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MEAL DELIVERIES

Mayors shine light on senior needs amid pandemic, inflation



SHERRY LAVARS — MARIN INDEPENDENT JOURNAL

Jack Waldvogel accepts a bag of food from Meals on Wheels program manager Erika Vaughn as Mill Valley Mayor McCauley looks on in Mill Valley.

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Mayors from across Marin joined the San Rafael nonprofit Vivalon to help deliver meals to needy seniors this week.

The annual “March for Meals” event marked the amendment of the Older Americans Act of 1965 to support the national nutritional program for older adults. Mayors Eric Lucan of Novato, John McCauley of Mill Valley, Fred Casissa of Corte Madera and Stephanie Hellman of Fairfax were slated to participate.

As food prices have soared amid the pandemic and inflation, meal deliveries have taken

on new meaning for many seniors in Marin, said Anne Grey, the chief executive officer of Vivalon, formerly known as Whistlestop.

“People who may not have faced food insecurity before, who were older, may have had their circumstances change,” she said. “Costs are increasing, and we may find more people become reliant on nutrition services the county provides.”

Hellman said living alone can make daily meal preparation an extra challenge.

“What we learned from the pandemic is how many people in our community live alone, like older adults,” she said. “The isolation was exacerbated by the

pandemic. As a daughter of a mother recently widowed, I know it’s hard to motivate to make a healthy meal for just one person.”

Lucan said his trip out reinforced for him that contact with people is as important as the food itself.

“The direct benefit of delivering nutritious meals to homebound, older adults is critical, but the indirect benefit of having a familiar face making the deliveries and checking in on individuals who are often isolated is what really makes this program shine,” he said.

Food support for seniors “definitely increased during COVID ...

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faster than any other group in Marin,” said Marchon Tatmon, a manager for the San Francisco-Marin Food Bank. The organization delivers meals to about 400 Marin seniors each week.

Almost 20,000 seniors experience food insecurity in Marin, particularly in Novato, San Rafael and western Marin, according to the nonprofit. Marin ranks in the bottom third among active participation rates for seniors who qualify for the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program, with only 19% of those eligible using benefits, Tatmon said.

“A lot of our seniors

have been hit disproportionately hard by COVID,” he said. “People of color have been affected most.”

Inflation is hitting seniors with fixed incomes hard, he said.

“Seniors are already struggling with what to pay and not to pay,” he said.

A 2019 assessment of older adults in Marin found 25% are at risk of food insecurity, and 80% are no longer employed, said Jenay Cottrell, a program manager with Marin County Aging and Adult Services.

Cottrell said these numbers are expected to worsen by 2030. A 30% increase in seniors using Meal on Wheels has “leveled off,” but could rise with inflation, she said.

More residents are ag-

ing and will experience hunger disproportionately, she said. About 21% of older adults who are people of color are food insecure, compared to 8% of White older adults.

“The programs don’t provide enough food of course, and more are needed to address the full need,” Cottrell said. “We’re hoping some of these relaxed regulations will last. Sometimes older adults are hesitant to ask for help, but that’s what our programs are for.”

On Wednesday in Mill Valley, Delpha Carpenter was among those who received a meal. The homebound senior with limited mobility said she’s grateful for the extra help each week. Most of her children have moved and her only visitors are her house-

keeper and friends.

“They don’t know how much I appreciate all this food,” Carpenter said.

Mill Valley resident Jack Waldvogel has lived alone in senior housing for more than 10 years. He said he only talks to his case manager and Vivalon volunteers, so deliveries are a chance to connect.

“I’m not much of a cook, I can cook in an emergency — but I prefer not to. This is very beneficial,” he said.

Information about Meals on Wheels is available by phone at 415-473-INFO or by email 473-INFO@marincounty.org. In western Marin, information is available by calling West Marin Senior Services at 415-663-8148, ext. 103.