

SAN RAFAEL

'FOOD IS HEALTH CARE'

Whistlestop expands meal delivery program for ailing



PHOTOS BY ALAN DEP — MARIN INDEPENDENT JOURNAL

Whistlestop volunteer Lee Heagerty, left, chats with manager Erika Vaughn before a food delivery run Monday.

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Whistlestop, the San Rafael-based nonprofit serving seniors and the disabled, is expanding a program that delivers food to Marin residents with chronic diseases.

The program, known as Nourish, provides seven ready-made meals a week to people with illnesses such as Crohn's disease, cancer, HIV and multiple sclerosis.

"A lot of the people are isolated with no family and can't stand for a long period of time," said Erika Vaughn, who manages Nourish and oversees Whistlestop's participation in the local Meals on Wheels program.

Whistlestop took the Nourish program over from Meals of Marin in 2013 after that nonprofit ran into funding problems. Whistlestop received money from Marin County for about 18 months so none of the people being

served by the Nourish program at the time had to be dropped from the program, but no new people were added during that period.

"As of June 30, 2014, the county decided it could no longer fund the program," Vaughn said. "This is when Whistlestop partnered with ExtraFood. We started off with 17 clients and now we have continued to grow the Nourish program to 65 clients."

ExtraFood.org is a San Rafael-based nonprofit that redistributes food not used by businesses, restaurants, schools, hospitals and other entities. Since its founding in 2014, the organization has collected 2.9 million pounds of food from 225 organizations and delivered it to 121 sites across Marin.

"In partnership with Whistlestop, together we are able to reach some of the most vulnerable people in the county at home with



Vaughn examines stored food at the Whistlestop base in San Rafael. Donors helped the nonprofit get a new refrigerator and two industrial-size freezers.

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— Daniel McKay, Whistlestop volunteer

Food

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high-quality, fresh, prepared food," said Marv Zauderer, ExtraFood's founder and CEO.

Lee Pullen, director of Marin County's Aging and Adult Services division, said the county still provides about \$8,700 annually from its general fund to help cover some of the Nourish program's administrative costs.

The county also contributes \$90,000 annually from its general fund to help support the Meals on Wheels program.

The remaining \$459,000 required annually to operate the Meals on Wheels program in Marin comes from the federal government, Pullen said.

Meals on Wheels will serve 83,000 meals this year. Of those, 75,000 will be delivered by Whistlestop while the remaining 8,000 will be delivered by

West Marin Senior Services.

Following its partnership with ExtraFood, Whistlestop was able to triple the number of clients served by the Nourish program, but the program's further growth has been constrained by lack of space and an inability to safely store larger quantities of food.

Now, thanks mainly to a donation by the Norman Raab Foundation, which is based in southeastern Pennsylvania, Whistlestop has been able to add two industrial-size freezers and a refrigerator at its facility in downtown San Rafael.

Vaughn said the new equipment will allow Nourish to again triple the number of people it is serving.

"My goal is to expand the Nourish program to the size of Meals on Wheels," Vaughn said.

To be eligible for Meals on Wheels, a person must be 60 or older, unable to drive, and in need of sub-

stantial support in at least two areas of daily functioning. People of all ages can qualify for the Nourish program, and there is no requirement that recipients be unable to drive.

"Having a chronic illness is what makes people eligible for our program," Vaughn said.

One in four Americans has multiple chronic conditions, and that number rises to three in four Americans aged 65 and older, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

Whistlestop said there are more than 49,000 people in Marin whose income is below 200% of the federal poverty level of less than \$23,544 a year for an individual, a standard measure of food insecurity.

"At Whistlestop we believe that food is health care, and we strive to eliminate the poor health implications of food insecurity in Marin County," said Whistlestop CEO Joe O'Hehir.

Whistlestop relies on its 45 volunteers to do most of the deliveries for both the Nourish program and Meals on Wheels. The nonprofit employs only four full-time, paid drivers.

"Our volunteers are awesome because they spend the extra few minutes to talk to clients," Vaughn said.

Daniel McKay, 38, who has been working as a Whistlestop volunteer since 2016, said he has taken a special satisfaction from being able to win the trust of the people he delivers to.

"I love chatting with them and getting their perspectives," said McKay, who himself has struggled with diverticulitis and diabetes.

"These are people hidden in plain sight, often one misfortune away from homelessness," McKay said. "Most of them don't have their family to help them out. If we can't help as a society, what good are we?"