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Forgotten Harvest: Help During the Golden Years

By Joyce Wiswell Published 6:45 a.m. ET Nov. 29, 2017 | Updated 12:27 p.m. ET Nov. 30, 2017



(Photo: Forgotten Harvest)

Despite a series of misfortunes that would level even the strongest individual, Erma Christy doesn't let things get her down. She's lost a child, faced cancer three times and in June, lost her home of 23 years to foreclosure. Her income is just enough to keep her from receiving government assistance, but not enough to make ends meet.

"It's all just a test I have to go through," she said. "I have a lot of faith."

One thing Christy doesn't have to worry about, however, is going hungry. Thanks to the food rescue operation Forgotten Harvest, "my freezer stays full," she said, "and I'm eating a lot healthier than I used to."

Christy, 62, is among the more than 589,000 people in metro Detroit who face food insecurity. Each Tuesday afternoon, she visits the Waterford Senior Center, where one of Forgotten Harvest's 35 trucks delivers "rescued" food from local grocers that is perfectly good but would otherwise go to waste.

At the center in Waterford, at least a dozen volunteers unload and sort the food for about 45 clients, which includes not only senior citizens but working families and disabled individuals. It's a scene that is repeated throughout the tri-county area as Forgotten Harvest rescues surplus food from more than 800 businesses and delivers it to 250 emergency food providers, food pantries, shelters, soup kitchens and faith-based organizations. Last year, Forgotten Harvest rescued 45.8 million pounds of nourishing food that would otherwise have clogged landfills.

"Forgotten Harvest helps keep everything going for me," said Christy, who lives with her disabled daughter in Pontiac since losing her house. "I would like people to know that this is really needed."



Clarkston resident Barb Lively, 74, depends on Forgotten Harvest to meet her nutritional needs. (Photo: Forgotten Harvest)

Barb Lively, another regular at the Waterford Senior Center, lost her husband at age 30 and went on alone to raise her three children, one with special needs, with low-paying jobs that allowed her the flexibility to be there for her kids, but no pension or retirement fund. Now 74, Lively depends on Forgotten Harvest to meet her nutritional needs. "Our golden years are kind of tarnished," she said ruefully.

"I know how to live frugally, and getting food from Forgotten Harvest has been so wonderful for me on a lot of levels," said the Clarkston resident. "Being able to get fresh fruits, vegetables and meat really helps my budget. I definitely would not be eating as healthy without this food, or it would be coming out of the money that keeps my car running and my house heated."

Like Christy, Lively does not sit around bemoaning her fate.

"Someone called me 'a woman of courage' and I going to hold onto that," she said. "If I felt sorry for myself, my life would be worse. And I feel very fortunate to have the help of the Waterford Senior Center and Forgotten Harvest, people who really care about the community. It's a tremendous blessing."



Forgotten Harvest Driver Khalid Peterson (second from left) looks forward to his deliveries at the Waterford Senior Center. “Everyone is so thankful for our food,” he said. “They are a true inspiration to me and one of the reasons I really love this job.” (Photo: Forgotten Harvest)

A Valuable Lifeline

Donielle Fidler, the Waterford Senior Center’s director of nutrition and auxiliary services, said more than 100 people benefit from the food pantry each week. She is especially grateful that the food from Forgotten Harvest is highly nutritious, which helps keep clients healthy.

“Fast food is so inexpensive, but it does not have as much nutritional value as a home-cooked meal made with fresh produce and fresh meat,” Fidler pointed out. “The way we set it up, our clients go through the food just like they are grocery shopping, so they get things they know their families will eat. They can make meals that will stretch and feed more people.”

Clients also benefit from the social interaction the program provides, with everyone from the truck driver to the volunteers making sure that all are treated with respect and dignity. “They all look out for each other,” Fidler said. “It’s like a little Forgotten Harvest family here.”

It’s a family Forgotten Harvest Driver Khalid Peterson likes being a part of. “I look forward to my delivery at the Waterford Senior Center,” he said. “Everyone is so thankful for our food. They are a true inspiration to me and one of the reasons I really love this job.”



Forgotten Harvest makes sure there is plenty of fresh food available for the more than 100 people who benefit from the Waterford Senior Center food pantry each week. (Photo: Forgotten Harvest)

Future Shock

Despite all the advice – and all those TV commercials touting retirement accounts – most people are just not saving enough for retirement. That means the services of Forgotten Harvest will be more crucial than ever in the coming years and decades.

“According to the most recent research, up to a third of baby boomers age 55 and older have saved nothing for retirement. Half of that generation has saved less than \$100,000. Only 15 percent have saved over \$500,000, which is really the minimum necessary to maintain a decent standard of living in retirement,” said Thomas B. Jankowski, PhD, associate director for research at Wayne State University’s Institute of Gerontology & Merrill Palmer Skillman Institute. “The most likely thing to happen is that folks without savings will just have to muddle through old age at the edge of (or fully immersed in) poverty, surviving on meager Social Security benefits, assistance from family members, and private charity from organizations such as Forgotten Harvest.”

Donald Grimes, a senior research specialist at the University of Michigan, said Michigan’s boomers (those born between 1946-64) face a particular challenge. “During their peak earning years, the state was going through the single state recession (actually more like a depression in Michigan) between 2000 and 2009. Baby boomer residents of Michigan suffered a much bigger decline in asset values, including home values, and of course were struggling when residents of other states were doing much better,” he said. “The residents of Michigan will pay a price for that decade for a long time to come.”

As much as it’s needed today – it’s estimated that one in six people in metro Detroit face food insecurity – Forgotten Harvest will only become more vital as the population ages.

“It’s going to be a big problem,” said Patrick Simasko, an elder law attorney in Mount Clemens. “People will be living with no money in the bank and \$1,300 a month in Social Security, and that doesn’t go very far.”

A comprehensive study commissioned by the Food Bank Council of Michigan backs those dire predictions. The “Self-Sufficiency Standard for Michigan 2017” dramatically demonstrates the disparity between federal poverty guidelines, which serve as the standard definition of poverty, and the minimum income actually required to pay for basic needs like food, rent, transportation and healthcare. The study reports that a significant portion of the population falls into an income gap between the federal definition of poverty and that necessary minimum income to meet basic needs. Many of these people are food insecure or need emergency food at points throughout the year.

For example, the federal poverty level for a family of one is \$12,060 a year. But the Self-Sufficiency Standard reports that a household of one adult actually needs an annual income of \$23,511 in Oakland County, \$22,342 in Macomb County, and \$22,799 in Wayne County to meet basic needs without private or public assistance. That’s about \$1,900 a month for one person.

Older adults are already working longer than in prior years; according to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, 40 percent of people age 55 and up are still in the workforce, Jankowski said. “That number will almost certainly increase,” he added.

A Grateful Family

Money is always tight for Angie Cutean of Clarkston, who shares her home with her 71-year-old husband, grown daughter and two teenage grandkids. The family lives on her husband’s pension and Social Security, but it’s just not enough to feed the entire household. Forgotten Harvest, she said, “really makes things better for us.”

Cutean, 68, never misses the chance to visit the weekly food pantry at the Waterford Senior Center, and said she especially appreciates the variety of fresh vegetables and fruit.

“Otherwise, we would have to do without those things because they are so expensive,” she said. “My grandkids have learned to eat healthier with all the salads that I can make. And I am able to show them that vegetables are good to eat, so when they are adults they can provide for their families in a healthier way as well. I really appreciate it, and I would like to give the volunteers a big thank you for helping make things better for us.”

Visit forgottenharvest.org (<http://forgottenharvest.org>) to learn more about Forgotten Harvest and how you can help.

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