

Rebuilding trust is leader's priority

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The San Diego Food Bank board has turned to a familiar face to manage the newly independent charity – James Jackson, who until last year was president and chief executive of the San Diego Rescue Mission.

Jackson becomes the eighth food bank leader since early 2005, when *The San Diego Union-Tribune* exposed a widespread theft ring within the organization.

The negative publicity resulted in plummeting donations of money and merchandise, and a host of management changes and new oversight rules. The food bank also split from its parent organization, Neighborhood House Association.

Jackson said he looks forward to rebuilding trust in the food bank, the largest hunger-relief agency in the county.

“We need to establish a sense of community ownership of the food bank,” he said. “It's been through some really tough times. I was really angry at what happened here.”

The new chief executive also said it is critical to raise money for the food bank and to prepare to assume millions of dollars in government food contracts that Neighborhood House still maintains.

“Donors here in San Diego are generous, but they want us to be accountable,” Jackson said.

The food bank is an important source of food and other products for poor families. According to one study, more than 800,000 people go hungry in San Diego County at some point every year.

Neighborhood House, which opened the food bank in 1977, gave up the program earlier this year after it ran afoul of America's Second Harvest, the national food charity that supplied millions of pounds of donations each year.

Jackson said he hopes to jump-start that relationship.

“They're certainly the premier organization nationwide for food banks. We'd be remiss if I didn't follow up on that,” he said.

A group of former members of the San Diego Food Bank board of directors continues to negotiate with Second Harvest about opening another food bank somewhere in the county, although no deal has been announced. If they succeed, two major food banks could operate here.

Jackson was selected as chief executive after a search that lasted several months. Food bank board Chairman Eugene “Mitch” Mitchell said Jackson is the right person for the job.

“I am certain of his ability to lead the food bank and am excited about the opportunity to work with him,” Mitchell said in prepared remarks.

Jackson left the rescue mission last August following what he said was a difference in leadership style between him and board Chairman Herb Johnson, who later was named president and chief executive of the homeless shelter.

“(Johnson) wanted to run the place, and now he is,” Jackson said.

According to its most recent tax filings, the San Diego Rescue Mission lost \$1.35 million over the past two years. It also reported a decline in its annual revenues, from \$12.4 million in 2004 to \$10.4 million in 2005.

Jackson said the rescue mission lost some important grants and at least one critical donor during his final years with the organization.