

County of Santa Clara

Board of Supervisors

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MANAGEMENT AUDIT OF THE SENIOR NUTRITION PROGRAM

AUDIT SYNOPSIS:

This management audit examined the operations, management practices and finances of the Senior Nutrition Program (SNP) to identify opportunities to increase its efficiency, effectiveness and economy. The report includes six findings and eight recommendations. The maximum savings or benefit to the County General Fund as a result of implementation of this audit's recommendations is estimated at \$947,000 per year. Key elements of the audit are summarized below:

- Transfers of initial allocations of federal dollars by the local Area Agency on Aging move money away from County senior meal programs to fund other senior services, especially case management. The transfers are legal under federal law and authorized by the State, but they are discretionary and substantially affect Senior Nutrition Program funding. In recent years, these transfers have reduced funding for County senior meal programs by \$500,000 to \$800,000 per year.
- The County contracts with a caterer to deliver a combined 14 breakfast and lunch frozen or cold meals per week to about 1,400 homebound seniors through the Meals on Wheels (MOW) program, but deliveries are made once per week. Lack of socialization of the elderly is associated with poor health outcomes and mortality. To the extent that seniors are weakened by lack of socialization, research shows that their risk of hospitalization, nursing home placement, or death is sharply higher. Without changing the existing weekly delivery program through its hired caterer, the Program should work to provide some daily meals or supplemental foods to its most isolated MOW clients.
- The Meals on Wheels program collects donations from program participants and from County staff through the "combined giving" campaign. However, some of these donations are not programmed and spent timely. By not expending funds specifically donated for the MOW program, the General Fund expense for these services is increased and fewer or lesser quality meals are provided. The estimated year-end unexpended amount of these funds as of the close of FY 2013-14 was \$667,000.
- In addition to its Meals on Wheels program, the Senior Nutrition Program oversees 39 congregate sites which through a network of contracted providers serve over 500,000 meals annually to seniors. Meal quality and availability are not consistent across sites. Funding devoted to food varies from \$1.87 to \$6.93 per meal across sites. As a result, some meals are excellent; others are poor. The level of service and paid staffing at sites also varies widely, and similar variation exists in the use of volunteers. Some sites turn away seniors due to insufficient food and others never turn anyone away. The SNP should adopt additional meal quality, availability and service level standards.
- The County contracts with a transportation provider to facilitate seniors' ability to get to meal sites. By the end of December 2013, 431 seniors were waiting for bus passes and 38 seniors were waiting for gas cards to facilitate their ability to get to senior nutrition meal sites. Their average wait time was approximately five months. Due largely to additional funding approved by the Board of Supervisors in March 2014, the list was vacated. However, to reduce the risk of senior under-nutrition and/or malnutrition, the Senior Nutrition Program should notify the Board of Supervisors in writing any time a wait list grows to 50 or more eligible seniors.
- The County does not determine the location of senior meal sites; sites are provided by entities that elect to do so. These sites may or may not be within areas of greatest need. In fact, some areas with few low-income seniors have multiple meal sites; others with comparatively large concentrations of impoverished seniors have no meal site. Thirty-eight percent of the County's poor seniors – an estimated 7,700 people – live in ZIP codes without meal sites. Allocating limited program resources to areas with relatively few impoverished seniors reduces the program's benefits and cost effectiveness, as program funds are spent in areas where the senior population is less likely to suffer adverse events in the absence of program meals. The Senior Nutrition Program should adopt a goal of Senior Nutrition Program on-site meal services serving ZIP codes that are home to at least 80 percent of the County's impoverished seniors.

A copy of the full report is available at:

<http://www.sccgov.org/managementauditor>

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