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Mel Matchett and Rick McCaghy volunteer weekly with Meals on Wheels.

Keeping seniors well-fed and connected

BY BARB MOSHER,
CONTRIBUTING WRITER

Restaurant food trucks have recently become a common sight in northern Michigan, travelling around and setting up shop at festivals, parking lots, and other locations to prepare and sell a variety of cuisines. But Antrim County Commission on Aging's Meals on Wheels program has had vehicles rolling around the area for more than 40 years, delivering hot, nutritious, and delicious meals right to the doors of senior citizens, enabling them to live independently as long as possible.

"The goal of Meals on Wheels is to help people stay in their homes as long as they safely can," said Judy Parliament, ACCOA's director. "To do that, it's vital that they have a healthy diet from a balanced menu."

Nationwide, Meals on Wheels has been keeping older Americans safe and well-fed since 1954, with more than 5,000 community-based programs now serving nearly two-and-a-half million seniors annually. The coronavirus pandemic has increased the need for MW services as temporary quarantines and ongoing concerns about exposure to Covid-19 have left even more senior citizens isolated in their homes.

Parliament said her agency has seen requests for home deliveries double this year with new applications coming from seniors who are not technically "homebound" but are leery of exposure to the novel virus while grocery shopping. In addition, when the pandemic forced the program's four congregate meal sites to cease operations, some of those who regularly ate there are now receiving meals at home instead. Last month, MW staff and volunteers brought meals to 170 homes (one to five times per week depending on each client's needs) on four routes throughout the county.

One of MW's newest clients is Elk Rapids resident Lois Lamoreaux. Severe arthritis in her hips and shoulders has made it increasingly difficult for the 83-year-old to prepare food.

"It's just gotten so hard for me to do," she said. "A friend who has been getting (Meals on Wheels) suggested it, and I knew of others who do also, so I thought I'd call to see if I was eligible."

A 15-minute phone screening qualified Lamoreaux, who asked for twice-a-week hot meal deliveries and two frozen meals each week that she can put aside for the weekend. She was surprised and delighted when service began the next day.

"I was just amazed," she said. "It's very nice of them. The meals are really good, and they're big. I can't eat all of it in one sitting, so I save it for later in

the day or for the next day."

When Lamoreaux opens the door to a MW volunteer on Thursdays, it's likely to be one of three Elk Rapids residents who share that day's local route: Mel Matchett, Rick McCaghy, and Howard Richter. The friends take turns working in pairs to deliver meals to up to 20 homes each week, picking the truck up at Sacred Heart Church, driving it to the meal preparation site in Bellaire where its loaded, and dropping the meals off as they return to Elk Rapids.

Matchett's been volunteering with MW for 15 years after a friend asked him to ride along as a substitute on a delivery route. Having retired from his job as a Michigan State University Extension regional director a few years earlier, Matchett was happy to find a new way to help others.

"My paid work had been serving people, and (Meals on Wheels) fit that mold," he said, adding that it was a perfect complement to volunteer work he was already doing with 4-H, Rotary International, and First Presbyterian Church.

Matchett has recruited a number of new volunteers for MW including McCaghy who's in his 14th year with the program. He said the opportunity to be a friendly and caring face on the other side of the front door is what keeps him delivering meals to seniors, recalling a day when a client didn't respond to their knocking and doorbell ringing. Volunteers are trained for that scenario, and McCaghy discovered the elderly woman had fallen and spent the night on the floor with no way to call for help.

"We were able to get in, call 911, get her water, and wait with her," he said. "It's not the only time we've maybe saved someone's life."

Many MW recipients live alone, and the delivery volunteers are often the only person they see all day. Making that regular connection with seniors is a key component of the MW mission.

"These people depend on the meals," said Matchett,



Rick McCaghy and Mel Matchett deliver a hot meal to Elk Rapids resident Lois Lamoreaux.

Photo by Barb Mosher

whose 96-year-old mother is helped by the Charlevoix County Meals on Wheels program. "But the personal contact is also important, someone checking in on them regularly. We're all going to be there some day. I'm just paying it forward."

Antrim County Meals on Wheels is funded through a combination of state and federal grants, millage dollars, and private donations. While clients are encouraged to contribute what they can, no one is required to pay for meals. Even so, Parliament believes there are many more seniors who could benefit from the program than are currently doing so.

"We feel the program is under-utilized, especially in the Elk Rapids area," she said. "A lot of times people will say 'Save it for someone who needs it more.' But that's not what it's about. It's about making sure everyone gets the nutrition they need to stay healthy."

For more information on receiving meals or volunteering, call 231-533-8703 or visit www.antrimcounty.org/coa.

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