



Bill Lovejoy/Sentinel

Daniel Meza, a member of the Meals on Wheels kitchen staff, helps volunteer driver Penny Carless load up for her deliveries.

## Volunteers keep the wheels moving and the table set for county's seniors

By GREG MILLER

SENTINEL CORRESPONDENT

The kitchen at the Elena Baskin Live Oak Senior Center was bustling Monday morning as Meals on Wheels volunteers filled Styrofoam coolers with frozen meals, apples and milk cartons set for delivery to local home-bound seniors.

The volunteers were working, but smiling, too.

"It's really very rewarding," Capitola Penny Carless said as she and her husband wheeled a cart loaded with meals to their car. "Where else can you go where people are always happy

to see you?"

Santa Cruz County's Meals on Wheels program celebrates its 25th anniversary this year. Every day the program delivers about 540 meals to seniors confined to their homes, and serves another 350 meals at five dining sites throughout the county.

In addition to providing food, the program's volunteers are an important contact for seniors who live alone, said Lisa Berkowitz, program director.

"Sometimes we're the only people they see," she said.

As a result, volunteers are often

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the first to notice when someone needs help. Volunteers have come to the rescue in a variety of situations, from noticing a natural gas leak to giving a senior's dog a much-needed bath, Berkowitz said.

She also credits the 300 local volunteers with sparing the local program from some of the financial woes suffered by Meals on Wheels programs around the country. With the recent economic downturn, many programs have seen donations slow while demand for the program's services rises, according to a recent report in the Wall Street Journal.

The Santa Cruz program has an

Wednesday, May 2, 2001 SANTA CRUZ SENTINEL A-5

## Meals on Wheels

Meals on Wheels provides 350 meals a day at dining centers in Ben Lomond, Live Oak, Santa Cruz, Capitola and Watsonville, and delivers meals to another 540 seniors. For information about dining center meals, home-delivered meals or volunteering, call 464-3180.

annual budget of \$1.8 million funded through federal, state and local grants, as well as private donations. The program serves about 223,000 meals annually.

Each meal costs about \$7.50, and seniors are asked for a donation of \$1.75 per meal, though no one goes without if they cannot pay.

Volunteers save the Santa Cruz program about \$60,000 annually, Berkowitz said.

But since the proportion of seniors

in the population is growing rapidly, keeping up with demand will get more and more challenging. Seniors in the program receive six meals a week.

"Meals on Wheels programs across the country have to be real creative to be able to get meals out," Berkowitz said. "You just have to look at the demographics to know that's going to be more of an issue."

Meals on Wheels makes a huge difference in the lives of seniors unable to cook for themselves, like 78-year-

old Capitola resident Helen Hayford. She and her husband are legally blind.

"We both appreciate it so much," Hayford said as she was delivered a meal Monday morning.

Bob Sutherland, also of Capitola, said the meals have helped him put some weight back on.

Sutherland has emphysema, which has robbed him of the energy needed to shop for food and prepare meals.

"It's saves me. It really does," he said.

What's more, the service has improved his eating habits.

"I'm eating stuff I never ate before," he said. "I never used to eat broccoli, and I like broccoli now."

And judging from the comments of Penny Carless and others, the program makes a difference in the vol-

unteers' lives, too.

Dick Nolte, 83, of Santa Cruz, started delivering meals about eight months ago.

"I had spare time and had the idea that I'd like to do something more meaningful," he said.

"You can play a lot of golf and do all that, but sometimes you've got to

give something back."

Bill Denevan, a retired teacher, started volunteering for a more personal reason.

"My mom got Meals on Wheels, so I figured I owed them a little," he said.

Contact Greg Miller at [gmliller@santa-cruz.com](mailto:gmliller@santa-cruz.com).