



Staff photo by Dan Gross

A Meals on Wheels recipient opens a lunch delivered by Karen Saul, of the Frederick County Department of Aging, on Wednesday.

Dine, sealed, delivered

Meals on Wheels an answer for homebound, disabled seniors

By NANCY LAVIN
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Clatter crunched beneath Sarah Matthews' feet as she strode across the dirt-covered floor to greet the small, white-haired woman perched on the faded couch.

The house was dark, curtains drawn against the bright December sun. Stacks of opened canned goods, trash and cat food covered the kitchen table, sources of an overpowering stench that consumed the air.

Matthews appeared unfazed as she strode across the dirt-covered floor to greet the small, white-haired woman perched on the faded couch.

"Miss Rippeon, hello," she called out, presenting a small package for the woman. "Do you remember what you told me when I asked you what you wanted for Christmas?"

"I don't know," Viola Rippeon responded, puzzled. But she



Staff photo by Bill Green

Sarah Matthews is a volunteer driver with Meals on Wheels. She picks up meals every Thursday from Homewood, one of the county vendors for the program, and delivers them to 10 recipients.

broke into a toothy smile as she pulled out a bag of chocolates.

She thanked Matthews, who began to unpack the rest of the

(See DELIVERED A6)



Staff photo by Dan Gross

Brenda Hill, of Frederick, puts food delivered by Meals on Wheels into her refrigerator on Wednesday.

By the numbers

68,000: number of meals the Frederick County Department of Aging Meals on Wheels program served in fiscal 2016

250: number of volunteers who helped organize the program and deliver meals in fiscal 2016

300: number of senior and disabled residents who received meals during fiscal 2016

173: number of clients served as of Jan. 6, 2017

THREE: average length of time in years a recipient participates in program

24: number of people on the waiting list as of December

20: number of routes to distribute meals across Frederick County

8 to 10: average number of participants served per route

1 to 1.5 hours: average amount of time it takes a volunteer driver to complete a route

\$366,077: Meals on Wheels budget in fiscal 2017

\$272,204: from Frederick County government*

\$50,000: from Friends of Meals on Wheels of Frederick County

\$27,000: in participant contributions

\$16,873: federal and state grants, donations and other funding sources

\$3: average cost per meal

\$1.67: average contribution per meal from recipients

*includes original budget allocation plus \$70,000 transfer approved in the fall

Source: Carolyn True, director of the Frederick County Department of Aging

Delivered

(Continued from A1)

items she brought; two ready-to-eat meals, one hot and one cold.

Rippeon, 87, is a recipient of the Frederick County Department of Aging's Meals on Wheels program. The program provides two meals per day, Monday through Friday, to eligible recipients.

Not all of those who benefit from the home-delivered meal program face the same circumstances as Rippeon. Each situation is unique, and the types of clients vary — wealthy and poor, men and women, seniors older than 60 and younger clients with disabilities or chronic illnesses that render them unable to access or cook meals for themselves.

Demand for the program is anticipated to increase dramatically as the senior population in Frederick County reaches record levels in coming decades.

Filling the need

In 2015, there were 29,930 seniors among 241,373 residents living in Frederick County, U.S. Census Bureau estimates show.

Maryland Department of Planning projections anticipate that the 65-and-older population in Frederick County will more than double by 2040, to 74,720 people.

Meals on Wheels has expanded significantly from the 32 meals per day served when it first began under the Church Women United group in the 1980s, according to Carolyn True, the county's director for the Department of Aging. As of January, the program had 173 clients, eligible to receive two meals a day.

About 68,000 meals were served to 300 clients during fiscal 2016, according to True.

Meals are prepared by three contracted vendors: at the Frederick County Adult Detention Center, the Homewood at Crumland Farms retired living community and by Business Food Solutions, a meal service company based in Baltimore.

Meals were picked up and delivered by 250 volunteers, including Matthews, in fiscal 2016. Volunteers commit to at least one day to deliver meals to eight to 10 recipients on one of the 20 designated routes across the county.

Most costs are funded through the county's general operating budget and supplemented by contributions from participants who are able, donations through the Friends of Meals on Wheels of Frederick County fundraising organization, and state and federal grants.

County employees within the Department of Aging oversee the process: recruiting, training and scheduling volunteers; working with food vendors; processing application forms; determining eligibility; and adding new routes and equipment to maximize the dollars available.

As one of her top priorities, County Executive Jan Gardner has emphasized services that help the growing senior population, including Meals on Wheels.

Determining eligibility

Matthews' route in December began with a delivery to Robert Reed.

Reed, 91, lived on his own when he first began receiving the meals a few years ago. He moved into the Woodsboro home of his son and daughter-in-law after the January 2016 snowstorm.

He greeted Matthews with a warm smile as he opened the separate entrance to his apartment in the back of the home.

"I'm glad you caught me," he said. "I was just about to go out."

He planned to get gas and groceries, he said, pulling his grocery list out of his shirt pocket — coffee, toilet paper and other things he doesn't get from Meals on Wheels. He has trouble walking, but still does some cooking, he said.

His family members can't cook for him; they work late, he said. But he takes them out to eat to show his appreciation.

Asked whether he thought he might not qualify for Meals on Wheels, Reed said he hadn't considered it.

The Seniors First report published in December highlighted concerns with eligibility. And with some interested participants on a waiting list, awaiting an opening on an existing route or creation of a new one, better oversight of existing recipients' eligibility is needed, the report stated.

Program leaders maintained that the department already monitors eligibility.

Potential applicants go



Staff photo by Dan Grass

Kathleen Hoffman, of Frederick, in her kitchen after receiving her food delivery from Meals on Wheels on Wednesday.

through what Kitty Devilbliss, the department's community service manager, described as a "rigorous" intake process. In addition to an application, prospective recipients must pass inspection from a nurse who visits their homes to evaluate their circumstances.

Two out of about two dozen recent applicants were denied based on home visits, Devilbliss said.

The nurse, or another department employee, returns for at least one additional home visit per year to re-evaluate eligibility, although it's often more frequent.

In addition to age or disability requirements, recipients must be homebound and without a caregiver who can provide meals. Federal funding for the program prevents the county from requiring any kind of financial disclosure or threshold for eligibility.

Certain situations might seem like they don't merit home-delivered meals, but that doesn't mean those recipients don't qualify, True said.

"For the casual observer, it may not always seem appropriate, but there's always more to the story," True said. "Our staff is in [the homes] on a regular basis and they see what's going on."

The program relies on volunteers to report concerns, too.

If Reed had left for the grocery store when she arrived, Matthews would have been expected to report that to the department, said Karen Saul, the department's volunteer coordinator. Due to health and safety codes, volunteers cannot leave meals at the door if recipients aren't home.

The department tracks when clients are not home for deliveries, and follows up, Saul said.

"If you're frequently out and missing delivery, why are you out?" she said. "Why do you need our service?"

Sometimes, the explanation is simple: A doctor's appointment conflicted with the delivery schedule. Other times, it might make program supervisors re-evaluate, and in rare cases, eliminate the recipient from the program.

More than just meal delivery

Volunteers play a critical role in looking out for a vulnerable population. Meals on Wheels recipients often live on their own, without family members nearby, Saul said.

Volunteers are the eyes and ears. They might detect if something seems wrong or dangerous.

Saul recalled a volunteer who saw a warning notice on a client's door that utility service would be cut off if a bill weren't paid.

Even meal recipients with families or caretakers who regularly check on them can face unexpected emergencies.

In one instance, an elderly man slipped and fell over the weekend. Unable to phone for help, he lay there for a day until a Meals on Wheels volunteer showed up on Monday and reported that no one answered the door, Saul said.

A few phone calls later, the man was taken to the hospital for medical attention.

"He was ultimately fine, but 'it could have been tragic,' Saul said.

Frequent interactions between volunteers and clients can develop into friendships.

Matthews recalled sitting and crying with a couple after their cat died. She makes sure to give birthday gifts, and sometimes Christmas gifts, as she did for Rippeon. Another man on her route, Frank Dorsey, often invites her to sit for a few minutes and watch his favorite TV show, "Dark Shadows."

"You grow to love these people," she said. "I feel like it's a two-way street, for the volunteers and the people who get the meals."

Brenda Hill, 72, who lives in the Hillcrest area, looks forward to visits from volunteers who deliver her meals.

"I love them, and they love me," she said.

Kathleen Hoffman, 92, agreed. Hoffman has received Meals on Wheels for 12 years. She suffered a stroke that confined her to a wheelchair. Her family lives in the area, and stops by to visit and help her with daily activities such as taking a shower. But living on her own can be isolating.

"It takes the loneliness away," Hoffman said of the daily deliveries.

The county has considered other ways to ensure meals for seniors and the disabled, such as having frozen meals shipped to senior communities. But these types of services lack the socialization that Gardner described as critically important.

Balancing the stool

The need presented by an anticipated surge in the senior population is clear. How to address this need remains a complex, evolving target.

Devilbliss likened the program to a three-legged stool. The legs are the meals (and funds that make them possible), the volunteers who deliver them and the clients served. Keeping the stool balanced requires maintaining the right numbers of each.

The number of clients served ebbs and flows, as do the number of volunteers, and the length of the waiting list.

Melanie Cox, co-chairwoman of the Seniors First Committee that produced the report, recalled three years ago, when the waiting list grew long. The county stopped accepting more people for its waiting list.

Several new routes have been added since then. Other prior recipients stopped participating — moving into nursing homes or with family members, leaving the county, or in some cases, dying.

There were 24 people on the waiting list as of December, according to Devilbliss. Two new routes slated to start at the end of the month will serve 20 of those people, she said.

Still, certain demands are constant. Among them is the need to expand Meals on Wheels in rural, outer reaches of the county.

A majority of the current routes and recipients center in and around the city of Frederick. But in remote, rural areas characterized by less access to public transportation or nearby grocery stores, the need for delivered meals exists, too.

Both Devilbliss and True named expanding to the far eastern and western ends of the county as a priority.

Funding is also a steady need. The county recently approved \$70,000 more for the program to cover costs associated with adding two routes: the meals and the hot and cold bags used to deliver them.

This money was in addition to \$202,204 for Meals on Wheels originally included in the county's fiscal 2017 budget.

Although Gardner said she was still waiting for preliminary department numbers to determine the county's fiscal 2018 budget, she anticipated more funding for the program in the next county budget.

"The fact that we had to add funds in the middle of a fiscal year makes me think we will continue to add money," she said.

Circumstances that recipients face have become more severe, according to Saul.

"Food may be one of eight or 10 issues these people are dealing with," Saul said. "It's not just meals. It's case management."

Follow Nancy Levin on Twitter: @NancyKLevin.