

\$15K grant will help hungry seniors, agency says



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1:57 p.m. EDT March 15, 2016



(Photo: Provided)

Jewish Family Service of Cincinnati was recently awarded (<http://www.ifscinti.org/aging-caregiver-services/senior-hunger-assistance/>) a \$15,000 grant to help low-income seniors receive nutrition assistance through the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP).

JFS is one of three Jewish agencies nationally selected for the initiative, called Solutions to Senior Hunger.

"We're all about social justice and making sure there's equity for all people," said Beth Schwartz, president and CEO of the family service. "If we don't speak loudly about our elders and make sure that we're raising awareness about these issues and these barriers for them, who will?"

Food insecurity among seniors is a hidden but prevalent problem, JFS says. One in seven U.S. seniors over the age of 60 live in poverty, and 5.4 million seniors are food insecure, according to statistics from Mazon (<http://mazon.org/>), a non-profit Jewish organization committed to ending hunger in the United States and Israel.

Additionally, many American seniors who qualify for SNAP benefits don't participate in the program. Three out of five seniors who are eligible for the program do not participate, according to Mazon, which means "food" in Hebrew.

That's roughly 5.2 million seniors.

"It's the fastest growing demographic, but it has the least amount of funding opportunities," said Schwartz.

This is the second grant JFS has received from Solutions to Senior Hunger, which is a partnership between Mazon and the Association of Jewish Family & Children's Agencies.

JFS and 12 other agencies used the initial funding in 2014 to provide outreach materials to community partners and help seniors with the SNAP application process, said Stephanie Seyfried, aging services operations manager at JFS.

The second grant, which was awarded in December, will continue and expand those services. JFS says it will place a greater emphasis on advocacy this time around.

JFS has reached out to roughly 4,500 people since the first grant was awarded, Seyfried said.

Seyfried said the seniors she works with are facing many challenges. They are living on Social Security and Medicare, they have no additional income and living costs are going up. Additionally, many seniors may be in and out of the hospital.

Navigating the complicated SNAP system is an additional challenge, she said.

"For a lot of people that we serve, it's a very difficult system to handle," Seyfried said. "It's a lot for them to handle, especially on their own."

Schwartz knows some of those challenges firsthand.

In late February, the CEO decided to take the SNAP challenge, a trend in which an individual purchases food (http://site.foodshare.org/site/PageServer?pagename=programs_movement_education_snapchallenge) using the same monetary amount a low-income individual would receive in the SNAP program. Schwartz pretended she were a typical JFS client: an 82-year-old woman living alone who has diabetes.

This is the third time Schwartz has taken the SNAP challenge, but she was still surprised by the psychological toll it took on her.

"It's very eye-opening," she said. "It really does touch on what food insecurity is like. It's not that I didn't have food. I did. But you start doing weird things like counting pieces of bread or counting eggs because you don't want to run out."

Schwartz blogged about the experience (<http://www.ifscinti.org/2016/02/29/eating-on-food-stamps-2016/>) on JFS' website. She details one day when her daughter asked if they could get ice cream after school – a common excursion for the two.

She decided to cheat a little bit, having a Graeter's ice cream cone that cost \$3.25. She spent the rest of the day hungry because she didn't want to

spend more.

"It is hard to imagine one ice cream cone being completely out of reach," Schwartz wrote. "Of course it's a special treat (especially Graeter's) and it shouldn't be a daily occurrence, but for people living in poverty that one ice cream cone is completely unattainable."

Schwartz said more needs to be done to help hungry seniors.

Community organizations and senior centers provide much-needed support, which should be continued and expanded, Schwartz said. Seniors know they can go to those centers when they don't have enough food.

"That is important, just like our free and reduced price lunch program is to children living in poverty," Schwartz said. "They know they can get a hot meal."

For additional information on resources available to seniors, contact Jewish Family Service of Cincinnati at 513-469-1188.

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