

Meals on Wheels now serving West Palm Beach

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When Elma Hatch was diagnosed with stage four cancer, she was so weak that preparing her own meals became a grueling task.

"I was so tired from cooking, I couldn't eat," said Hatch, 85.

Hatch had heard of Meals on Wheels, but until several months ago, the program didn't exist in Palm Beach County. That's when Hatch was put in touch with Charlie Ring, founder and former president of Episcopal Charities of Southeast Florida.

Ring was retired but looking for a way to stay busy and make a difference. So he started a West Palm Beach chapter of Meals on Wheels, a national federally funded program

The program is starting modestly, providing 55 lunches a week. It has a budget this year of \$140,000, but unlike the program in Broward County with a \$4.5 million budget, Ring isn't looking for federal or state money. Instead, he's hoping for charitable donations and grants.

The meals cost on average about \$4.50 for the individuals, who qualify by being up to 200 percent above the federal poverty line. The price is flexible.

There are separate programs through the county that provide free meals for poverty-stricken elderly residents.

Ring said his Meals on Wheels customers average about \$15,000 to \$20,000 a year income, mainly from Social Security.

"We have a lady in Riviera Beach who is 90 years old, weighs 90 pounds and she's completely homebound," Ring said. "We come in and deliver that meal, and in many cases we're the only people they see all day."

The meals are cooked and prepared at Good Samaritan Medical Center.

"The CEO wanted the hospital to be more engaged in the community, and he saw this as a vehicle to achieve that," Ring said.

The volunteers pick up the meals every morning at 11 a.m. and place them in thermal bags so they arrive hot. Ring said it's one of the few programs in the county that provides hot meals.

"I have felt that having this ability to have one very good meal arrive, without my having to cook it, has helped me get some of my strength back," said Hatch, who lives at the St. James Residence on South Olive Avenue. "People are quite amazed at how well I've been doing."

The program runs five days a week, and the customers receive a different meal each day. It comes with a main entrée, a roll, two vegetables, a dessert and cranberry or apple juice.

Hatch's only regret is that the meals only come once a day, and it doesn't run on weekends. She said she

manages to cook a meal on Saturday that she eats throughout the weekend. Ring said many of the customers "scrounge for food" for breakfast and dinner, and use the Meals on Wheel lunch as their main course of the day.

Hatch said she's been talking to Meals on Wheels officials about providing an extra frozen meal on Fridays to eat on the weekends.

Ring's main concern moving forward is receiving more donations and finding more volunteers. With gas prices surging, Ring said it's more difficult to find volunteers. Also, he rarely leaves the West Palm Beach boundaries and barely goes west of the turnpike.

Anyone interested in participating in Meals on Wheels or volunteering can call (561) 802-6979.

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