

CalFresh grant and assistive devices change life for Fortuna senior

By Carol Harrison



In the last year, 38 people received free assistive devices delivered by Area 1 Agency on Aging. Many people are unaware of the simple, basic kitchen tools that can make food preparation easier and improve nutrition. (Carol Harrison — For the Times-Standard)

Opening cans and bottles used to be an impossible task for Jo Ann Wolf.

"I'd have to go to a neighbor or wait for my caregiver to come over," she said. "And boiling water was dangerous. I'd put it over the sink and lose half the water pouring it out."

Wolf, 66, suffers from carpal tunnel syndrome and diabetes. Both of her knees have been replaced and her hands shake as a side effect of multiple medications. Illness, injury, and declining strength and mobility sap her ability to do the everyday tasks associated with food preparation, and make her youth as a professional singer a distant memory.

"I am so stiff, especially in the morning, and can't stand very long," she said. "Fixing coffee, opening a jar of jelly I have to take it really, really slow."



Area 1 Agency on Aging staffer Jeanie Ren sifts through assistive devices that can make food preparation easier for those with arthritis, grip and balance challenges. Many people are unaware of the simple, basic kitchen tools that can make food preparation easier and improve nutrition. (Carol Harrison — For the Times-Standard)

That changed after Lee Gonzalez came to her home to conduct a food assessment survey as part of a year-long partnership between his employer, Area 1 Agency on Aging, and Humboldt County Department of Health and Human Services.

A1AA and DHHS work together to raise awareness, improve access and alter attitudes around CalFresh, the state name for the federally funded Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program. A grant to provide assistive devices to improve the nutrition and health of eligible seniors is part of the partnership. Wolf was one of 38 Humboldt County residents to participate in the assistive device program during the program's first year.

"He (Gonzalez) brought some samples of different things that were available that might help," she said. "We talked about my limitations and I invited him to look around my kitchen."

Based on her needs, he bought a bag full of equipment to her front door in February.

"I asked him how it felt being Santa Claus, because that's what he was," she said.

Gonzalez brought a Swedish cutting board, three different things to deal with grasping and opening, an electric kettle and skillet, and a toaster oven.

"I may even get a can opener," she said. "I got everything I wanted, plus. It makes a lot of difference. A lot. I wish I could do something like that, something that really helps people."

Gonzalez and his co-workers delivered 367 items, worth slightly more than \$6,000, in the partnership year ending March 31.

Every participant received a CalFresh cutting board, reusable grocery bag and cookbook.

The program also provided 21 adaptive jar/lid openers, 16 adaptive grips, 16 adaptive grip cups, 11 adaptive kitchen stools with adjustable support for back and arms, and 11 electric can openers. A couple of participants received food processors, microwaves, toaster ovens or an electric skillet.

"Most people can be helped with very basic, simple tools they might not be aware of," said Ali Lee, A1AA resource specialist.

The most commonly reported disabilities by the 38 clients were: 75 percent had arthritis in the hands, 63 percent had a weak grip and 21 had difficulty maintaining balance while standing.

"Almost 70 percent lived alone," Lee said. "We are serving some of the most vulnerable people in our community. Many commented that it wasn't just about access to better nutrition, but access to food, period. That's why we gave out a lot of electric can openers."

"They also said they were able to cook more of what they wanted, when they wanted and how they wanted as opposed to being more limited," Lee continued. "Some had stopped eating or cooking in certain ways. The devices gave them choice."

Lee's favorite product is an adjustable plastic stand, shaped liked a "V", that can hold open a plastic or zip bag while it is being filled. The device enables people to pour with both hands, and cuts down on the spills that require them to bend over and clean.

"Spills are associated with falls," Lee said, "And fall prevention is a key to keeping people healthy and living independently."

Area 1 Agency on Aging began promoting CalFresh in January 2013. It signed on as a community partner with DHHS in March 2013 to support outreach and enrollment, including application assistance, home-delivered meals at hospital discharge, and devices that can help seniors with food storage and preparation.

A1AA and DHHS renewed the CalFresh partnership on April 22. Lee said the goal in year two is to pair another 75 people with assistive devices.

"It does no good for people to have food if they can't prepare it safely or won't prepare it because of health concerns or the inability to chop, cook or whatever," Kraft said.

"Helping people with assistive devices helps us to break down barriers. It builds the kind of relationship and creates multiple touches that help folks realize we are there to work with them for better nutrition."

A1AA commissioned Carol Harrison to write this story. For more information about assistive devices, call A1AA at 442-3763.