

For Waiting Seniors, No Relief is in Sight

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On the second floor of his apartment building, Larry Montgomery waits for a familiar knock at his door. A friendly face brings him a hot meal at about eleven thirty, and judging by the empty plate in the trash, Mr. Montgomery's Meals on Wheels driver was early today. Mr. Montgomery lives in the 300 block of W. 19th street in the Heights and receives daily lunches from Meals on Wheels for Greater Houston five times a week. He has been a participant in the program for the past four years.



Without such a program, getting a hot and balanced meal would be difficult for Montgomery. His wife passed last May, and now he lives alone in his small one bedroom. The Meals on Wheels program is "very helpful," chuckled Montgomery. "That's my breakfast and lunch, and living on social security disability, it sure means a lot to me." Mr. Montgomery's disability limits his ability to get the food he needs. The kitchen counter in Montgomery's apartment displays a small assortment of canned items and half a loaf of bread; most evenings Montgomery will heat up one of these cans for his dinner. However, he looks forward to the variety and warmth that the lunches from Meals on Wheels for Greater Houston provide. "Well, it was good today; a slice of turkey and dressing, green beans, cranberry sauce, a biscuit, a banana and even some honey graham cookies."

Mr. Montgomery is not alone. There are currently 249 people being served by Meals on Wheels for Greater Houston just in the Heights, West University, and the area's surrounding White Oak Bayou. Meals on Wheels for Greater Houston serves over 3300 meals each day to seniors in Harris County.

Despite the large number of seniors receiving help, there is a great need for volunteers and donations. The waiting list to receive meals currently exceeds 1,000 people. The wait list for the Heights, where Mr. Montgomery lives, doubled in the past five months, up fifty-nine percent since October.

Bridget Samuel, Chief Operating Officer of Interfaith Ministries for Greater Houston, says that the list of seniors waiting for meals continues to grow every day. "These are individuals who do not have the ability to prepare a nutritious meal for themselves on a regular basis and it's typically because they have several, two to three, chronic illnesses," said Samuel, who also serves as VP of Member services for the Meals on Wheels Association of Texas.

The senior population is currently one of the fastest growing populations in Texas. Since 1990, Houston has experienced a fifty percent growth in residents age 65 and older. The

National Center for Vital Statistics reported that over the next 33 years Texas will see an increase of 184%, or 4.4 million people over 65. Samuel expects that by 2010, if situations do not improve, 5,000 seniors will be on the waiting list for Meals on Wheels for Greater Houston. According to the Meals on Wheels Association of Texas, four out of ten Meals on Wheels programs have waiting lists and some are even facing bankruptcy. Seniors on the lists, who are waiting six months or longer, are at risk for poor health, but can do little to relieve their situation.

CareGuide@Home is an online resource that provides care management to help elders live comfortably and securely in their own home. As part of their *Health & Well Being* discussion board, CareGuide@Home outlines the problem of poor nutrition for seniors with chronic conditions. “It [poor nutrition] can exacerbate or worsen health conditions that elders have already been diagnosed with. Furthermore, elders may experience difficulty recovering from an illness if they are concurrently not eating enough foods, or nutritious foods.”

The U.S. Department of Health and Human Services’ Administration on Aging found that 62 percent of seniors participating in meal programs receive half, or more, of their daily food intake from their home-delivered meal. “My lunch is what I make it on,” said Montgomery, who depends on the meals he receives for proper nutrition. Poor nutrition not only increases the recovery time from illness, but puts seniors at risk for expensive institutionalizations and poor quality of life. The combination of rapidly increasing senior populations and lack of funding for senior nutrition programs is already compounding the growing issue of senior hunger, leaving an overwhelming number of Houston’s seniors in the cold for a hot meal.