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Relieving Senior Hunger: An Evaluation of Nutritional Assistance Programs in the U.S.



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I. Introduction

A study released by the USDA in November 2007 estimates that one in every ten households, 35.5 million in total, experienced food insecurity in 2006.¹ Households with incomes below 130 percent of the poverty line experienced food insecurity at an even high frequency: nearly one in three was afflicted.² 17.6 percent of households at this income level contained at least one elderly resident, a statistic that is enlarged not only by the limited resources seniors have, but also by their limited mobility, health problems, and physical limitations to access and prepare food.³ As the baby boom generation ages, the number of elderly requiring nutritional assistance will rise as well, leading to greater pressure on federal and state governments, families, and Community Action Agencies to keep low-income seniors food secure. This issue brief will demonstrate that with the support of community services, funded by federal and state governments and public and private entities, low-income seniors have received, and will continue to receive, the nutritional assistance they need to maintain healthy, independent lifestyles.

II. The Importance of Food Security

Food insecurity is defined as “limited or uncertain availability of nutritionally adequate and safe foods or limited or uncertain ability to acquire acceptable foods in socially acceptable ways.”⁴ It can lead to hunger, or worse, malnutrition, which can “exacerbate disease, increase disability, decrease resistance to infections, and extend hospital stays.”⁵ As the government shifts the responsibility of meeting basic human needs from public programs to private and non-profit groups, weakened federal food programs place additional pressures on emergency food providers who have neither the funds nor the food supplies to provide thorough, year-round nutritional support. The system that was intended to provide emergency hunger relief has become a chronic solution for seniors struggling to pay the rising costs of housing, health care, dependent care and utilities.⁶

In 2006, approximately 37 million people in the United States (12 percent of the population) were 65 or older. Forecasters focusing on the impact of the baby boom generation project that by 2030, nearly 71.5 million people will be 65 or older- nearly 20 percent of the total U.S. population.⁷ Citizens born between 1946 and 1964 represent the

post-war era of prosperity in the U.S., yet it is sadly ironic that this same generation looms with economic hardship and strife. Debates on the future strength of Social Security, Medicare, and other transfer payments the government makes wane negative, as we approach 2011, the year when the first of the baby boomers will retire. With extended life expectancies, fewer children to support them, and more serious medical concerns, the baby boomers will need the support of government assistance programs more than any prior generation. Greater public and private resources (including financial, physical, and human capital) need to be injected into federal, state, and community nutritional assistance programs so the needs of the baby boomers are both expected and met.

III. Federal and State Governments Respond

A network of public and private food assistance programs has evolved over the past few decades to help the low-income elderly to meet their nutritional needs. As the U.S. population ages, increased attention is being given to delivering health and related services to older people in the community. With limited resources, low-income elderly individuals with health conditions often face the choice of spending resources on food or on medication, a choice that can harm their health whatever the decision. In America's Second Harvest's 2006 study on hunger in the U.S., one key finding indicated that of their 300,000 elderly clients, 28.7 percent had to choose between food and medical care and 31 percent had to choose between food and utilities, including heat.⁸ Without adequate access to food assistance, the nutritional needs of the low-income elderly may go unmet.

Policymakers have long been concerned that low-income elderly individuals who are eligible for food stamp benefits tend not to participate in the nutritional assistance programs. Historically, only about one out of every three eligible elderly individuals participates in the Food Stamp Program, and these rates have fallen in recent years. In 2002, only 27.7% of eligible elderly households participated in the food stamps program.⁹ No other group in the U.S. participates at this low of a rate. To investigate this trend, the USDA has sponsored focus group studies to understand the lack of participation in nutritional assistance programs by older Americans.

In conversations with groups of both elderly program participants and eligible non-participants, the most common barriers, in order of most frequently mentioned to least, were: misinformation and confusion about the program's eligibility rules, lack of transportation, special issues confronting elderly immigrants, and language barriers.¹⁰ Other frequently mentioned barriers include low benefits, the burdens of applications and administrative requirements, and the rise of technology with the EBT replacing paper food stamps. In order to receive adequate amounts of food, people need strong, intact, accessible federal food support (Food Stamps, WIC, Surplus Commodities Programs, School Lunch/Breakfast programs) to fulfill their long-term needs and charitable emergency food providers for crisis assistance. Advocates for seniors fear this will place greater pressure on state and federal governments for subsidized healthcare and adult care programs. While several support systems are available, many seniors still do not, or are unable to, ask for assistance.¹¹

IV. Adapting to Seniors' Nutritional Needs

To identify effective strategies for increasing participation among this section of the population, the U.S. Department of Agriculture designed three model program changes, with each model employing different techniques for reducing the barriers to FSP participation that seniors face. The three models were tested as county demonstration programs in six states between 2002 and 2004. This report presents the findings from an evaluation of these demonstrations. Some demonstrations resulted in relatively large increases in elderly FSP participation while other demonstrations resulted in little or no impact. Relatively large impacts were observed from demonstrations employing each of the three demonstration models. Successful demonstrations increased the number of participating seniors by between 20 and 35 percent after 21 months of operation. These demonstrations are effective because they make participation in the program worth the burden of applying for benefits, either through reducing those burdens or by enhancing the benefit to the client.⁴

In response to these concerns, the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) funded the Elderly Nutrition Demonstrations—six projects aimed at testing ways to increase participation among eligible elderly individuals. The demonstrations were designed to reduce the barriers to nutrition assistance participation that the elderly face by simplifying the application process, increasing eligible elderly individuals' understanding of the program, assisting elderly individuals with the application process, and providing food stamp benefits as commodities rather than as traditional program benefits.¹²

In addition to investigating solutions to increase eligible elderly individuals' participation in the Food Stamp Program, the federal and state governments have recently been encouraging participation by low-income elderly in the Commodity Supplemental Food Program (CSFP). Many elderly people suffer from health conditions that require special diets, such as diabetes and heart disease, and CSFP provides supplemental meals that contain the extra nutrients they need. The CSFP was originally created to provide extra nutrition to low-income pregnant and postpartum women, infants, and children, but in recent years, this group has become increasingly dependent on the Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC), making the CSFP available to more seniors. This is occurring to such an extent that the Almanac on Hunger and Poverty in America 2007 suggests that 90% of CSFP's meal supplements now go to elderly participants.¹³

Despite these resources, many low-income elderly remain chronically hungry. While the USDA works on making government food programs more accessible to them, many seniors in America rely on the nutrition assistance programs offered by their local Community Action Agencies. Below are two examples of successful nutrition programs implemented at the community level that have helped alleviate elderly food insecurity and maintain senior independence.

V. Community Action Agencies Respond

A. Washington

By September 2005, Rural Resources Community Action's Diner's Choice Program had provided 31,798 meals at restaurants to 1,290 participants, and 7,568 home-delivered meals to 131 participants in rural Stevens, Ferry and Pend Oreille Counties.¹⁴

Senior citizens, who Rural Resources case managers deem at nutritional risk, are eligible to receive up to twelve Diner's Choice meal coupons per month. Coupons are good for one meal at participating restaurants in the tri-county area. Meals are selected from a special menu that offers only nutritionally balanced meals and are priced at the vouchers' value. Rural Resources also organizes volunteers to pick up and deliver take-out Diner's Choice meals to home-bound senior citizens. Rural Resources' leadership developed and maintains relationships with participating restaurants, and jointly, they worked on designing appropriate menus, establishing a voucher system, and engaging the participants to solicit feedback. CSBG supports the in-depth eligibility assessments of interested seniors and reimburses the restaurants for the nutritional vouchers.

B. Texas

Aware that their Meals on Wheels Program was not assisting every hungry senior in the South Texas region, the Community Action Council of South Texas (CACST) created the Senior Citizens Congregate Program (SCCP) to provide nutritious meals for residents age sixty and older. Available to elderly residents not currently enrolled in the Meals and Wheels Program, SCCP serves meals wherever congregate nutrition services are provided. Transportation to the meal site is provided if necessary, or home-bound elderly participants can opt to have the meals delivered to their residences. SCCP states that clients recently released from the hospital are given priority, due to their immediate need for nutritional assistance.¹⁵

C. Washington

In addition to their three senior nutrition assistance programs, the Olympic Community Action Programs (OlyCAP) of the Olympic Peninsula of Washington State has created another program just focused on senior home care. This program helps keep seniors clean, their homes tidy, and their mouths well-fed.¹⁶ Cooking and eating assistance is one of the components of the program, and seniors are provided with home cooked meals and good company, too.

The mission of OlyCAP's nutrition assistance programs is to "to help increase the nutrient intake of older individuals who might not eat adequately, and, through better nutrition, assist them to remain healthy and independent in their communities." These goals are achieved through the Congregate Nutrition Services Program, the Home-

Delivered Nutrition Services Program, and the OlyCAP Senior Nutrition Program.¹⁷ The Home-Delivered service is available to limited mobility seniors, while the other two services provide meals at locations where seniors are encouraged to socialize and enjoy their meals with friends. With more than 10 locations available to receive a hot meal, OlyCAP has created a collection of nutritional support programs that truly allow their elderly community members to remain independent, social, and healthy.

VI. Conclusion

As demonstrated in the above examples of Community Action, Community Action Agencies are maximizing their resources to find inventive ways of providing nutritional assistance to America's low-income seniors. In FY 2005, over 1.3 million senior citizens received services from community action agencies and achieved a healthier, independent living situation as a result.¹⁸ Along with the continued support and evolution of the Food Stamp and Commodity Supplemental Food Programs, Community Action Agencies are helping a growing number of low-income elderly individuals break down the barriers to accessing inexpensive, reliable, and nutritious food.

¹ United States Department of Agriculture. Nord, Mark, M. Andrews, S. Carlson. Household Food Security in the United States, 2006. November 2007.
<<http://www.ers.usda.gov/Briefing/FoodSecurity/trends.htm>>

² United States Department of Agriculture. Nord, Mark, M. Andrews, S. Carlson. Household Food Security in the United States, 2006. November 2007.
<<http://www.ers.usda.gov/Briefing/FoodSecurity/trends.htm>>

³ "Senior Hunger." America's Second Harvest. February 2006.
<http://secondharvest.org/learn_about_hunger/fact_sheet/senior_hunger.html>

⁴ Life Sciences Research Office, S.A. Andersen, ed., "Core Indicators of Nutritional State for Difficult to Sample Populations," *The Journal of Nutrition*, Vol. 120, 1990, 1557S-1600S.

⁵ Hall, Bryan and J. Larry Brown. "Food Security Among Older Adults in the United States." Food Insecurity and Special Populations, *Topics in Clinical Nutrition*. Vol. 20, Issue 4: 329-338, October/December 2005.

⁶ Cody, Scott and James Ohls. "Reaching Out: Nutrition Assistance for the Elderly Evaluation of the USDA Elderly Nutrition Demonstrations." USDA. June 2005.

⁷ "Americans Living Longer, Enjoying Greater Health And Prosperity, But Important Disparities Remain." *Science Daily*. Mar. 27, 2008.
<<http://www.sciencedaily.com/releases/2008/03/080327172244.htm>>

⁸ "Senior Hunger." America's Second Harvest. February 2006.
<http://secondharvest.org/learn_about_hunger/fact_sheet/senior_hunger.html>

⁹ Cunnyngham, Karen. "Trends in Food Stamp Program Participation Rates: 1994 to 2000." U.S. Department of Agriculture, Food and Nutrition Service. June 2002.

¹⁰ Wilde, Park and Elizabeth Dagata. "Food Stamp Participation by Eligible Older Americans Remains Low." Economic Research Service, *USDA Food Review*. Summer-Fall 2002.

¹¹ Wilde, Park and Elizabeth Dagata. "Food Stamp Participation by Eligible Older Americans Remains Low." Economic Research Service, *USDA Food Review*. Summer-Fall 2002.

¹² "Elderly Nutrition Pilot Projects," Food and Nutrition Service, USDA, 2005.
<<http://www.fns.usda.gov/OANE/menu/DemoProjects/ElderlyPilots/Update.htm>>

¹³ "The Almanac of Hunger and Poverty in America 2007: Section II. Federal Nutrition Programs." Economic Research Service, USDA, 2007.
<http://secondharvest.org/learn_about_hunger/hunger_almanac_2007.html>

¹⁴ "Senior Nutrition: Diner's Choice." Rural Resources Community Action.
<<http://ruralresources.org/pages/seniornutrition.php>>

¹⁵ "Senior Programs." Community Action Council of South Texas.
<<http://www.cacst.org/senior.html>>

¹⁶ Olympic Community Action Programs.
<<http://www.olycap.org>>

¹⁷ Olympic Community Action Programs.
<<http://www.olycap.org>>

¹⁸ Alwin, Ramsey. "President's Budget Overlooks Successful Performance and Results." NASCSP Newsletter. National Association of State Community Services Programs. Vol. 21, February 2006.