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Waiting list for hungry elderly

BY BOB JOHNSON
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State budget cuts have forced nutrition officials in Santa Cruz County to put homebound elderly residents on a waiting list to receive food.

The food and nutrition services agency began a waiting list for home meals that grew to 80 people by the end of 1991. The end of the winter illness season and rigorous screening has reduced the waiting list to 12, but agency officials wonder at what cost.

"There have been cases of people having to go into a nursing home because we couldn't serve them," said Beverly Calvo, who administers food programs for the elderly for the agency. "But we don't even have the staff time to document a strong case for what we know is happening."

With the program capped at 400 meals a day, elderly residents who are unable to cook must wait up to a week before they can be served, Calvo said. A referral from a physician, a hospital or the Visiting Nurses Association allows an applicant to avoid the waiting list.

Appeal for aid from China

Under founding director Al Di-Ludovico, the food and nutrition services agency received funding for a children's food program in the 1970s after publicly appealing for foreign aid from China. Demonstrations in Sacramento by Santa Cruz elderly made the agency one of the best-funded food programs for the elderly in the state under director Sam Karp in the 1980s.

"The times are different — back in the 1980s, there was money to be had if you could make a case for it," agency director Bob Garcia said. "Now we have to do virtually as much advocacy as before just to hang onto the money we already have."

"We are feeling the backlash of our activism of the early 1980s," said Jennifer Davis, executive director of the Seniors Council of Santa Cruz and San Benito counties.

Used 'blackmail'

"At least we could blackmail (ex-Gov.) Jerry Brown on these things — (ex-Gov. George) Deukmejian and (Gov. Pete) Wilson didn't seem to care," Davis said.

The \$15,000 reduction in local home meals last year was the largest percentage cut in elderly nutrition in the state, Davis said.

Santa Cruz County could face the loss of an additional \$125,000 in elderly nutrition funding, out of \$500,000, under a ruling last month by U.S. District Judge Robert Takasugi that the higher funding levels received by some communities are illegal.