

Serving the Underserved

Meals delivered to the elderly and disabled also provide food for the soul

BY NANCY NALL DERRINGER



PHOTOGRAPHS BY CYBELLE CODISH

Just two miles away from the Somerset Collection, inside the temple to suburban recreation and socializing that is the Troy Community Center, a handful of ordinary people are staving off hunger.

Not their own hunger, but that of others. The kind that threatens when you're old, sick, or disabled and your life has dwindled to your four walls, and you look forward to the person who knocks every day and hands over your Meals on Wheels delivery — typically a hot tray of meat with two vegetables and a cold pack of a sandwich and a couple of sides for later. For many, it's all they'll eat in a day. And the person who hands it over may be the only other person they see.

With the holidays approaching, food is a special concern. This ordinary Wednesday meal, arranged and paid for by the Area Agency on Aging, 1-B, is one thing, but holidays are not covered, and require special fundraising. If the elderly and disabled people served by the agency are to have any holiday meal at all, it will have to be paid for outside the regular budget. But then, Meals on Wheels has a lot of off-the-books elements.

Take Jim Forrer. He's a volunteer driver, one of dozens who buy their own gas and use their own vehicles to deliver Meals on Wheels. For three years, he's been making the rounds, getting to know his clients. Many are people he describes as "orphans" — those for whom a long life has led them to a lonely place, that of last man standing. "Hiding in the dark corners are people who have been put away by their families who have been forgotten, who have simply fallen through the cracks," he says. "They've outlived everyone, even their children."

Some have difficulty caring for themselves, either because of decreased mobility, incipient dementia, or depression. One day, one of Forrer's clients asked him if he smelled gas, and he offered to check the basement. The furnace seemed fine, he said, but maybe the water heater was the problem.

"Oh, that doesn't work," she said. For how long? he asked. Three years, she told him — three Michigan winters without hot water.

Forrer pulled some strings and got the appliance repaired. But it and all his other experiences taught him something: All is not well, even in the upmarket suburbs.

Forrer formed his own charity, Helping Angels. He wrangles food donations, calls in favors, begs restaurants for handouts (the Capital Grille has been a big supporter), hits drive-through windows at fast-food places, whatever works to help him get whatever he can for the aging, disabled, and poverty-stricken of Oakland County. He knows that if he didn't come by on weekends, some of them would go hungry between Friday and Monday deliveries.

People like Forrer, "the people who go door-to door, are the ones who see the most," says Sallie Justice, communications manager for the Area Agency on Aging, 1-B. The agency relies on the volunteers to tell them when a client has tipped into a zone where intervention is needed, although even that can be difficult.

"Most people don't want to leave their homes," Justice says.

That's understandable, and so this group at the Troy Community Center — volunteers and employees of Emerald Food Service, which has the food-preparation contract — is set up to feed Oakland County's poor, disabled, and elderly on this day. The cooks place steam-table trays on a table and put instant-read thermometers into them for a final check; the food must be 160 degrees both for safety and so that when the trays arrive, they're still hot enough for a satisfying meal. Today's menu is a barbecued pork riblet, potato wedge, and peas.

Starting the line is Kirk Morgan, the cook who oversaw its preparation.

It's not much of a process: Fill three holes in a tray, send the tray through the sealer, and pack them into heated delivery bags. The food is prepared according to strict nutrition guidelines; that potato wedge may look like a McDonald's hash brown, but it's not deep-fried, and the riblet is boneless for a reason. Many of the people who get it lost the ability to gnaw meat from bones a long time ago.

The holidays are rapidly approaching, and the agency is again doing its fundraising for Christmas, Hanukkah, and New Year's Day. Seven thousand people in their six-county territory will get these meals, which cost about \$6. The need is great every year, but recent economic calamities are expected to add to the burden.

It's hard to overemphasize how tenuous some of these old people's lives are. When gas went up to \$4 a gallon in the summer of 2008, many called the agency in a panic, fearful the economic pressure would cause volunteers to abandon their routes, and then how would they eat?

"We told them we'd get it there if we had to ride bicycles," Forrer says. It hasn't come to that, but the need is great just the same.

Donations may be made through the agency's Web site: <http://aaa1b.com/>. Or givers can call the agency at 800-852-7795.