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Mountain Meals on Wheels is dedicated to helping mountain seniors

BY KEN BRAFMAN

Meals on Wheels is a network of more than 5000 community-based programs across the country dedicated to addressing senior isolation and hunger. The network serves virtually every community in America and, with more than two million staff and volunteers, delivers the nutritious meals, friendly visits and safety checks that enable countless American seniors to live nourished lives with independence and dignity.

Today, the average life expectancy is at a record high of 79 years. As the population gets older, even the most independent may experience physical declines or financial hardships that strip away their ability to self-sustain. With many families moving farther away from one another, the result is millions of seniors being left behind, hungry and alone.

Mountain Meals on Wheels (MMOW) is a nonprofit 501(c)(3) organization that began providing meals within the mountain community in 1979. The current service area is Cedarpines Park to Arrowbear/Green Valley Lake.

The program was started by the Mountains Regional Council on Aging. The president, at 82, was Lucy Kelley, who founded the program, which was sponsored by Mountains Community Hospital Auxiliary.

After a more than 40-year association, MMOW still pur-



Jack Cooperman, MMOW board president, has been dedicated to helping seniors for two decades.

PHOTO COURTESY OF IMDB.COM

chases nutritionally balanced meals from Mountains Community Hospital. Recipients are asked to pay a nominal fee for their meals, but if they're unable to afford them, they may qualify for a subsidy. Meals are delivered Monday through Friday, year-round, with interruptions limited to major holidays and severe snow days.

Clients often have special needs, so there's a concerted effort to meet them. Within limits, meals can be customized based on dietary requirements. Delivery schedules can often be adjusted to accommodate client needs. In times of impending severe weather, backup food is provided. Special holiday meals are also delivered. Drivers even give birthday and "thinking of you" greeting cards.

Welfare checks are one of the most important functions. For example, if a driver drops off a meal and discovers yesterday's delivery was not brought in, the driver will call family, friends or caregivers if there's no response. Calls are also made if other problems arise.

Nationally, 58% of home-delivered meal recipients live alone, and for many of them, the person delivering the meal is often the only person they see that day. Millions of volunteers enable 221 million meals to be delivered to 2.4 million seniors each year.

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LONGTIME VOLUNTEERS

Stanley and Linda Oswalt are longtime volunteers. Most drivers work alone, but the Oswalts work as a team. Stanley explained: "The routine is this. We go to Mountains Community Hospital and

we report to the food-service area in the back. We tell the food-service people, by hand signal, what route we're on. Our route has gone as far as Hook Creek Road and in the other direction to Twin Peaks. Then they bring out on a cart the designated meals for that route, which are customized according to the dietary needs and preferences of the clients. There's a full hot meal in a clamshell container and a bag that has fruit, a drink and a dessert."

Oswalt continued: "Mountain Meals on Wheels provides us with a large, insulated cooler. We can get a lot of meals in, and so I load up the cooler with the meals, carry it down to the car and put it behind the passenger seat. Most of the drivers use four-wheel-drive [vehicles]. Clients are also provided with coolers. My wife takes the meal and puts it in their cooler. Because of COVID we can only knock on the door; we can't go inside the residence. Then a new meal will be delivered the next day by another driver. We average about 10 meals per day."

Jack Cooperman is the president of the Board of Directors of MMOW, which is composed of five very dedicated individuals who volunteer their time. "I've been president off and on for quite a while now," he said. "The only person on the board who's been on there longer than me is Ianita Wagner. She lives in New Mexico, and she's still on our board. We meet by Zoom now."

Cooperman emphasized that "the organization couldn't do it without the drivers to deliver the meals. We're always looking for volunteers. If somebody calls us for assistance, we'll try to get them meals within just a few days. I mean, this is not your government at work. And I'm not going off in any political thing. But we're not tied to any government grants or subsidies or paperwork. We have no salaried employees, and we don't see the need for it."

The recipient coordinator is Roxanne Beeman. She talks with all the potential recipients to find out their needs and whatever else and puts them onto the sched-



Stanley and Linda Oswalt are longtime volunteers. Here Stanley picks up the meals at Mountains Community Hospital for the day's deliveries.



Volunteer Linda Oswalt transfers a meal to the recipient's cooler. She'll knock on the door and engage in a welcome conversation.

PHOTOS COURTESY OF THE OSWALTS

ule. They're set up in one of four different routes within the mountain area. "At that point, all the coordination and training of the drivers is handled by Laura De La Parra, our volunteer coordinator," said Beeman.

Cooperman talked about the service that provides backup food bags. "One of the things we do, and we will be doing it again in about a week or so, is we make up what we call emergency food bags," he said. "Every winter each recipient gets several bags of non-perishable food. If there's a storm, and we can't deliver for two or three days, they have something to fall back on."

DEPENDENT ON DONATIONS

MMOW is an all-volunteer organization that relies solely on the local community and charitable organizations for donations. They don't receive any federal or governmental grants or funding. "I would say we get a lot of individual donations," Cooperman shared. "The Ted Roy Foundation has always been there for us. We've benefited in the past from the San Manuel Band of Mission Indians, and the Lake Arrowhead Sunrise Rotary has made donations. But it's a little bit from quite a few people that helps meet all our costs." Cooperman praised the mountain volunteer community, adding that many volunteers give their time to more than one organization.

Stanley Oswalt shared some personal insight into volunteering: "We knock on the door, and some of them are more talkative than others. Some of these people don't get out very much. And it's a human coming to the door, and they're having some interaction. And they can be happy, or they can complain about their latest medical condition. But that's OK, because we're all people. We do that."

Then he added: "It's really nice for them to be happy to get the meal, and there's nothing like having somebody be happy to see you. That's a lot right there."

To donate, to find out about becoming a driver or to inquire about receiving meals, visit www.mountainmealsonwheels.org/