

NEIGHBORHOOD Gazette

Volunteers Make Meals on Wheels Go Round – But Funding’s in Peril

Tweet

By Mike McKibbin

December 19, 2017

Jack R. Russell likes to talk. But living alone in a small apartment in Lakewood means there isn't always someone around to listen to the 87-year-old U.S. Marine veteran.

That's why Russell happily greets volunteers with the Meals on Wheels program at his front door. Run for the last 43 years in the metro Denver area by Volunteers of America Colorado, the program is one of a nationwide network of 5,000 local community-run programs.

Russell has received meals for the last 8 months and said he appreciated the "overall assisting" the program provides.

"I can't get around as much due to my legs, and it really helps financially," he said.

Federal budget cuts proposed

The national program drew attention in March, when President Donald Trump's proposed 2018 "skinny" budget included the elimination of the Community Services, Community Development and Social Services block grants. Some Meals on Wheels programs rely on those funding sources to deliver nutritious meals to at-risk seniors, either to homes or in group settings, such as assisted living and senior care centers.

In a May statement, Meals on Wheels America President and CEO Ellie Hollander noted the primary source of federal funding – the Older Americans Act Nutrition Program – would see a \$3 million decrease from current levels under Trump's proposed budget.

"This is taking place at a time when these nutrition programs are already serving 23 million fewer meals than in 2005," Hollander added in the statement. "While waiting lists mount in every state, the number of seniors threatened by hunger will only increase if current funding levels are not adequately boosted. This would, in turn, cause a far greater taxpayer burden through costly Medicare and Medicaid expenses."

The Older Americans Act has supported senior nutrition programs for 45 years and provides 35 percent of the funding for Meals on Wheels nationally. Backers worry about this "foundational funding source" if Congress does not reach a bipartisan budget agreement "with realistic caps on defense and nondefense discretionary spending."

In September, Meals on Wheels America and Care2 delivered more than 112,000 petition signatures to Congressional leadership and members who sit on key legislative committees, urging Congress to avoid cuts to federal funding for Meals on Wheels programs. Supporters also shared more than 1,000 paper plates with personalized messages from recipients, volunteers and supporters about the impact of Meals on Wheels, part of a nationwide #SaveLunch campaign.

100,000+ meals delivered in JeffCo

The metro Denver program area includes seven counties included in the Denver Regional Council of Governments, or DRCOG. Last year, the program served 100,615 noon meals to senior citizens in Jefferson County, according to Dale Elliott, division director of aging and nutrition services for Volunteers of America Colorado. That compared to 94,000 in the 2015-16 fiscal year and 98,000 in

Main Menu

➤ [Home](#)

➤ [Latest Issue](#)

➤ [What's Happening](#)

➤ [Wheat Ridge Mayor](#)

➤ [Edgewater Mayor](#)

➤ [Mountain Views](#)

➤ [Edgewater Collective](#)

➤ [Ask The Expert](#)

➤ [School Crossing](#)

➤ [Ask The Super](#)

➤ [School Visitor Pass](#)

➤ [Localworks Update](#)

➤ [Medically Speaking](#)

➤ [Senior Focus](#)

➤ [West Metro Fire](#)

➤ [West Colfax Sketches](#)

➤ [40 West Arts](#)

➤ [Neighborhood Arts](#)

➤ [Neighborhood Theater](#)

➤ [Focus on Sustainability](#)

➤ [HEALTHy Edgewater](#)

➤ [Archive](#)

➤ [Online Issues](#)

➤ [Subscription](#)

➤ [News Leads](#)

➤ [Advertising](#)

➤ [Contact](#)

2014-15, Elliott noted.

Another 3,400 “emergency” meals (six meals delivered at one time in case of weather-related program closures) were also handed out last year.

“The demand has been pretty steady most of the time,” Elliott said. “There’s a little up and down movement at times.”

The Jefferson County program runs on a \$700,000 budget, with VOA contributing \$4 million to programs across Colorado, Elliott said. Statewide, the program had nearly \$15 million in expenditures last year.

Unlike some Meals on Wheels programs across the country, Elliott said the state of Colorado has been “extremely proactive” in funding senior services.

“That makes up a very large chunk of our funding,” Elliott added.

Most of the local program’s federal funds - 46 percent - come through the Older Americans Act. Around 85 percent of the program’s money comes from those state and federal sources, Elliott said, with 9 to 10 percent from fundraising.

“That’s very much a large segment of funding, so it would be hard to continue to run things as we have if that took a major hit” from Congressional budget cuts in the coming fiscal year, Elliott added. “We’ve had conversations with DRCOG and some of the other agencies (about funding help in case of federal cutbacks), but we have not changed our ask from the state, just because they’ve been so very proactive.”

Volunteers, seniors become friends

In metro Denver, around 150 volunteers deliver hot meals to senior citizens five days a week, along with frozen meals for Saturdays. Each volunteer delivers an average of 670 meals a year, Elliott noted. Each hot or frozen meal costs the program an average of \$7.

Nancy Collier of Golden has organized the delivery program at Montair Christian Church, 1390 Benton St. in Lakewood, for 37 years. She joined the program after seeing a story in a local newspaper. Her main duty is to transfer the hot meals from coolers to paper bags - “They call me the packer,” Collier said with a laugh - for delivery by volunteers to seniors in need.

Anne Robinson of Arvada has delivered meals for two years and got involved when she was close to retiring and considering volunteering.

“I wanted something like this, something that would be consistent, and you could develop friendships,” she said.

The seniors Robinson delivers hot meals to are “like friends.”

“I bring them birthday presents with their meals and they buy little treats for me, too,” she added.

Tracy Rotter and Maggie Collins of Lakewood volunteer to deliver meals “because senior citizens are often neglected,” Rotter said.

Collins added that she and Rotter “have been very blessed and we just want to give something back” to the local community.

That goal was appreciated by Russell, who lauded the “kindness of the girls” who deliver his meals.

“They’re good fellowship,” he said. “We enjoy good food and good fellowship. I can’t thank them all enough for reaching out and serving.”



