

## **Del Norte Senior Nutrition Program Scrambling After Loss of \$250,000 Grant**

*by Carol Harrison*

The salad bar is gone, a hiring freeze is in place, and Del Norte Senior Center staffers have been asked to either reduce their hours or absorb extra duties without an increase in hours or pay while DNSC leadership figures out how to keep the congregate and home-delivered meal program afloat in the months ahead.

DNSC Executive Director Charlaine Mazzei learned Sept. 12 that Del Norte County's bid for an almost \$2 million Community Development Block Grant fell short.

"I'm not sure you could put my reaction in print," Mazzei said. "The sky isn't falling yet, but it's sure a lot closer to our heads."

DNSC spent \$302,000 – half of its budget – on nutrition programs in 2013-14. Monday through Friday with the exception of holidays, it served 16,543 meals at its Crescent City dining site and delivered another 18,630 to homes in the region. Revenue from the two-year Community Development Block Grant made up 24 percent of the congregate meal program and 45 percent of the home-delivered meals program.

"We have reserves we can go into if we absolutely have to, but that's only a short-term option," Mazzei said. "We have to figure out if the program is sustainable on the funding we can count on. CDBG isn't something we can count on."

Del Norte County's application sought funding for two public services programs (DNSC and Court-Appointed Special Advocates for children) and a pair of Smith River projects for water improvement along Fred Haight Drive and ADA upgrades at Community Hall.

Del Norte County Administrative Analyst Toni Self, the county's point person for CDBG grants, said she was "flabbergasted" at being bypassed after successful applications in 2008 and 2012.

"These are two extremely needy nonprofits," Self said. "The reason we were given for the denial was an overabundance of applications for public services."

Self said the state funded seven of the 16 applications requesting a combined \$63 million, but had only \$28.5 million to award compared to more than \$40 million in 2012.

At an exit interview Sept. 30, the details of which will be discussed at today's Del Norte County Board of Supervisors meeting, Self learned the county's application ranked 10<sup>th</sup>.

"We will re-apply in January for 2015, but at this point, I have no expectations," Self said.

Meanwhile, Mazzei is offering "minimal" meals at DNSC. Those meals are being prepared by the nutrition coordinator. The hiring freeze means the cook and assistant cook positions can't be filled.

Mazzei reduced the bookkeeper's hours from 27 to 20, chopped another five hours out of reception and is working with the nutrition coordinator to complete and streamline government mandated reporting requirements.

Mazzei said she's still a least \$21,000 in the hole and in "grave danger of burning out my one remaining person who knows how to cook."

That person is also the back-up driver for home-delivered meals.

"There's absolutely no room for anyone to take vacation or be sick," she said. "It's not sustainable. We'll be looking at the impact of the cuts we've already made, and we'll be expanding our grant pursuits and applying for more funding from different grantors."

Mazzei said the DNSC board has talked about a reduction in service days to make ends meet, "but we really don't know yet how close the cuts we have already put in place will get us to breaking even."

She is certain, however, that funding reductions in senior nutrition programs are short-sighted.

"It costs less to feed a senior for a year than it costs for one day in the hospital, and reducing medical costs is supposed to be a major public policy goal," she said. "The senior nutrition program is one of the most economical ways to do that. If you want to keep people healthy and in their homes, you feed them."

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