

Delivery program is a lifeline for elderly clients

By Mike Swift

mswift@mercurynews.com

Posted: 11/26/2011 03:41:22 PM PST

Updated: 11/27/2011 03:29:28 AM PST

On a sunny fall Friday morning, Marty Hoenisch and his wife, Laurie Kelly, walk up the driveway of a tidy home in Aptos carrying several frozen meals, along with fresh milk and fruit. "Hello," Hoenisch calls out. "Meals on Wheels."

Bob Somers, a 95-year-old retired airline pilot, and his wife, Jean, started getting visits from Meals on Wheels last year when Jean began having trouble lifting food out of the oven. But they rely on volunteers like Hoenisch and Kelly for more than just nutritional sustenance.

"These guys are the best part of Meals on Wheels," said Jean Somers, 88, standing in her kitchen, watching Hoenisch and Kelly load up her freezer. "They are so darn nice."

Hoenisch, a retired captain with the San Jose Fire Department, is a volunteer who spends a chunk of his Fridays shuttling meals to elderly residents of beachfront communities near Santa Cruz. Sometimes, he says, he's delivering a different kind of nourishment -- a link to other people, contained in a bit of conversation.

Volunteers also help keep tabs on elderly people who live alone. A Meals on Wheels driver in Santa Cruz County recently found a client who had fallen and been on the floor for six hours. But it would have been much longer if the driver hadn't been making a meal delivery.

"A lot of them don't connect with people all that often," Hoenisch said. "You find that you're staying longer than you anticipated, but I've got all day. I'll stay and talk

with them."

For Meals on Wheels for Santa Cruz County, the struggle now is to preserve a service that is a

lifeline for thousands of people. Squeezed by government funding cuts, the organization nonetheless has seen demand for meals rise because of the economic downturn. So the nonprofit agency that served nearly 160,000 meals last year is asking Wish Book readers to help support delivery of a special meal and gift basket on Christmas Day.

"We know that during the year, we're providing a really important social contact for people. We're filling their soul and their stomach," said Lisa Berkowitz, program director for Meals on Wheels for Santa Cruz County. "But during the holiday time, it takes on all kinds of increased importance. People start thinking about holidays past, and who's not around any more. It becomes doubly important to make sure we're making contact with those individuals and giving them a really warm holiday experience."

The agency has provided that Christmas cheer in the past, but is strapped this year as it tries to cope with a \$200,000 funding reduction from federal, state and county governments since 2008.

"It's kind of been the perfect storm," Berkowitz said. "We've seen a reduction in county funding, and we've seen a reduction in what people are able to pay" for meals.

Last year, Meals on Wheels projected it would serve 149,000 meals, but it ended up providing 157,396 meals because of the need. The agency asks clients to contribute toward the cost, with a voluntary suggested payment of \$2.50 a meal. But in these recent recessionary years, Berkowitz said the

HEARTLAND QUALITY
OMAHA STEAKS
SINCE 1917

SAVE
up to **64%**

Plus, get
3 FREE Gifts

Special Code: **45069ZWN**

To order: www.OmahaSteaks.com/print71
or call 1-877-605-0496

The Mercury News

MercuryNews.com

average contribution has dropped from \$1.10 to 99 cents per meal.

The agency has tried cost-cutting measures, such as delivering several days' frozen meals in bulk, but those can only go so far.

To continue to deliver meals on Christmas to about 200 housebound seniors, Meals on Wheels for Santa Cruz County needs Wish Book readers' help. Each donation of \$9 will buy food for a holiday meal. Contributions of \$15 will purchase items to put in holiday gift baskets for three housebound seniors.

After his retirement from the San Jose Fire Department in 2009 after breaking his pelvis and legs in a fire call, Hoenisch had been looking for some way to give back to the community. He discovered Meals on Wheels. After more than 25 years as a firefighter, showing up at the doorstep of people in need felt familiar. His training in the medical corps in the Navy and his firefighting experience help him notice when people on his route are in trouble.

Hoenisch's wife, Laurie, often accompanies him on routes, and sometimes also volunteers at Meals on Wheels' offices in Santa Cruz. And his son Matthew, a sophomore at Aptos High School, has also gotten involved, volunteering to wash the agency's delivery vans with his classmates, who earn community service hours toward their graduation.

After eight months doing the route, Hoenisch has gotten particularly close to Bob and Jean Somers -- even stopping by to drop off some salmon he'd caught on a fishing trip recently. He likes listening to stories from Bob, who flew 747s before retiring from Pan Am in 1976.

"You make friends on this route; it's fun," Hoenisch said. "It's something to do, and it makes you feel good."

Wish Book readers' donations will also support Meals on Wheels programs in Santa Clara, San Mateo and Alameda counties, which have seen similar increases in demand, as well as food programs for low-income people run by the Second Harvest Food Bank of Santa Clara and San Mateo Counties, and by the Tri-City Free Breakfast Program in Fremont.

Comments about Wish Book stories? Email

wishbook@mercurynews.com or call coordinator Sue McAllister at 408-920-5833. "Like" our Facebook page at www.facebook.com/mercurynews.wishbook.



Send flowers for any occasion
Bouquets
 from **\$19.99** +s/h
ProFlowers
 Offer ONLY available at:
proflowers.com/happy
 or call 1.877.804.1133

Print Powered By  FormatDynamics™