Many people know that the Community Food Bank of Southern Arizona provides food to those in need – yet may not realize that the organization’s overarching vision is to fight the problems that cause poverty and to improve the health of its customers.

Because of that ongoing commitment, the local nonprofit received the Food Bank Member of the Year Award from Feeding America, a network of more than 200 of the nation’s largest food banks. Feeding America is the third largest charity in the United States.

“We are being recognized because we do a lot of programming to fight low-income problems such as insufficient funds and insufficient household assets like medical insurance or a break in employment. Another problem is that many low-income people are not engaged in the community because they don’t feel like anyone will listen,” said Michael McDonald, Community Food Bank of Southern Arizona CEO. “We were really surprised to win the award because it is not self-nominating.”

The Food Bank also operates what it coins a farm produce “rescue” program that saved 52 million pounds of fresh produce from going to the landfill last year. Each day, the Food Bank collects food that farmers can’t sell because of oversupply from farms in Nogales, Arizona and Nogales, Sonora. The collected produce is transferred by refrigerated truck to the main Food Bank facility and directly into a large refrigerator to be stored before it is distributed.

The program has grown rapidly since it started five years ago when the Food Bank collected eight million pounds of produce. Because of that rapid growth, the Food Bank hopes to launch a $4 million capital campaign to purchase more refrigerated trucks and more efficient storage refrigerators.

“We have an opportunity to acquire additional fresh produce – but we don’t have the refrigeration necessary to main-
tain the growth of the program,” McDonald said. “The money from the capital campaign will invest in that needed infrastructure so that we can take advantage of that fresh produce, help improve health and lower healthcare costs.”

The expansion of fresh produce rescue in Southern Arizona is getting a boost from Feeding America. “Because they support our innovative fresh-produce initiative, they have agreed to donate $190,000 towards our expansion efforts, with a good possibility of another $360,000 to come in the next six to 12 months,” McDonald said. The total sum of $550,000 will fund 60 percent of the next year of the program’s operating costs. The next step is to obtain large local capital campaign donors to support the infrastructure campaign, before they begin looking for smaller donors.

Donors of all sizes are important to the Food Bank for its day-to-day operations. “Approximately 75 percent of our funding comes from local charitable giving – so it’s mainly local people supporting and feeding local people,” he said.

One of the successful Food Bank programs is Las Milpitas Community Farm at Silverlake Road and the Santa Cruz River. About 100 people grow food for themselves or to sell at farmer’s markets. Not only does the urban farm provide additional income to the farmers who sell their produce, it also increases the amount of fresh produce that these mainly low-income farmers and their families consume.

The link between food and healthcare is important, according to McDonald. “Our new strategic plan focuses on this link. Disease management has become such an important issue – and it is really related to one’s diet. Whether it’s obesity or diabetes, we’re on the path to improve the diet of the people we feed.” Being healthy helps people to lower their healthcare costs and better manage their budgets.

Another success to come out of Las Milpitas Community Farm is increased community action. Many of the urban farmers are residents of the surrounding neighborhood, and because they began networking with each other while at the urban farm, they decided to do something to increase safety in the neighborhood.

“They reestablished their neighborhood association, which allowed them to lobby for and obtain such public safety improvements as traffic softening road improvements,” McDonald said. “This energized the entire neighborhood because they became a part of the public and political aspects of society and were able to achieve their goals.”

The Food Bank’s service area spans the approximate 23,000 square miles of Pima, Santa Cruz, Graham and Greenlee counties. The main facility is located on Country Club Road in Tucson and satellite facilities are in Nogales, Amado, Marana and Willcox. A second location in Tucson includes a commercial kitchen that produces hot and cold meals to home-bound seniors and after-school meals for kids at the Boys & Girls Clubs of Tucson and Southern Arizona.

The Food Bank partners with more than 300 agencies across Arizona to provide services to approximately 180,000 people annually – and they don’t just provide food. Additional services include working with schools to create gardens for students, connecting with local growers to make their produce available in the community and offering nutrition education.