



Pathfinders in Elder Law



More Seniors Turning to Free Food Programs

The story is the same across the country: the combination of a tough economy, rising food and fuel prices, and strained social services are causing dramatically higher numbers of elderly to seek out free food programs.

In big cities like New York, the numbers showing up for free meals at senior centers is increasing by between 20 to 40 each day, according to Aaron Kesselman, president of the Manhattan Borough Wide Interagency Council on Aging (MBIAC), while the 2009 city budget for elder services is being cut by 6 percent, or approximately \$37 million. "This is a huge issue, because those most directly affected by all the proposed cuts are the low-income elderly," Kesselman said.

In smaller cities, like Seattle, the central food program is feeding 38 percent more elderly than at this time last year.

"We see more seniors coming in than any other demographic," said Fran Yeatts, executive director of the West Seattle Food Bank, told ElderLawAnswers. "Many of them have lived in this part of the city for a long time. Over the years, house prices have gone up, so property taxes have, too.

Then, when food prices started to rise -- that hit a lot of elderly people on fixed incomes who were already feeling the strain."


"We started to see the change over the summer," agreed Sunny Schaeffer, executive director of Operation Food Search in St. Louis, Missouri, which works with 300 organizations, including soup kitchens and homeless shelters. "Many older people who relied on Social Security and small savings are finding themselves no longer able to get by. We get calls from seniors telling us they can't afford both to eat and to pay their medication costs. And many of them seem to be taking such a lot of medications."

Nearly One-Third Choosing Between Food and Medicine

The modern forms of free food programs -- like community food kitchens that provide cooked meals, and food pantries that distribute basic raw food items -- were started across the U.S. in the 1970s.

Over the decades, there has been a steady need for them, even in times of a thriving economy, and in good times and in bad, elderly Americans remain more vulnerable than other age groups to what the government terms "food insecurity."

According to [Feeding America](#), the country's largest hunger-relief



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organization, three million seniors seek out their meal services each year, and the organization expects that number to grow by 20 percent in the coming year. Feeding America reports that some 30 percent of the country's elderly have to choose between paying for food or for medicine.

For those who work to provide seniors with free, nourishing food, the challenges of a shrinking economy are formidable. The various groups that support their services -- from the manufacturers and restaurants that donate food to the corporate philanthropies that underwrite them -- also suffer, so that, as demand for food goes up, both provisions and contributions go down.

"Our waiting lists are getting longer, and yet funds for the elderly budget are being cut all over," says Malika Robins, executive chef for Senior Connections in Atlanta, Georgia, where 8,000 meals are served to the elderly each week via senior centers and Meals-on-Wheels services. "I can't understand how we can allow the quality of our elder care to get lower, when what we really need is to generate a better quality of life for seniors, so that they can stay well in their homes. We need to keep them healthy with good nutrition and life-affirming activities. We will need to advocate hard for

them to the new Administration."

One recent bright note comes from Kraft Foods, which has [promised Feeding America](#) \$4.5 million to buy 25 refrigerated trucks over the next three years, to distribute food in areas of need, such as New York, Cincinnati, San Antonio, Chicago, and Madison, Wisconsin. Kraft chairperson, Irene Rosenfeld, says the pantries are the first part of a planned \$180 million gift by Kraft aimed at combating hunger.

And in West Seattle, the Food Bank's Fran Yeatts claims that in her city, commitment to feeding the hungry remains strong, no matter what the economic climate.

"We are a diverse community here, with many people in need," she said. "But those with means understand the urgency, and continue to support us in providing the emergency feeding programs this community needs."

Sue Woodman is a free lance writer based in New York City. She is the author of [Last Rights: The Struggle Over the Right to Die \(Da Capo, 2001\)](#). ▲

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