

## Food security for seniors

by William Treger  
Staff Writer

In Montgomery County, one of the wealthiest counties in the country, you wouldn't expect "food insecurity" and hunger among seniors to be major issues. They are.

The American Community Survey for 2006-2010 estimates that of Montgomery County's 110,000 seniors, nearly 14 percent are living with incomes under 185 percent of the Federal Poverty Limit.

An estimated 8,000 Montgomery County seniors, according to the nonprofit Maryland Hunger Solutions, are eligible to participate in the state's Food Supplement Program [FSP] that could provide individuals an average benefit of up to \$113 per month in supplemental food assistance, but they do not sign up — either they lack awareness and are hard to reach, or they opt out, often for reasons of pride, or a reluctance to draw money from federal coffers that they feel they did not earn.

Grace Whipple is a member-at-large of the Maryland Association of Senior Centers, and senior director of the Gaithersburg Up-County Senior Center. Her center provides lunches to seniors through a congregate program mandated by the Older Americans Act, Title III, and administered by the Montgomery County Department of Health and Human Services.

Whipple says that any individual over the age of 60 may receive a low salt, low sugar, healthy and nutritious lunch at her center for a voluntary anonymous donation of up to the \$6 cost of the meal. The donations, she says, go "back into the program to service more people." The center offers no breakfast or dinner at present, though they are considering adding a breakfast cafe. All seniors are invited, she says.

According to Melanie Polk, director, Senior Nutrition Programs for the Montgomery County Department of Health and Human Services, the county also holds contracts to serve kosher congregate lunches at five sites throughout the county, including the Jewish Community Center of Greater Washington and Ring House in the Charles E. Smith Life Communities, both in Rockville, and synagogues Young Israel Shomrai Emunah of Greater Washington and Congregation Har Tzeon-Agudath Achim and the Gwendolyn Coffield Community Center,



Melanie Polk, director, Senior Nutrition Programs for the Montgomery County Department of Health and Human Services, believes the county's lunch programs are good for socialization, as well as nutrition.

all in Silver Spring.

Polk claims there is no data pointing to the number of Jews in the county who are seniors and food insecure.

"The congregate [lunch] programs are for good nutrition and socialization," she says. It is important to "join together with other seniors, meet people, make new friends, and remain an active part of the community."

Polk adds, "This is often the only good meal that [the seniors] eat throughout the day."

According to data on the Maryland Hunger Solutions website, nearly one in five seniors in the state struggle with hunger; additionally, the state has the eighth highest food insecurity rate in the nation among low-income seniors.

Cathy Demeroto is the director of Maryland Hunger Solutions, which, she says, "works on hunger across the board ... to end hunger by advocacy, education, collaboration, and outreach."

"We want to assure that seniors have access to healthy and affordable food," she says, "and the really important component of that is connecting them to food stamps,

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## FOOD

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now called the Food Supplement Program.”

FSP program participants once received actual food stamps to purchase food. Today, monthly benefits are deposited on an Independence EBT card that functions much like a debit card.

“We do research and target areas where there is need,” Demeroto says.

Maryland Hunger Solutions is connected via multiple partnerships with a vast network of agencies, food banks and food action groups committed to alleviating hunger in Montgomery County and the state. AARP, the Maryland Department of Human Resources, Meals on

mates.

Seniors can file as individuals, or with a spouse. The minimum benefit is sometimes, but rarely, as low as \$16/month, enough for extra fruits and vegetables, but can also be as much as \$113/month, per individual. Maryland Hunger Solutions advocates for the state to conduct phone interviews when signing seniors up, rather than asking seniors to commute and wait in line to apply for assistance.

“We go to senior centers, conduct grocery store outreach, offer senior discount days, go to tax preparation sites” says Demeroto.

Anti-hunger advocates agree seniors need to be able to afford health-sustaining food for an adequate diet and file for FSP.

Communities are also pitching in to

**“With seniors, many have heard of food stamps but think it’s an entitlement and they don’t want to take it. Hunger leads to isolation, low energy, and for seniors who need special diets, it can be very tough. We need to educate them that they’ve contributed to their communities, they are entitled.”**

— Cathy Demeroto, director of the Maryland Hunger Solutions

Wheels, the Maryland Association of Senior Centers, the Maryland Food Bank and the Manna Food Bank are only a handful of the many organizations at work on the problem.

“With seniors,” Demeroto says, “many have heard of food stamps but think it’s an entitlement and they don’t want to take it. Hunger leads to isolation, low energy, and for seniors who need special diets, it can be very tough. We need to educate them that they’ve contributed to their communities, they are entitled.”

Demeroto’s website indicates that food insecure seniors are more than five times more likely to suffer from depression and 27 percent less likely to be in excellent or good health than their food secure counterparts. Food insecurity also increases the risk of long hospital stays, disability and infection.

“[Seniors] are often very proud,” Demeroto says. But if they need help, “that’s why these programs are here.”

Eligibility for the FSP program is based on income including social security income. Marylanders who are older than 60 or are disabled can often apply for benefits as a household of one, in order to increase benefit levels. This option often helps seniors who live with adult children or room-

help their fellow residents.

In neighboring Howard County, Julie Rosenthal, founder of the program Food on the 15th, is working with county parents and student volunteers to fight senior hunger while operating without any overhead. To date, Julie’s teams have delivered nearly 14,000 free bags of nonperishable regular and diabetic groceries and toiletries to low-income seniors right around the 15th of the month, when social security checks often run out.

“What people don’t realize is senior citizens don’t have transportation to food banks,” says Rosenthal. “These seniors look like you and me, but they’re hungry.”

“Many have lost their savings and their pensions in this economy, but people like to eat three meals a day, seven days a week.”

“One donated item makes a difference, and here we get the students involved, too, so they can see that they don’t have to be Bill Gates to be a philanthropist,” says Rosenthal.

Seniors are often forced to choose between purchasing enough food for an adequate diet or purchasing prescriptions. When they opt for the medicine, the bottle often reads: “Take with food.” There is no choice.

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