

Farmers Market Coupons Support Healthy Eating

By Carol Harrison

She waited in line more than three hours to get a book of vouchers for the farmers market and another 12 weeks to use them, but the wait was worth it.

“We wait until the tomatoes are ripe,” said Ruth, an 11-year resident at Silvercrest who asked to be identified by first-name only. “Tomatoes . . . a few nice, flavorful tomatoes – there’s nothing like it.”

Ruth was one of 250 low-income seniors from Humboldt and Del Norte County to pick-up a \$20 book of vouchers to be exchanged for fruit, vegetable and other specialty crops at local farmers markets. She found her tomatoes at the Henderson Center market in mid- September, and still has plans to turn a gallon of cucumbers into five pints of pickles.

“My family was poor, but my father always had a big garden so I’ve always eaten healthy,” the 73-year-old said. “My mother canned tomatoes and beans, and we had pickled beets, regular beets and all the tomatoes we could get hold of, some of which we ran through the sieve for tomato juice.”

Ruth and two friends were among the 71 people who showed up at A1AA on June 16 to claim their booklets. Known as the Senior Farmers’ Market Nutrition Program, the vouchers are funneled through the state Department of Agriculture to Area 1 Agency on Aging, which then disperses them outright or to other food and senior groups in the two counties.

“We didn’t go last year because (my friend) was sick, but every other year we’ve been there,” said Ruth, who brought along her knitting to fill some of the time in A1AA’s jam-packed waiting room. “It’s first-come, first-serve, so we got here a little before 8:30 a.m.”

That was 90 minutes after Tici McCormack started the line at 7 a.m., and a good three hours before the final coupon found its way into qualified hands. An 8:30 a.m. arrival put Ruth and Co. in about 50th place in the line, which didn’t begin snaking into the office until 9 a.m.

“It’s a very popular program and it’s been a long time since we’ve had enough sets to meet demand,” A1AA nutritionist and registered dietitian Debby Krzesni said.

Krzesni said the latest statistics show one in seven seniors in America is hungry right now.

“People who are willing to come that early and wait that long for the coupons, you know they need them,” Krzesni said.

Even so, one of every four coupons went unredeemed by the recipients in 2013.

“My guess is the coupons get lost or forgotten; illness, hospitalization or institutionalization happens; or they lack transportation,” Krzesni said. “A lot can happen between when you pick up a coupon and when you plan to use it.”

Ruth and her friends are examples. One has been ill and may not make it to the market this year. Illness prompted Ruth to give her coupons away years ago, “so they wouldn’t be wasted.”

Another challenge: Silvercrest changed its van schedule from Tuesday and Thursday to Tuesday and Friday. The new schedule misses the Henderson Center market by a day.

“In past years, our van would take us there, but we have to find our own way now,” Ruth said. “It makes it harder to use the coupons.”

But Ruth has been figuring out how to eat healthy on a low income for years. A dedicated Winco shopper, she found two 12 oz. packages of raspberries for \$2.98 a day before the voucher giveaway.

“I almost had heart failure,” she said. “I bought two and then had to figure out what I could give up on my list.”

Up until two years ago, she was running out of grocery money at the end of the month and tired of getting whatever she could from the food bank, often “fattening things that were all starch.”

“I didn’t know much about CalFresh and didn’t know if I was eligible,” she said. “People said I’d only get \$16 a month or less, but the way groceries had gone up, I applied. I got way more than people said I would.”

Between the farmers market vouchers and CalFresh, Ruth said she feels “blessed,” even as she and her friends miss having their own gardens.

“All three of us had one,” Ruth said of their pre-Silvercrest lives. “Working and weeding a garden is like therapy.”

A garden also enabled her mother to show her how to cook and prepare fresh food.

“People cook things to death, so all your vegetables are like mush, don’t taste good and look gray and yukky,” she said. “I was fortunate.”

“Use the farmers market vouchers and apply for CalFresh,” Krzesni said. “Seniors who experience food insecurity have lower nutrient intakes, and that leads to less energy, weaker immune systems, and high rates of hospitalization and mortality.

“Those who eat more fruit and vegetables and a balanced diet will be healthier, and healthier people take less to take care of medically. Everybody wins.”

The next Senior Farmers’ Market Nutrition Program voucher dispersal will be in June.

To apply for CalFresh, call the DHHS Call Center at 1-877-410-8809 and follow the phone tree. Seniors or the disabled who need help with the application or have difficulty leaving home should call A1AA at 442-3763 to schedule an appointment or home visit.

Area 1 Agency on Aging paid Carol Harrison to write this article.