



# Mealtimes



Cover Story

## A Fresh Start

On a sunny Thursday morning, Vivian can be found sharing a meal and lively conversation with her friends at the Downtown Senior Center.

The Center, one of eleven Community Nutrition Program (CNP) sites supported by Project Open Hand, serves as a haven for people seeking nourishment, physically and emotionally.

Each day, these locations provide warm, nutritious meals to hundreds of community members throughout San Francisco.

In the past year alone, Project Open Hand has provided more than 335,000 meals at these CNP sites.

For Vivian, the Downtown Senior Center has become a vital part of her life. “I come here for the community,” she says. “Being here helps me stay active, both physically and mentally.”



Vivian reading the menu at the Center

Vivian never imagined she’d one day come to rely on a program like this.

After a stretch of unemployment, Vivian found herself struggling to regain her footing.

Seeking support, she turned to the meal program at the Center and discovered much more than just a healthy meal: “This place helped me focus on the present instead of dwelling

on the past or worrying about the future,” she explains. “Coming here has given me hope and a renewed sense of purpose.”

Before joining the program, Vivian’s diet often consisted of quick, unhealthy options like fast food, pizza, and burritos – convenient choices that left her feeling lethargic and unwell. But the wholesome, balanced meals provided by Project Open Hand inspired her to rethink her relationship with food.

Now, she is mindful of her choices, using less sugar and salt in her cooking, and she is focused on meals that support her overall health.

**“It’s about more than food. It’s about finding a place where you can thrive.”**

The changes have been remarkable. Vivian’s cholesterol has dropped by an impressive 100 points, and her blood pressure and oxygen levels are now back to normal. Even her doctor was impressed by her transformation, praising the impact of her improved diet and expressing curiosity about the meals she enjoys at the Center.

Vivian’s favorite foods at the Center include turkey meatballs, salmon, fresh salads, and seasonal fruits, which she describes as both delicious and satisfying.

Beyond the food, Vivian says she values the sense of connection she’s found here: “The community here is so important,” she says. “It keeps me engaged and gives me something to look forward to each day.”

Sharing meals and conversations with other people at the Center provides her with a strong support system,

reinforcing her commitment to both her physical and emotional well-being.

Reflecting on her journey, Vivian feels deep gratitude for the role Project Open Hand has played in her life: “You have the privilege and honor to serve the community,” she says. “Programs like this are so important for people like me who need a place to feel supported and cared for.”

As Project Open Hand enters its fourth decade of service in San Francisco and the greater Bay Area, stories like Vivian’s underscore the transformative impact of our mission to improve the health outcomes and quality of life of our community members.

For Vivian, the Community Nutrition Program at the Center is far more than a source of nutritious meals – it’s a

place where she has rediscovered hope, health, and a sense of belonging. The program not only supports her physical wellness but also reminds her that she is part of a community that values and uplifts her.

And because of your ongoing support, real life stories of recovery and redemption just like Vivian’s can be heard over a nutritious meal at any of our Community Nutrition Program meal sites throughout San Francisco.

To find the nearest CNP site to you, or to help more clients like Vivian, go to [www.openhand.org/cnp](http://www.openhand.org/cnp)

by Erika Wong, Associate Director, Community Nutrition Program





## Paul's Letter

Dear Friend,

This year marks our 40th anniversary, a testament to the legacy and impact of this amazing organization.

This is made possible because of you and friends like you.

I wonder if our founder Ruth Brinker could have ever imagined the movement Project Open Hand would grow into: Since its founding in 1985, Project Open Hand has served over 30 million meals.

While the thousands of people living with HIV/AIDS we serve every year are living longer, healthier lives, secondary chronic health conditions have become more prominent and difficult to manage for many.

Today, nearly 60% of our Wellness Program clients are living with HIV/AIDS and that's why our medically tailored meals remain a critical intervention to help delay serious conditions like heart disease and end-stage renal disease.

And we continue to expand support to those who are battling other life-threatening illnesses such as cancer

and kidney disease, as well as address the challenges of aging.

Today, Ruth's vision of *meals with love* is more alive than ever before, and it remains this motivating force behind everything we do.

Last year, we celebrated becoming the first organization in Northern California to achieve accreditation through the Food Is Medicine Coalition.

These rigorous nutrition, operation, and counseling standards are a signal to our community, policy makers, health care partners, and clients that we are deeply committed to a high level of service they can trust.

Through evidence-based nutrition and innovation, we continue to put our clients' needs first; sustainable, local, and culturally appropriate foods; client dignity and choice through self-shopping; advancing and educating public policy that supports the Food Is Medicine movement; and a team of expert registered dietitians who help transform lives.

Whether our clients pick up food at one of our Grocery Centers or mobile

locations, receive home-delivered meals, or enjoy meals at one of our eleven Community Nutrition Program sites, we remain dedicated to providing food with love, a friendly face, and community.

Each and every one of us are stewards of Ruth's vision - the belief that we can make a difference for our neighbors in need.

With your help, we get to work every day to ensure that no one living with a critical illness has to go without a nutritious meal with love.

Celebrations for our 40th anniversary will be ongoing throughout the year, and we hope you will join us.

Thank you for your continued support and investment in the future of this organization, and for joining us on this journey.

**Paul Hepfer**  
Chief Executive Officer



## 32<sup>nd</sup> Annual Hand to Hand Marks Another Year of Accomplishment at Project Open Hand



Despite historic levels of rain fall in the Bay Area throughout the week, hundreds of Project Open Hand supporters turned out to support the 32nd annual Hand to Hand Gala on Friday, November 22.

Held at the Hibernia in downtown San Francisco for the third year in a row, attendees were treated to an evening filled with local, nutritious food, as well as music, entertainment, and the celebration of our amazing community.

Speakers during the event included Paul Dressel, nephew of the late Jon Borset, to present the Jon Borset Award For Service; Project Open Hand's Vice President of Wellness Programs, Ana Ayala; and Project Open Hand CEO, Paul Hepfer, who presented the Ruth Brinker Visionary Award to international nonprofit World Central Kitchen. Chef Wendy Escobedo, Manager of Culinary Operations, accepted the award on behalf of the organization.

We extend our special thanks to The Bread Project, who hosted the event in community partnership with us, as well as Master Chef Sponsor the Goldman Foundation, and all the donors, board members, and Project Open Hand staff and volunteers who help to put on this amazing event year after year.

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**Project Open Hand**  
40 years of meals with love

*Project Open Hand's mission is to improve health outcomes and quality of life by providing nutritious meals to the sick and vulnerable, caring for and educating our community.*

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**FOOD=LOVE**



## Community

# Spotlight: Bridging Nutrition and Accessibility in the East Bay

Did you know that the East Bay contains over 1,400 square miles and is home to nearly three million people? Each year, Project Open Hand serves thousands of these people living in Alameda and Contra Costa counties through our Oakland Grocery Center. Because of this wide reach, our team is laser-focused on meeting the many diverse needs of this community.

Unlike San Francisco’s relatively compact service area, Project Open Hand’s East Bay operations cover both Alameda and Contra Costa counties – regions that include a patchwork of urban and rural areas. Clients often face long commutes, have limited public transit options, and mobility impairments that make it more challenging to access essential services.

Also, the need for culturally relevant resources means that our East Bay team must use innovative strategies to empower our clients to take control of their health. That’s why the East Bay team has embraced telehealth consultations, personalized grocery programs, and local partnerships to ensure that no client is left behind.

Oakland-based Project Open Hand Registered Dietitian Ryan Farquhar explains why telehealth has become a vital tool for client care: “Because of the wide area we serve, many of our clients prefer telehealth. It’s more convenient and allows us to provide consistent support, even for those with transportation barriers.”

The option to connect via phone or video not only ensures accessibility but also fosters a deeper connection between clients and dietitians. This level of adaptability is particularly important in the East Bay, where needs vary greatly between urban hubs like Oakland and smaller, more remote communities.

### Grocery Shopping in East Bay

One of the standout features at the East Bay location is the self-serve grocery program, which debuted with the Oakland office remodel in May 2023. Unlike in San Francisco, where staff shop for clients at our Grocery Center, East Bay clients can select their own items using their own shopping carts. Recipe cards and supplements are also provided to help clients maximize the benefits of their selections. “Self-shopping gives our clients a sense of autonomy,” says Ryan. “It’s more than just getting food—it’s about giving people the dignity of choice, which can be a huge confidence boost.”

### Culturally Informed Care

The East Bay’s population is also demographically distinct, with a predominantly Spanish-speaking client base. This contrasts with San Francisco’s Cantonese-speaking majority. The East Bay team tailors its services to ensure culturally relevant support to the community.



Project Open Hand Team outside of the East Bay office during Oakland Pride.

“We make sure our clients have access to foods that are familiar and meaningful to them,” Ryan notes. “When that isn’t possible, we provide recipes and guidance to help them incorporate new ingredients into their meals.”

### Building Bridges to Long-Term Health

While immediate food assistance is crucial, our East Bay team focuses on equipping clients with tools for their long-term well-being.

The team also strives to establish stronger community partnerships, creating smoother transitions for clients who need housing support, CalFresh enrollment, or other services.

“We want to move beyond just handing out information,” Ryan explains. “Our goal is to build a network of reliable referrals, so clients feel supported every step of the way.”

From its expansive telehealth program to its empowering self-shopping model, Project Open Hand’s East Bay location embodies innovation tailored to the region’s unique challenges. By meeting clients where they are—geographically, culturally, and emotionally—the team ensures that every client receives not just food, but the tools and encouragement they need to thrive.

Through all these efforts, Project Open Hand’s East Bay team stands out as a model of adaptability and client-centered care, proving that even in a region as vast and varied as the East Bay, compassion and innovation can bridge the gap to better health.

This is only possible because of the continued support from people like you. Thank you!

by Grace Cho, Marketing and Communications Team



# Project Open Hand Plate Clubs

**Make a difference.** MealTimes offers special acknowledgment to Project Open Hand supporters who have made gifts totaling \$1,000 or more from July 1, 2024 through September 30, 2024. If you have questions about this list, please contact [donations@openhand.org](mailto:donations@openhand.org) or 415-447-2300.

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To learn more about The Supper Club, visit: [openhand.org/give/supper-club](https://openhand.org/give/supper-club).





From Our Kitchen to Yours

## Chicken and Autumn Vegetable Stew

This recipe was originally featured in Project Open Hand's 1996 cookbook, *Comforting Foods: Feel-good recipes from America's top chefs*. This book included over 150 meals submitted by chefs across the country to support Project Open Hand. This recipe was submitted by Sarah Stegner of The Dining Room at The Ritz-Carlton in Chicago. It has been adapted for a smaller serving size.

### Ingredients

Serves 2 to 3

- One 2 ½-pound chicken, cut into pieces, rinsed, and patted dry
- 1 medium-size red onion
- ½ large butternut squash
- ½ large red bell pepper chopped
- 2 large garlic cloves, finely chopped
- 1 medium-size zucchini, cut into ½-inch dice
- 1 Granny Smith apple, halved, peeled, and cut into ½-inch dice
- 2 cups chicken stock
- 1 tablespoon olive oil
- 1 tablespoon fresh thyme leaves, finely chopped
- Salt to taste
- 1 tablespoon coarsely cracked black pepper

### Directions

1. Season the chicken pieces with salt and rub them all over with the thyme. Set aside to marinate at room temperature while you prepare the vegetables.
2. Peel the onions and cut each into 8 wedges.
3. Cut the squash in half, peel it, and scrape out the seeds and fibers; cut the flesh into ½-inch dice.
4. Halve, stem, and seed the bell pepper. Cut it into ½-inch dice.
5. Heat the oil in a large skillet over medium-high heat.
6. Add the chicken pieces, in batches if necessary to prevent overcrowding, and cook, turning them once until evenly gold brown. (Approximately 4-5 minutes per side.)
7. Remove the chicken and set aside.
8. Add the onions, squash, and bell pepper to the pan. Season to taste with salt and cook, stirring, until slightly browned. (Approximately 5-7 minutes.)
9. Add the garlic and continue cooking, stirring until it is tender. (Approximately 4-5 minutes more.)
10. Add the stock and black pepper to the skillet. Add the chicken back to the skillet, nestling it down in the liquid.
11. Bring the liquid to a boil over high heat, then reduce it to low. Simmer gently until the chicken is cooked through, tender, and the liquid has reduced by about half. (Approximately 30-40 minutes more.)
12. Add the zucchini and apples to the skillet and continue simmering until the zucchini is tender, about 5-7 minutes. Add salt and pepper to taste.



**Tip from our Nutrition Team:** Serve this paired with a whole grain like brown rice, quinoa, or barley for a balanced meal. Enjoy!

# MealTimes



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A Fresh Start

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