



Bill Johnson, left, and Luanna Fleugge load their vehicles with meals ready for delivery.

Delivering More Than a Meal

Lane County's Senior Meals Program offers friendship, safety checks and nutrition

By Pam Spettel

The welcoming aroma of chicken and gravy greets visitors at the front door of the Viking Sal Senior Center in Junction City on a rainy Wednesday morning. In the open kitchen behind the dining room, a gaggle of happy volunteers packages up individual meals, stacks them into coolers, and loads the coolers into vehicles for the day's Meals on Wheels deliveries.

In addition to overseeing Meals on Wheels, the Senior Meals Program runs 11 Café 60 dining rooms around Lane County. The program serves

people ages 60 and older and their spouses, regardless of income. In 2016, the Lane County program served just under 60,000 meals, says Program Director Sandy Karsten.

"We know that for people of any age, a nutritious diet is the foundation of good health," says Sandy. "These meals help our seniors recover more quickly from illness, and help to manage chronic health conditions like diabetes.

"We also provide a social support network, which is shown to help seniors maintain their independence and stay healthier in general. We get acquainted during our Meals on Wheels visits, and



JoAnn Stewart portions out meals.

To volunteer or donate to the Senior Meals Program, call:

- ▶ Rural Lane County and Springfield, (541) 682-4368
- ▶ Eugene, (541) 607-5065

To request Meals on Wheels services:

- ▶ Rural Lane County and Springfield, (541) 682-3353
- ▶ Eugene, (541) 607-5065
- ▶ Café 60, Junction City, Viking Sal Senior Center, 245 W. 5th Ave., Monday, Wednesday, Friday
- ▶ Café 60 Veneta, Fern Ridge Service Center, 25035 W. Broadway Ave., Monday, Wednesday, Friday
- ▶ www.laneseniormeals.org

look for things to be normal when we visit. If they're not, we call an emergency contact or case manager."

Marcia Scalise, program manager at the Junction City Senior Center, agrees about the value of the program.

"Half of our seniors live alone, which isn't conducive to good nutrition," says Marcia. "People say they first come to Café 60 for companionship, then they stay for a good meal."

Sandy says the program could not happen without the dedication and care of its volunteers, who are its backbone.

"We are volunteer driven," says Sandy. "A huge part of our concern is reaching out to new volunteers. Many volunteers age out themselves, so we're always looking for people to take part. Even if we had funding to meet the needs of the communities we serve, we might not have the volunteer support to run the program."

Deb Hart of Junction City has volunteered with the program for four years. She works two or three days a week in the dining room and helps with some of the office work.

"Volunteering here is like Hotel California," Deb chuckles. "Once you start, you just can't leave. It's as good for us volunteers as it is for those we serve."

"I love the people, and watching out for them. We treat it like a restaurant here, catering to our seniors. I started because I was having a bout of depression and visited with my pastor. He said that the Lord

blesses what we put our hands to, and suggested that I get involved with Meals on Wheels. I started the very next day and haven't looked back"

Bill Johnson does not recall exactly how long he has been a senior meals volunteer, but it has been 12 or 13 years. Fellow volunteer Darin Olson has been at it for about two years.

"I'm so glad we do this," says Darin. "We feel like we really make a difference in our community."

The Junction City and surrounding area Meals on Wheels currently does not have the capacity to add new seniors to their routes, but frozen meals can be delivered to homebound seniors. Frozen meals also are available for days fresh meals are not available. The outreach area is about a 90-minute radius from downtown Junction City.

JoAnn Stewart has been volunteering for seven years, and says the program is a win-win.

"It's a win for the seniors, but I also feel so blessed," she says. "I love getting to know the people. Sometimes we are the only friend they see."

Early guests to the senior center on this Wednesday are Cafe 60 regulars Bette Sandford, who will be 89 years old in June and Alice Bergstrom.

"I've lived in Junction City all my life, and worked for years in the school here," Bette says. "Then I became a senior companion. I delivered Meals on Wheels, and I used to work here in the kitchen."

Alice adds, "I come because I like talking with the people here. And the food is good, too." ■