

Happy 35th Anniversary Meals on Wheels of Santa Cruz County

Written by Judy Chamberlin



Imagine a program that for 35 years has met the food and nutritional as well as the social needs of many seniors. As May is designated 'Older Americans Month,' it's the perfect time to feature this program.

Meals on Wheels is one of the programs operated by the non-profit agency Community Bridges since its inception in Santa Cruz County in 1976. The funding for the Meals on Wheels program originated from the Older American Act of 1965 which called for Congregate Meal Sites and home delivery of meals for seniors sixty and older in every state.

Kudos to Lisa Berkowitz Program Director of Meals on Wheels for her management of this complex county program. While there are standards regarding participant's age, nutritional content of meals and sanitation, there are no set standards regarding how each program operates. Some operate under the direction of a city or county, others under the banner of a non-profit agency while other programs operate under the direction of a local church.

The Santa Cruz County Meals on Wheels program follows the guidelines set by the California Department of Aging including nutritional content, kitchen and food handling sanitation. If you are 60 and older and cannot shop, cook or take care of your nutritional needs, the home delivery program is for you.

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The number of home-delivered meals changes per the needs of seniors in our community. This service fills a vital need when family members are not able or available to provide help. According to Lisa, there are currently 435 home-delivered meals per day.

Due to budget cuts in 2003 and 2004, home-delivered meals are no longer prepared locally but are purchased frozen from Langlois of Laguna Beach, California and are supplemented locally with a variety of breads, fruit and milk to meet state requirements.

The menu is prepared by a Registered Dietician and contains specified amounts of nutrients from vegetables, fruits, proteins and grains/starches as well as foods prepared with less salt and fat.

As variety is the spice of life, home-delivered meals have a four-week menu rotation cycle and menu substitutions are offered each month. For May participants can opt to substitute Macaroni and Cheese or meatloaf for any main dish on the menu. Menus for the up-coming month are delivered on the last Wednesday of the current month.

Menu offerings for the month of May include Beef Stroganoff over Noodles, Carrots, Peas, a Whole Wheat Roll and Orange Juice.

Another day features BBQ Pork Ribslets, Mashed Potatoes, Spinach, Whole Wheat Bread and Mixed Fruit.

Meals for the Congregate Sites are made locally and delivered to the five Dining Sites located in Santa Cruz, Live Oak, Scotts Valley, Ben Lomond and Watsonville. To ensure safety guidelines, the temperature of the food is recorded before leaving the main facility and again upon arrival at the Dining Site.

Dining Site Managers record comments from participants about the meals such as, "I didn't realize how tasty food could be with less fat and salt." Another, "It's a great way to spend time and stay healthy." Lisa stated that satisfaction with the program is evident as participants, "Vote with their feet." Currently the Dining Sites serve 200 people daily.

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Some seniors attend twice a week while others may be there four or five times a week. Many seniors go because they really enjoy the daily contact and social interaction with their peers.

Entertainment adds to the ambience and there is a wide variety at the Sites. There are speakers, pianists, guitarists, and celebrations for holidays. Also featured is a special table for those with a birthday during that month. Each Site can also collect donations for special programs.

Lisa mentioned that Bulk Meals, that is 7 days worth of meals, are now a home delivery option. This will better serve those who can't be home at a specific time and is more cost effective for the program for those who are distant or are in remote locations.

There will soon be a 5-day option for this program.

It's important for those using the program to make reservations at the Dining Site the day before so the Manager can order the correct amount of food. Also, it's important to cancel a meal delivery if not at home.

The suggested donation is \$2.50 per meal but the program literature states, "There is no obligation to contribute. Contribution is voluntary, and no one will be denied participation if they are unable to contribute." Also, transportation is available to all Dining Sites.

How can you help Meals on Wheels? You can join the 87 volunteers and donations are always appreciated. You can also leave a lasting legacy to Meals on Wheels. For more information please call 831-464-3180 extension 100 or visit www.communitybridges.org

Congratulations to the staff and the dedicated volunteers of the Meals on Wheels Program for 35 years of invaluable service to the Santa Cruz County Community.