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## More of Detroit's aged go hungry as economy falters

Kimberly Hayes Taylor / The Detroit News

Ruby Allen can't remember the last time she went grocery shopping.

Instead, she relies on whatever food her children drop off, and the five frozen Meals on Wheels dinners delivered to her home each Monday.

"Without the meals, it would be hard for me to get three meals a day," the 80-year-old Detroiter said. "It would be breakfast and whatever I can get for lunch or dinner. Meals on Wheels helps me get through the week. I always tell people we were raised during the Great Depression. You learn to survive. You learn to make do with what you have."

But an increasing number of seniors don't have enough to make do. According to a recent national AARP survey, 59 percent of people 65 and older said rising costs and a tightening economy have made it more difficult for them to pay for essentials such as food, medicine and gas.

The United Way for Southeastern Michigan reports that 41,579 unique callers ages 50 and older telephoned its 211 helpline in 2008 for such basic needs, up from 16,702 callers in that age range in 2007. Detroit Meals on Wheels, which serves more than 1 million meals a year to people 60 and older, has a waiting list of nearly 700 hungry seniors, according to the Detroit Area Agency on Aging.

As baby boomers age, organizations serving seniors expect this trend to worsen within the next two years and are bracing for what some call a "silver tsunami" of need.

The need is so great that organizations serving seniors that don't normally work closely together -- including United Way for Southeastern Michigan, Wayne State University's Institute on Gerontology, and the Detroit Area Agency on Aging -- are collaborating to assess needs and pool resources to keep the elderly from suffering or starving.

### Economic woes take a toll

Like many other seniors, Allen, who lives on Social Security, attributes rising food and medicine prices to her financial challenges. After she pays her utilities and other bills, she

said she rarely has anything left over. "You stop the holes in the door, stop up all the cracks and you can make it. I get behind sometimes, and I get in trouble sometimes."

Allen is rooted in a generation of people -- those Depression-era seniors -- accustomed to pulling themselves up by their boot straps.

But not all seniors have those skills. For that reason, authorities such as Jacqueline Morrison, interim state director of the AARP of Michigan, said they are especially concerned about seniors during this downward economic spiral and plead with people to make sure the seniors in their lives are eating and have other basic needs met.

"It's a big issue," Morrison said. "Everybody's feeling it right now, and because it's not just seniors, they may be forgotten, and we don't want that to happen."

Nevertheless, Roger Paige, assistant manager of the Focus: HOPE Community and Supplemental Food Program in Detroit, said some seniors are being forgotten. "Lately, we've had a lot of emergency calls from seniors that need food and some type of assistance," he said. The nonprofit provides not only training for the jobless but also products like cheese, powdered milk and bread.

Unfortunately, not everyone qualifies for help they seek. For example, a single senior must bring in less than \$13,520 a year to get help from Focus: HOPE.

Paige wishes he could do more to help. "They say, 'I have to pay for insurance and medicine. I'm depending on the food and you say I don't qualify?' " Paige said.

With Meals on Wheels, people will wait four to five months before receiving the first meal, said the Detroit Area Agency on Aging, which manages the meal delivery program for people 60 and older living in Detroit, Hamtramck, Highland Park and the Grosse Pointes.

#### **'I didn't know what to do'**

Sharron Newport and her husband, Willis, found themselves in similar need when devastation hit their lives.

One day in June, she worked at a dry cleaner, and Willis drove a tractor-trailer. The next, they were unemployed. Willis suffered from an inoperable brain tumor and out-of-control diabetes, and she had to quit her job to care for the 64-year-old, who within days couldn't walk or talk. His blood-sugar level became dangerously high because she couldn't properly prepare his meals. Sharron Newport was so stressed out she stopped eating.

"I cried all the time because I didn't know what to do," said Newport, 62. They try to survive on her husband's Social Security check. "He was a strong, healthy man who never sat down or watched TV. I totally depended on him. When he got sick, I fell apart. I would have committed suicide if I didn't get help."

By midsummer, the Plymouth resident had to find private care for her husband. Newport hired Livonia-based Home Instead Senior Care for help with meal preparation, food shopping and cleaning.

Others say they are managing to make ends meet now but may need help down the road.

Irma Jaxon expects to make changes whenever her mother, now 90, passes away. The two rely on their Social Security checks, but the 68-year-old Detroit resident doesn't know how she will buy food and take care of things on a sole check. They've cut down on food consumption to buy fewer groceries. Now, she's speculating on her financial future.

"I've been thinking about looking after children or something like that," said Jaxon, who worked for the phone company for 20 years before taking a buyout. "More than likely, I'll have to get rid of the car I drive. I may have to take in roomers."

#### **Rising food costs drive need**

"We're seeing seniors skipping meals, cutting back on medications, not going to the doctor's because of co-payments, and the heat isn't high enough," said Glenna Yaroch, president and CEO of Home Instead Senior Care. "We come in and help with some of this. We are a set of eyes and ears when family isn't there to see these things."

Rising costs haven't helped, said Ann Leen, manager of basic needs at United Way for Southeastern Michigan. "The need is so much higher because food costs have increased so dramatically."

From her AARP office, Morrison said she's advising people to stop by more often to check on relatives and visit the neighbors. "It's incumbent to check on your mother, your father, your aunt, your uncle," she said. "Make sure their heat is on and they have food in the refrigerator. Don't wait for them to ask for help, but seek them out and ask them if they need help. These are situations that don't have to exist if we rally together as a community."

Linda DeVore, program manager with Senior Alliance of Wayne County, said if people listen and pay attention, they will hear things from seniors and find small ways to help. "People tell me stories and I see things," DeVore said. "I listen at the pharmacy counter. Besides children, our seniors are the most vulnerable group, so someone has to stand in the gap for them."

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