500 to 700 bags of groceries and produce for county residents.





SAN LEANDRO, CA – AUGUST 22: Niran Bunlert, senior farmer at Dig Deep Farms washes vegetables for a food order on Monday, Aug. 22, 2022, in San Leandro Calif. The Alameda County Deputy Sheriffs Activities League is currently growing food on over 90 acres at multiple sites with their urban farming program. (Aric Crabb/Bay Area News Group)





SAN LEANDRO, CA – AUGUST 22: Niran Bunlert, senior farmer at Dig Deep Farms harvests vegetables on Monday, Aug. 22, 2022, in San Leandro Calif. The Alameda County Deputy Sheriffs Activities League is currently growing food on over 90 acres at multiple sites with their urban farming program. (Aric Crabb/Bay Area News Group)

So is the reform that makes Dig Deep Farms possible working?

Of the 8,537 Alameda County parolees who took part in programs funded by AB-109, such as Dig Deep Farms, 38% were convicted of more crimes within three years, compared with 40% of those with more limited access to AB 109-funded services, according to Resource Development Associates, an Oakland consulting firm.

California's recidivism rate remains steady at about 44.6%, according to the state's Rehabilitation Oversight Board.

Ashland's 12.9% and Cherryland's 8% poverty rates are still above the county's 5.8% rate. Nearly 13,000 people in the county's unincorporated areas live in poverty, defined as a family of four surviving on less than \$26,500 annually.

However, according to Census data, poverty has declined in the unincorporated neighborhoods. Ashland's poverty rate today is down from 16.7% between 2011 and 2015, while Cherryland's dropped from 20.5%.

In the 12 years Dig Deep Farms has fed residents, the county's food insecurity rate also has plummeted, from 16.2% in 2011 to 9.3% in 2020. That's still above the state's rate, which was 9.1% in 2020, according to hunger relief organization Feeding America.

Thomas is resolute in her commitment to helping others get back into society while facing head-on the multitude of challenges in unincorporated Alameda County.

"Now I'm able to help individuals who were just like me, who didn't have a voice. I have a voice now. I'm going to use it."

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Dylan J. Bouscher is a multimedia editor focused on breaking news and telling stories in words, photos and videos. Previously, he produced, scripted and edited national and world news and local entertainment videos for LA Times, Chicago Tribune and Sun Sentinel newspapers. He is a meddling kid turned Florida Man, made in Miami and now running Bay Area trails off-the-clock.

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