

Published March 6th, 2019

## Meals on Wheels helps Lamorinda seniors stay in own homes

By Sora O'Doherty



Meals on Wheels volunteer Greg Holm arrives at a home in Lafayette. Photo Sora O'Doherty

Former firefighter Greg Holm used to know Lamorinda like the back of his hand. He feels comfortable driving his own car around the small, twisty lanes of Lamorinda where he was volunteering to drive a Meals on Wheels route on Feb. 26. The usual driver had a family emergency, but Holm was happy to step in to deliver meals to the 16 clients on the route.

At each stop, he would check his list to see what type of meal the client was to receive, and if there were any special delivery instructions, which there quite often were. Each client might get either a regular meal, which is low salt and low fat; a regular meal with fruit, which has less sugar; or a special meal for those on a sodium restricted regime, chiefly heart and kidney patients. To receive low sodium meals, a doctor's approval is required. In addition to the hot daily meal, some clients also receive a deli meal, a light lunch consisting of a salad, sandwich or wrap. These supplemental meals are

really for those clients who have no other way of getting groceries, according to Nancy Raniere, nutrition services division manager of Diablo Region, the contractor that distributes meals for Meals on Wheels.

As Holm made his way through the route, he patiently waited for clients to make their way to the door. Often the door was open, with the instruction to come in to deliver the meal. If a client does not respond, and the door is locked, the meal cannot not be left for them. Sometimes Holm was warmly greeted by clients who were clearly delighted both to receive the food but also to have a chance to chat a little with the volunteer who delivered it, knowing that the volunteers are charged with looking out for the clients, and getting help if anything is amiss. A number of clients don't speak English, and several spoke only Russian.

Nancy, 87, has been living in Lafayette for three years, having moved up from Modesto three years ago to be closer to her family. Her daughter lives in Lafayette, her son in Dublin, and another daughter lives in Castro Valley, while her "baby" lives in New York. She has eight grandchildren. Nancy has vision trouble, but manages to watch television with her huge glasses. Arthritis has twisted her hands and makes it impossible for her to cook. She enjoys the meals delivered, "very, very much. I like everything," she enthused. She receives one meal a day from Meals on Wheels. Her children stock her fridge and cook meals she stores in her freezer.

Carolyn, 70, has lived in Lafayette for two years after her social worker found her small apartment in a cul-de-sac. She currently has no family in the area, but her son, a church minister, is moving back from Florida soon. Born in Fresno, Carolyn started working for her father, who owned a trucking company in Las Vegas. She drove for him for several years, delivering construction materials. She was a cross-country trucker for 10 years and she became accustomed to eating sandwiches while driving. To this day, she really likes sandwiches, and she gets a deli meal in addition to the hot meal of the day. Carolyn has great difficulty moving about, and her son would like her to move in with him, his wife and their two girls, but she is happy on her own, and Meals on Wheels allows her to continue to live independently, which fulfills the organization's avowed purpose of enabling seniors to live on their own for as long as possible.

Rose, 84, lives with her husband, 88, in the same house where they have lived for 50 years. They raised six children, and have seven grandchildren, but their children are scattered, mostly in the military. Rose has her "kitchen cabinet," friends of her son who, now that she's older, are happy to help her out. Rose is retired from an insurance company in San Francisco, and her husband was a journeyman sheet metal worker. Rose had enjoyed cooking, but she had to give it up because of a leg ailment that makes it impossible for her to stand at the stove. The first thing to go from their diet was fresh fruit and vegetables, and she is especially happy to receive the meals from Meals on Wheels because she gets a balanced diet. She enjoys the volunteers who come in, deliver the food, and check on her and her husband. The volunteers, are "very pleasant people. I really appreciate them," she said, adding, "I've made a couple of friends!" Rose couldn't emphasize enough how much she and her husband appreciate the service.

Meals on Wheels of Contra Costa, Inc. subsidizes 2,200 meals daily in Contra Costa County and is a nonprofit coalition of all the public and nonprofit agencies, and senior citizen advisory groups involved in providing Meals on Wheels services to frail homebound elders in the county. According to Marti Carlson, community engagement specialist for the nonprofit, Meals on Wheels of Contra Costa, Inc. is the only agency in the county raising funds to provide the meals delivered to homebound elders served by the Meals

on Wheels program.

Diablo Region delivers between 1,800 and 1,900 Meals on Wheels meals daily in Central Contra Costa County. Diablo Region, recently under the direction of Interim Executive Director Carrie Blanding, are the "boots on the ground," so to speak, delivering to individual clients and also checking out the CC Cafes at the Senior Centers, according to Raniere..

According to Community Engagement Specialist Marti Carlson, Meals on Wheels of Contra Costa, Inc., is the umbrella group that is responsible for the fundraising and they liaise with the county, which provides a nutritionist who makes up the menus each month, meeting federal guidelines for nutritional content.

In Lamorinda, one route covers Lafayette and another covers Moraga and Orinda. Each route has 16 clients, and delivery to both routes requires 10 volunteers, each driving one route once a week, since the routes are some of the longest in the area.

Volunteers seem happy to use their own vehicles, and can, but rarely do, declare their mileage as a tax deduction, according to Raniere. Each driver receives an hour of training and orientation. Before driving their first route, new drivers do a ride-along with an experienced driver. Volunteers sign confidentiality agreements, and security training agreements and drivers are mandated reporters of any situation they think is abusive. According to Carlson, there is always a need for more volunteer drivers, but there is also a long list of substitute drivers. Many local groups, such as local churches or Rotary groups, volunteer to drive. All volunteers are subject to background checks.

Meals are delivered to clients five days a week. On Friday, delivered frozen meals for Saturday and Sunday are provided for those who need it. Meals are also provided in advance of holidays. Meals on Wheels clients receive at least one meal for every day of the year.

Raniere says that the Lamorinda area routes are pretty stable, with people who have been on the routes for a long time. The most common reason people come off is because they are going to an assisted living facility, she added.

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