Giving Season

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Briefcase

GIVING BACK

• The PG&E Corporation Foundation has donated $250,000 to the California Association of Food Banks' Emergency Response Fund to help alleviate the pressure food banks are facing because of record-breaking demand — the highest seen since the pandemic — caused by the federal government shutdown and the SNAP (CalFresh) benefit delays. The grant will go to 38 food banks across the state, including some here on the Central Coast like: Food Bank for Monterey County receiving $6,670, the Community Food Bank of San Benito County receiving $2,950, the Food Bank Coalition of San Luis Obispo County receiving $4,430, the Second Harvest Food Bank Serving Santa Cruz receiving $4,720 and the Food Bank of Santa Barbara County receiving $5,760. Learn more at cafoodbanks.org/get-involved/emergency-response-fund/.

• General Store Paso Robles celebrated its 13th birthday over the Thanksgiving weekend and did so by donating 10% of all sales made over the four-day holiday to the El Camino Homeless Organization.

• Bank of the Sierra announced that it has donated more than $5 million to organizations in its communities through its Sierra Grant Program. Since the program's inception in 2004, more than 1,900 grants have been awarded. During the second and third quarters of 2025, Bank of the Sierra donated $315,000 to organizations in its communities through its Sierra Grant program. From April to September 2025, Bank of the Sierra awarded a total of $219,500 in grants to 34 Central Valley organizations, $55,000 to 24 organizations in the Bank's Coastal and Southern California footprint, and $40,500 to 5 organizations that offer services in both regions. This includes donations to over 20 nonprofits based on the Central Coast, including 10 from Ventura County, eight from SLO County and five from Santa Barbara County.

CELEBRATE GOOD TIMES

Community Action of Ventura County, which has been named the California nonprofit of the year, is celebrating the honor with the local community, inviting everybody to a celebration ceremony on Dec. 11 from 5:30 p.m. to 6:30 p.m. at the Wagon Wheel Brewing Company in Oxnard.

BIG DREAMS

Big Brothers Big Sisters of Ventura County hosted its inaugural Big Dreams Gala on Nov. 8 at Las Posas Country Club in Camarillo. Proceeds from the event directly benefited BBSVC's vital youth mentoring programs across Ventura County. The ESCO Foundation attended the event in order to present a gift of $15,000 in support of BBSVC's youth mentoring programs in the greater Oxnard and Port Hueneme areas.

STATE OF PHILANTHROPY Roundtable

MEET THE PANEL



Vanessa Bechtel
CEO and President
Ventura County Community Foundation



Christine Dawson
CEO, Community Foundation San Luis Obispo County



Jackie Carrera
CEO and President
Santa Barbara Foundation

For our 2025 State of Philanthropy roundtable, we welcome Christine Dawson, CEO of Community Foundation San Luis Obispo County, to the panel. She joins Ventura County Community Foundation CEO Vanessa Bechtel and Jackie Carrera, president and CEO of the Santa Barbara Foundation. Our Q&A session was conducted via email over Thanksgiving week by Business Times Founder Henry Dubroff. It has been lightly edited.

Q1: We're witnessing an extreme pullback in federal support for many programs and the state budget is tight. What are some areas where you think philanthropy can make a difference to our communities?

Christine: We are living through one of the most challenging moments our local nonprofit sector has faced in decades. As state and federal dollars shrink, organizations providing food, housing, childcare, and mental health services are being asked to do more, with dramatically less. Many are seeing 30–50% cuts to essential revenue streams at the exact moment demand continues to surge. The safety net is fraying, and the consequences are real for families in every corner of the Central Coast.

Vanessa: So many ways! Some of the most meaningful opportunities lie in strengthening the systems that support children and families. Supporting collective community efforts like the Isabella Project, which is working to expand access to high-quality early childhood education and ensuring that frontline nonprofits have the unrestricted cash flow they need to stay stable can make a tremendous difference. Philanthropy is uniquely positioned to move quickly, offer flexible funding, and bring people together across agencies and sectors. Our ability to convene is truly a superpower and given the complexity of what we are facing as a region, it is needed now more than ever. I'm also increasingly optimistic about the impact of innovative tools like Robotic Process Automation and artificial intelligence. I've seen how these technologies help nonprofits streamline administrative work so their teams can devote more time to mission and meaningful donor or client engagement.

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>
> **Christine Dawson**
> *CEO of The Community Foundation SLO County*

Jackie: This is such a challenging time for many individuals and families, and for the nonprofits that provide essential services to them. The hardest part is the volatility and uncertainty. People don't know if they'll have sufficient food for their children, access to health care, legal support to protect them from unlawful enforcement actions, or childcare so they can go to work to provide for their families. Nonprofits don't know whether their federal or state contracts and grants will be fulfilled, and if /when they will need to lay off all or part of their workforce. Philanthropic contributions can provide much-needed unrestricted funds so nonprofits can use them where they are needed most, which can depend on each organization's unique situation. Donating to organizations that provide food, shelter, safety, healthcare, mental health services, childcare, and immigrant services can make a big difference right now. Community foundations, like ours, support donors who want to make a difference in their communities, especially during times like these.

Q2: What gives you hope that some of our most dire problems can be addressed with some new thinking and perhaps some innovative approaches to community support?

Vanessa: What gives me hope is seeing what Dr. Kathleen Allen describes as "webs of anti-causality," referring to the intentional and collaborative efforts that interrupt patterns of harm and make space for new possibilities. We need these webs because so many of today's challenges are fueled by fear, scarcity, and isolation. When people feel overwhelmed, their world narrows. But as Dr. Allen reminds us, when compassion, connection, and solidarity emerge, entirely new solutions become possible. Here in Ventura County, we see this through the Ventura County Neighbors Support Coalition, where hundreds of neighbors and trusted partners unite to provide direct financial relief to nonprofits that are supporting local businesses, keeping students in school, and helping families in crisis. It is a powerful example of what happens when our community refuses to look away and instead steps forward with shared purpose. Please learn more at vccf.org. What gives me hope is the strength of that collective vision. When local government, businesses, nonprofits, and everyday residents come together, rooted in empathy and shared responsibility, there is truly nothing more powerful. It is in these moments of unity that innovation, healing, and lasting change take root.

Jackie: Santa Barbara County is a very generous community. In times of crisis, our neighbors step up to help one

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ROUNDTABLE

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another, such as the volunteers clearing debris after the 1/9 debris flow, or collecting, packaging, or serving food at various food-related organizations, or providing vaccines at health clinics during COVID, or contributing to disaster funds to support nonprofits as they work tirelessly to meet needs in times of crisis. Whatever it takes. Our county's compassion gives me hope. Recently, I was moved by the speed at which donors raised their hands to support the Critical Needs Response Fund created by the Santa Barbara Foundation in mid-September. In a few short weeks, the fund had nearly $1 million and is offering short-term, timely support to nonprofit organizations that are experiencing financial disruptions due to changes in federal or public funding and/or are experiencing an increase in demand for services due to policy shifts. Dozens of grants ranging from $10,000 to $50,000 have been made to help bridge budget gaps so services can continue to support those who need it most.

Christine: Philanthropy will never replace government funding, but it can move quickly to fill gaps in essential services. Community foundations are uniquely positioned to convene partners, coordinate support, and deploy flexible capital where it's needed most. Through efforts like Together for SLO County: A Critical Response Fund, we're aligning public, private, and philanthropic dollars to stabilize the safety net and strengthen long-term capacity. When philanthropy acts as both connector and convener, we keep critical services running, attract matching resources, and help our communities navigate these challenges with far more resilience. In San Luis Obispo County, I'm seeing a real shift in how we problem-solve. Funders are collaborating rather than working in silos, local government is stepping into co-investment roles, and nonprofits are sharing data and lessons learned. As the new CEO, it's an honor to step into this role and serve a community that truly shows up for one another. That alone changes the game. Yes, the challenges are real — from housing affordability, childcare shortages, behavioral health, and food insecurity, but when we bring people to the same table, creative solutions and unexpected partnerships emerge. Philanthropy is leaning into innovation through mission-related investments, pooled funds, flexible grants, and community-led approaches. When you combine that creativity with real dollars and a sense of urgency, real solutions emerge. And that gives me tremendous hope for SLO County's future.

Q3: What's your advice for leaders of other nonprofits, especially small community-based organizations, who are trying to cope with disruption and budget stress?

Jackie: First, plan. Run multiple "if/then" scenarios so you are prepared to make the best decisions for your organization when the time comes. Santa Barbara County organizations that need guidance in this area are encouraged to reach out to the Santa Barbara Foundation's Collaboration for Social Impact, which offers names of consultants, best practices, and possibly, financial assistance to retain needed expertise. Second, communicate. Everywhere I turn, people are trying to understand how our community is being affected by budget cuts and policy changes. Don't be afraid to explain how your clients and organizations are being affected. Donors are more likely to direct their contributions to meet your resource needs if they are informed. Third, partner. If you are leading a small organization that is facing budget disruptions and/or an increase in service requests as a result of policy changes, chances are that larger organizations that provide similar services are, too. Reach out to find out how they are approaching their challenges. Perhaps there is an opportunity to partner to maximize resources or bridge gaps. Finally, prioritize wellness. There is no easy way to escape the stress from this disruption. Nonprofits are reporting that staff wellness is their #1 concern. Prioritizing staff wellness will ensure staff will be sustained and able to be responsive in the long run.

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>
> **Jackie Carrera**
> *CEO of Santa Barbara Foundation*

Vanessa: As many of you may remember, we faced our own challenges just over a decade ago. I learned from that experience that the greatest gifts you can give your organization, and your mission, are complete transparency about the challenges you are facing, a willingness to listen, and a deep understanding of your insurance and risk profile. I also learned that time can be an extraordinary gift. You do not need to have all the answers right away. When you steady the moment and allow space for thoughtful decision-making, solutions often reveal themselves. The work of our nonprofit sector is far from easy, and it carries profound responsibility. All of us share in the duty to ensure that no one in our region goes hungry, that families are safe, and that children can pursue their dreams and have the strongest start in life. When we are honest about the pressures we face, we give our community its best opportunity to help. Please remember that you do not have to navigate these stresses alone.

Christine: Start with your mission. This is a moment for absolute clarity and purpose. Know which programs genuinely move the needle, which partnerships strengthen your work, and which expenses simply aren't worth carrying anymore. Be transparent with donors and funders; honesty builds trust, and trust attracts investment. Collaborations, shared staffing models, and back-office partnerships aren't signs of weakness; they're smart strategies. In SLO County, we stand ready to help nonprofits stabilize, plan, and explore new approaches. The organizations that stay focused, nimble, and willing to evolve will not only survive this period, but they'll also emerge stronger, more resilient, and better positioned to serve our community for the long haul.

Q4: How about a topic you feel strongly about, or perhaps take a longer-term view of the role of a community foundation?

Vanessa: I often think about the fact that community foundations are here for good, forever. It is extraordinary when you pause and consider it. Throughout our region, tens of thousands of donors have contributed to their local community foundations, and the philanthropic capital they have entrusted to us will serve generations far beyond our own. Because of this, we are afforded the rare ability to take a truly generational view. We can plant seeds today that will continue to grow decades from now. We can support early childhood education, strengthen local journalism, provide scholarships to students, and promote disaster resilience in ways that endure. We can help stabilize nonprofits, nurture community leadership, and invest in systems change work that is effective but takes time. At our best, community foundations hold the long arc of a region's hopes and possibilities. In this season of gratitude, I find myself reflecting on the remarkable people whose generosity made our three counties' community foundations possible. Their impact is beyond words, and their legacy continues to shape a stronger and more connected future for all of us.

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> **Vanessa Bechtel**
> *CEO of Ventura County Community Foundation*

Christine: Community foundations are the backbone of long-term community resilience. Our work goes far beyond making grants. We bring people together, align public and private resources, and stay focused on community priorities, even as the landscape around us continues to shift. Looking ahead, our role becomes even more catalytic: investing in mission-aligned projects, building permanent charitable capital, strengthening the nonprofit sector, and ensuring that data and community voice guide every decision. At our best, we're the place where generosity becomes lasting impact. In uncertain times, community foundations offer something increasingly rare: stability, trusted partnership, and a long-range view of what our county needs to thrive. I'm inspired by how generously this community continues to show up for our most vulnerable neighbors. In the end, one truth rises above the rest: we are stronger together. And together, we can ensure San Luis Obispo County is not just a beautiful place to live, but a place where everyone belongs and can thrive.

Jackie: The Central Coast community foundations serve as conveners, advocates, and philanthropic first responders to ensure our region is prepared and equipped to effectively respond to challenges. Our work is made possible by the extraordinary generosity of donors past and present. Working together, we are creating transformational change that helps communities thrive. In this season of hope, we are inspired by our neighbors who seek to make a meaningful impact. Reach out to the community foundation in your county as you seek to partner in philanthropy. We are all stronger together.

• *email: newsroom@pacbiztimes.com*

Save These Dates

Join Us For These Special 2026 Events!

Business HALL OF FAME
Publication date: April 24th

Central Coast BEST PLACES TO WORK
Publication date: May 22nd
Combined Event date: TBD

LATINO BUSINESS Awards
Publication date: June 26th
Event date: July 23rd

SPIRIT OF SMALL Business
Publication date: July 31st
Event date: August 27th

40 under 40
Publication date: August 28th
Event date: September 24th

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