

■ Hunger and the Elderly

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Across the nation, millions of senior citizens are living out their dreams of retirement. After years of working hard, they are finally able to relax and spend more time with their families. At the same time, one in five of these Americans over the age of 65 live in or near poverty. In fact, according to research conducted by the Urban Institute, these seniors are not able to relax at all - 1.9 million of them are faced each year with the impossible choice of buying food or buying needed medicine.

America's Second Harvest is the largest domestic hunger-relief organization in the country with a nation-wide network of nearly 200 food banks. Each year 16 percent of the emergency food clients America's Second Harvest serves are seniors. Ruth and George are just one example. They live in Louisiana where the poverty rate for elderly citizens was one of the ten highest in the country between the years of 1995 and 1997.

"There's just nothing left at the end of the month. We try to pay for everything, and our tithes to the church, because I believe that's what we should do, but sometimes it's a question of do we get medicine or food." - Ruth, food bank client

According to the study Profile of Older Americans: 1998 done by the Administration on Aging, most seniors have at least one chronic condition and many have multiple conditions. While many older Americans live on a fixed income that probably won't change in their lifetime, the prices for prescription drugs in the U.S. are skyrocketing. A recent study by Families USA shows that prices for drugs taken by seniors rose as much as four times faster than inflation last year. Ruth and George for instance pay nearly half of their monthly income to prescription drugs. When all is said and done, their kitchen usually only holds the basics - beans, rice, and cereal.

Aside from the obvious health risks of forgoing medical care, seniors who experience hunger are at risk for serious health problems. Hunger increases their risk for stroke, exacerbates pre-existing ill health conditions, limits the effectiveness of many prescription drugs, and may affect brain chemistry increasing the incidence of depression and isolation. Research suggests that insufficient nutrient intake accounts for a disproportionate amount of health care costs among low-income elderly individuals, unrelated to the aging process.

America's Second Harvest food banks are working in communities across the country to serve the needs of older Americans who do not have enough to eat. For example, the Food Bank of Northeast Louisiana runs an Adopt-A-Senior program that allows individuals and organizations to provide food for a year to a senior in their community for a \$100 donation. Any senior who is 65 or older and meets the United States Department of Agriculture poverty guidelines - an income of no more than \$855 a month for an individual and no more than \$1,150 a month for a couple - is eligible for the program.

Food bank executive director, Melinda Mintz says that the Adopt-A-Senior program was specifically designed to ensure that senior citizens would not have to spend their remaining years worrying about the sort of things that plague Ruth and George, and the community's whole-hearted support of the program echoes her concern. Youth groups and Sunday school classes not only raise money to sponsor seniors, they also volunteer helping to pack the food boxes each month. Schools have held contests to see which class can raise the most money for the program. One school sponsored 20 seniors with money it received through a grant. The program is definitely helping. Ruth can attest to that.

"We've never asked for charity before, but, yes, this food will make a difference. This will mean the difference between getting a prescription filled and not getting it filled." - Ruth, food bank client

America's Second Harvest food banks across the nation have similar programs in place to help seniors that need food assistance in their communities. For more

information on services, or how you can get involved, visit the [America's Second Harvest web site](#).

Facts:

- Nearly 20% of older Americans, one in five, live in poverty or near poverty.
- Approximately 4 million of the emergency food clients served by the America's Second Harvest network each year are elderly.
- America's Second Harvest research shows that 28% of all clients (includes all age groups) had to choose between buying food and buying medicine or filling prescriptions.
- In 1988, an estimated 25% of eligible seniors with incomes below the Federal poverty level participated in the food stamp program. In contrast, 62% of elderly respondents with incomes below the federal poverty level participated in congregate meal programs, such as charitable food programs supplemented by TEFAP commodities. This disparity is believed to be the result of the unnecessary complexity of food stamp applications and the stigma sometimes attached to food stamps as welfare.

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