

Senior Outreach Services' meals fill nutrition void: Holiday Spirit

By John Horton, The Plain Dealer

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Seventy-eight-year-old John Johnson sat down hungry. He pulled in a deep breath and savored the mouth-watering smell wafting from the nearby kitchen at the Langston Hughes Center.

Ahhh, yes. Good eats awaited.

Life-saving eats.

The nutritious meals served up free of charge by Senior Outreach Services help keep Johnson alive and well. The cane-carrying retiree hobbles into the center at Quincy Avenue and East 79th Street twice a day Monday through Friday to fill his belly.

He would never eat as healthy relying on his meager Social Security income.

"Without this," Johnson said before a recent lunch, "I'd be long gone by now. "

Senior Outreach Services, or SOS, enriches the lives of hundreds of older Clevelanders every day with food, care and various empowerment programs designed to put extra polish on a person's golden years.

The agency -- which celebrated its 30th anniversary this year -- benefits from this year's Plain Dealer Holiday Spirit campaign.

Money from the campaign will go toward building up SOS's new dinner program, which provides a 4 p.m. meal to seniors who visit the center in the Fairfax neighborhood, said Executive Director Delores Lynch.



Chuck Crow, The Plain Dealer
Birdie Welch takes part in a light aerobics class after lunch at the Langston Hughes Center.

The agency added the early evening meal to supplement a lunch program that serves more than 400 people a day.

"Once just wasn't enough," Lynch said.

SOS provides more than 90,000 meals a year, delivering most of those around noontime to homebound seniors scattered around Glenville, Hough, Mount Pleasant and other communities on the city's East Side. Lynch described this population as "nutritionally at risk," often because of thin finances that keep home pantries lean.

It's vitally important that the elderly eat properly, particularly given chronic health issues faced by many, Lynch said. It's key to keeping them strong and independent.

That's the focus of everything at SOS.

The agency tailors support services to clients to allow them to live well while aging. The program -- modeled after African village life -- emphasizes respect, reverence and caring for those who have earned their gray hairs with the passage of time.

SOS caregivers visit more than 160 seniors at their homes to offer help with housekeeping, grocery shopping and personal hygiene. Telephone calls go out to maintain connections and ensure everything is all right. Friendly faces regularly arrive at doorsteps so that homebound seniors know that they're not alone or forgotten.

Meanwhile, the center itself grows as a community gathering place.

SOS moved into the 22,000-square-foot Langston Hughes Center last year after a \$7 million renovation and expansion of the one-time library the agency now leases. (The Fairfax Renaissance Development Corp. financed the project.)

The long-desired facility provides the organization the home it never truly had. Previously, SOS operated out of a small administrative office at East 100th Street and Cedar Avenue. Workers ran programs and cooked meals from St. James AME Church on Cedar. The limited space prevented SOS from expanding its services.

That's no longer an issue. Money is, though, as the budget didn't grow with the available square footage, said Saroya Queen-Tabor, the agency's development director.

Grants and government funding -- which comprise most of the agency's \$1.1 million annual budget -- are increasingly tougher to land.

"We're struggling just like everyone else," Queen-Tabor said. "Don't be fooled by the new building. We still need checks."

That's because plenty of people need help. Aside from the hundreds of people assisted daily at their homes by SOS, dozens of seniors spend their time eating, socializing and participating in self-improvement activities at the center.

Mary Lou Wilson, 86, recently sent her first e-mail from the center's computer lab after a bit of training. ("I never thought I'd be able to do it," she admitted.) Annie Kennebrew, 74, discovered a

love -- and talent -- for painting after attending a Friday morning art class and started walking better after fitness sessions.

Silvia Smith, 88, described herself as "a basket case" before finding SOS four years ago. Sitting around a lunch table with friends last week, she called the agency the best thing that ever happened to her.

"It's letting us live a little," Smith said.

And better, too.

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