

Good neighbors share acts of kindness



Your Turn
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Guest columnist

Each weekday when I arrive at work, I see the almost 100 volunteers arriving to pick up their coolers for Meals on Wheels home deliveries.

These volunteers head out in all kinds of weather to deliver a nutritious meal and visit with our senior clients. They know, as MIFA's founders knew in 1968, that by serving, we can make our community a better place.

Volunteers from Kingsway Christian Church adopted a meals route in 2014. Their experience mirrors what we hear from other volunteers and clients.

One couple on their route is in their 80s. The husband is confined to bed, and his wife suffers from a chronic disease making it difficult for her to perform care-giving. Our volunteers see firsthand how two hot meals and a friendly visit are a blessing for this couple.

Another client is close to 90 and lives alone. Yet, each day she greets volunteers with a cheery, "Good morning, darlings! The door is open."

Our Kingsway volunteers are quick to point out the other, not-so-obvious advantages to delivering Meals on Wheels: strong positive relationships between volunteers and clients develop, and the benefits flow both ways.

Meals on Wheels is MIFA's largest and best-known program. In the past year, Meals on Wheels served more than 560,000 meals to over 3,600 seniors; of those clients, over 2,000 received home-delivered meals, and the others were served at congregated sites.

Surveyed clients reported the following: 94 percent eat healthier foods as a result of the program, 92 percent believe the program helps them feel better, and 95 percent of home-delivered meal recipients believe the program helps them continue living in their own homes.

A few years ago, funding from the Plough Foundation made possible a collaboration called No Hungry Senior that enabled MIFA and other partners including Aging Commission of the Mid-

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South, Baptist Memorial Healthcare, Catholic Charities of West Tennessee, CoactionNet, Memphis Jewish Federation, Methodist Healthcare, Mid-South Food Bank and the University of Memphis School of Public Health, to expand meal delivery to seniors at the greatest risk of food insecurity and hunger.

Methodist Healthcare, a key referring partner, analyzed electronic medical records for patients who receive meals, comparing hospital utilization one year before and one year after meal service began. The data is incredibly encouraging. It indicates a 21 percent reduction in total encounters including emergency room visits and inpatient admissions. At a cost of about \$7 per meal, we can make an enormous difference for a senior.

An agency doesn't get to be 50 years old without doing some things right. At MIFA we are proud of our program results. We measure and analyze our program outcomes through a continuous improvement process. We are proud of our financial stewardship and grateful for our generous donors and volunteers. We are proud of our staff. We invest in training and pay attention to staff retention.

All of these best practices have helped ensure that MIFA is still here after 50 years and should ensure that MIFA will be here for future generations. But perhaps the most important factor in MIFA's longevity is what our founders knew in 1968 and what we – and our meals volunteers – still know today.

In a city often divided by fear, hate, suspicion, and misunderstanding MIFA offers a remedy that is both profound and practical: we can know our neighbors. By serving together, we can all make our community a better place.

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