

Honor Our Older Americans by Promoting Good Health

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Honor and support your community's seniors in ways that are meaningful to them. Ensuring they are healthy and receiving good nutrition is one way to do this.

Sadly, poor nutrition and even hunger is a hidden danger to our elders' health and well-being, especially for low income seniors. The statistics show a crisis.

According to research in the *Journal of Gerontology* (1999), the probability of a person experiencing a year below the poverty line at some point between the ages of 60 and 90 is 40% and about 1 out of every 2 people will fall below 125% of poverty for one year during their senior years. Our state's Office for the Aging reports that one out of every four older New Yorkers living at home is at risk of being undernourished. This statistic translates to 728,000 of our older neighbors.

In addition to not having enough money to buy food, there are other factors that affect seniors' access to adequate diets, including limitations on physical mobility, social isolation and reductions in taste and smell sensations. No matter what the issue, we know that poor nutrition exacerbates disease, increases disability, decreases resistance to infection, and extends hospital stays.

Government sponsored nutrition programs can help seniors who are at risk of being undernourished. Home Delivered Meals and Congregate Meals offer prepared meals to people at least 60 years of age. However, according to Princeton-based Mathematica Policy Research, 1 in 10 congregate meal participants and 1 in 6 home-delivered meal participants experienced food insecurity during the preceding month. Although the U.S. Dept. of Health and Human Services reports that the cost of one year's supply of home-delivered meals is about the same as one day in the hospital, due to federal funding limitations, nutrition services offered through these programs are not always available.

The good news is that one nutrition program is available for all seniors who qualify. The Food Stamp Program provides the purchasing power to everyone who is eligible to buy the groceries they want to eat.

Seniors have supported the Food Stamp Program with their federal tax dollars, just as they have paid into Social Security or Medicare. And just like preventative medications available through Medicare, food stamp benefits provide access to

good nutrition, reducing the incidence of chronic health problems, and allowing seniors to remain in their own homes and communities.

The bad news is that older adults remain one of the largest underserved groups of potential food stamp participants. In 2003, only 28% of our nation's eligible elders received food stamps compared to 74% of eligible children, and 56% of all eligible individuals (U.S. Department of Agriculture, 2005). In New York, we estimate that 75% of eligible seniors living Upstate and 50% of eligible seniors in New York City are not receiving the nutrition assistance the Food Stamp Program offers.

There are a few key reasons for these abysmal statistics. First, the U.S. Department of Agriculture cites a lack of information as the main reason that seniors do not apply for this nutrition assistance program.

A second well-researched reason few seniors apply for food stamps is the myth that they will get only a small amount, such as the \$10 minimum, each month. However, the truth is that for New York's one-person elderly households, the median monthly benefit ranges from \$76 (upstate) to \$117 (NYC). The frequency of those receiving the minimum benefit of \$10 is as common as those receiving the *maximum* benefit of \$139. Throughout New York, the average food stamp benefit for seniors ranges from \$77 to \$164 each month, depending upon the household size (see chart below). These benefits go a long way at the grocery store!

Poor nutrition costs! It costs older people by decreasing resistance to infection and disease and increasing disability. It costs caregivers by increasing worry and care giving demands. We all pay the increased health care costs related to complication rates, hospital stays, and mortality rates. Poor nutrition costs in people and in dollars.

If one in every four of our older neighbors is at risk of being undernourished, chances are high that we all know someone who may benefit from the Food Stamp Program. For more information on the Food Stamp Program and how to apply, see the Nutrition Outreach and Education Program (NOEP) section of our website at www.HungerNYS.org.

Many of the statistics referenced in this article may be found in the recent Center on Hunger and Poverty report, Hunger and Food Insecurity Among the Elderly, and may be accessed at www.centeronhunger.org.

Food Stamp Allotment and FS Income by number of persons aged 65+ in Case (Non Public Assistance) (OTDA, September 2002)

	Total NPA FS Cases Age 65+	1 Person Household		2 Person Household			
		Count	Mean FS Monthly Benefit	Mean FS Net Income	Count	Mean FS Monthly Benefit	Mean FS Net Income
NY State	147,463	125,710			21,753		
NY City	108,846	90,389	\$96	\$505	18,457	\$164	\$765
Rest of State	38,617	35,321	\$77	\$703	3,296	\$114	\$992

The Nutrition Consortium of NYS is a statewide private non-profit organization whose mission is to fight hunger in New York through outreach, public education, policy analysis and research.