

Supplemental Food Access for Montgomery County Seniors



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OVERVIEW

Manna Food Center’s mission is to end hunger through food distribution, education and advocacy. We achieve this mission, in part, by increasing access to nutritious food for all those experiencing hunger and food insecurity. One program that directly increases access is our Food for Families program that provides supplemental food packages to Montgomery County residents who report an annual income below the 2012 Maryland Self-Sufficiency Standard for the County. This is a measure that “defines the amount of income necessary to meet basic needs...without public subsidies...and without private/informal assistance.”

Montgomery County, much like the rest of the United States, will experience an unprecedented growth in the senior population in the coming decades. By 2030, seniors (those aged 60 years and older) will comprise 25% of the County population, compared to 19% currently¹. The senior population in Montgomery County as of 2013 is 19.1% or 194,000 individuals².

It’s also important to note that Montgomery County has the third highest percentage of low income minority adults in the state of Maryland at 13% according to 2010 Census reports³.

Seniors often have unique health, social, and nutrition challenges that can include decreased mobility, limited shopping and cooking ability, and existing health challenges that make food access difficult and can lead to food insecurity. Food insecure seniors are 60% more likely than their food secure counterparts to suffer from depression, 53% more likely to have a heart attack, and 40% more likely to be diagnosed with congestive heart failure⁴. An awareness of the particular challenges faced by older adults and, especially, the health concerns that disproportionately affect seniors living with food insecurity was the impetus for a closer look at the access seniors have to food assistance in Montgomery County.

In Montgomery County, housing is subsidized, in part, through the Housing Choice Voucher program (formerly known as Section 8). Applicants to the Housing Choice Voucher program receive a voucher that entitles them to rent an apartment in the private marketplace, while limiting their rental payment to 30-40% of their adjusted income. Residents are eligible to apply for Housing Choice if their annual household income does not exceed 50% of the local median family income for the D.C Metropolitan Statistical Area (109,200 for a family of four). In addition, the specific income limits for the Housing Voucher Program for households of the size, i.e. 1 and 2 are: \$37,450 and \$42,800, respectively.

Manna Food Center currently distributes Food for Family food packages to eight subsidized senior housing sites in Montgomery County:

Housing Site	No. of Seniors Served	Percentage of Subsidized Units
Forest Oak Towers	41	100%
Franklin Apartments	150	100%
Homecrest House	36	N/A; Non-profit for low-income seniors
Shady Grove Apartments	36	100%
Town Center, Rockville	25	100%
Town Center Place, Olney	30-35	100%
The Willows	23	20%
Victory Tower	110	100%

In April 2014 visits to Londonderry Towers and Victory Towers by Manna's Client Services team learned residents may receive more food than they can use and types of foods that they are unwilling or unable to prepare. In response to these initial findings and as part of our agency's commitment to program development and strategic decision making informed by data, we began a strategy to assess the specific needs of seniors who qualify for food assistance and assess how well Manna is addressing this specific segment of its clientele.

Several food assistance services are available to seniors living in subsidized housing in the County. Using information gathered from the Montgomery County Senior Nutrition Program, Capital Area Food Bank and Manna's existing data, we created a database of Montgomery County senior housing sites and their corresponding services. From this universe, seven sites were chosen to produce a sample population of senior subsidized housing communities. We selected an assortment of housing sites based on their current involvement or lack of involvement with the following food assistance programs: Capital Area Food Bank Brown Bag (CAFB), Manna Food Center Food for Families (Manna), Cold Box Lunches and Congregate Meal Programs provided by the Montgomery County Senior Nutrition Program, and Meals on Wheels (MOW).

During the period from April 20, 2015 through June 16, 2015 seven focus groups were conducted with a total of 98 resident participants at the following locations:

Housing Site	Address	Programs Provided	Income Qualification
Forest Oak Tower	101 Odendhal Ave, Gaithersburg, MD 20877	Manna, MOW, Congregate	All Housing Choice Voucher Qualified maximum income for 1 person is 42,500 and for 2 is 48,550
Franklin Apartments	7620 Maple Avenue, Takoma Park, MD 20912	Manna, Cold box, Congregate	All Housing Choice Voucher units
Homecrest House	14508 Homecrest Rd, Silver Spring, MD 20906	Manna, CAFB, Congregate	Non-profit for low income seniors
Londonderry Towers	17060 King James Way, Gaithersburg, MD 20877	Manna, CAFB	All Housing Choice Voucher units
Rebecca Apartments	10920 Connecticut Ave, Kensington, MD 20904	None	95% Housing Choice Voucher units
The Charter House	1316 Fenwick Ln, Silver Spring, MD 20910	None	20% units up to 50% AMI, 55% of up to 80% AMI and 25% are unrestricted
Victory Towers	7051 Carroll Ave, Takoma Park, MD 20912	Manna, CAFB, Cold box	All Housing Choice Voucher Units

The opportunity to attend the Manna focus groups generated very positive response, with several locations far exceeding the requested 10-12 participants. Discussions were moderated by a volunteer consultant, using a discussion guide developed by Manna. Additionally, 80 participants completed a brief on-site questionnaire regarding demographic data.

SENIOR CLIENT PROFILE

Seniors served by Manna comprise a vibrant multi-national community.

The focus group participants we met represent 24 countries across five continents. They speak six major languages: English, Spanish, Korean, Amharic, French and Chinese.



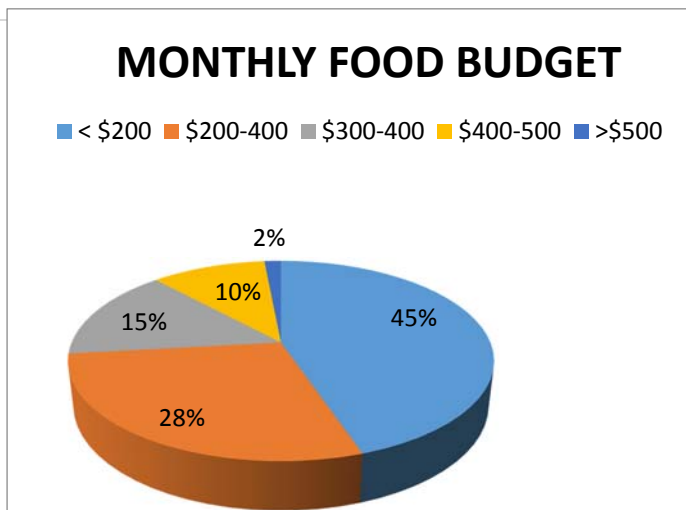
Seniors depend on Manna Food services to help them manage their limited income and spend their food budget dollars more effectively. Manna enables them to meet their dietary needs and supplement essential purchases with more costly items they can't regularly afford.

As expected, most focus group participants live alone (68%), and slightly more than one quarter (29%) have a household of 2. The vast majority (81%) receive Manna's Food for Families package with 60% receiving SNAP benefits, 20% receive Capital Area Food Bank Brown Bag, 14% receive food from another program, 14% take advantage of the Senior Farmers Market Nutrition Program, and 9% receive Meals on Wheels.

Further, 24% of participants receive no food assistance services, 34% receive just one (in all cases this was either Manna or SNAP), and 42% receive assistance from 2 or more services.

The vast majority of Manna recipients spend less than \$400 on food each month.

Among the focus group participants who completed on-site questionnaires, slightly less than half (45%) reported that their monthly food budget is less than \$200. Slightly more than a fourth (28%) report spending between \$200 and \$400, and 15% spend between \$300 and \$400. Combined, this represents 88% of respondents. Only 12% say they spend \$400 or more per month on food for their household.



Although the demographic survey did not ask seniors for information regarding annual income, we can make some assumptions based on the income qualifications of the residences assessed. Four sites are exclusively Housing Choice voucher eligible, one has 95% voucher eligible units, one is a non-profit that provides housing to “very low income” seniors, and one has an assortment of units that range from 50% of Area Median Income (AMI) to unrestricted income.

Further, the Montgomery County Department of Housing and Community Affairs lists the maximum rental income for an “Extremely Low Income” household of one as 30% of AMI or \$22,950 and for a “Very Low Income” household of one as 50% of AMI or \$38,250. For comparison the Self-Sufficiency Standard for Montgomery County and the metric Manna Food Center uses to determine eligibility is \$36,000 for a family of 1.

Residence Managers and staff are the key sources seniors rely on for information about available services in their community.

In the focus group discussions and from completed on-site questionnaires, most residents indicated that the primary way they find out about available services is via the residence staff. Many admit that if it weren’t for the residence manager, they wouldn’t know about available food resources or how to gain access to them. The second most common source for information is friends/family. Few use the internet, radio, or newspaper to find services.

FOCUS GROUP FINDINGS

Seniors are nutritionally “aware” and express common dietary concerns.

The focus groups began with a discussion of participants’ typical daily diets. We learned that most seniors are making a conscious effort to “eat healthy,” and maintain a balanced diet. When necessary, they try to comply with doctors’ orders to limit or avoid certain foods. As expected among this population, the two major dietary concerns expressed by participants are blood sugar and blood pressure. Over 25% of all participants mentioned they avoid either sugar, salt or both. Six participants indicated that they avoid specific foods because of possible food/drug interactions and the same proportion mentioned that they avoid pork.

Seniors like to cook and eat “fresh” whenever possible. They tend to avoid canned foods because of sodium content.

As a group, they tend to cook often, and favor fresh ingredients. The common cooking habit among the groups was avoiding canned food, primarily due to the sodium content. Several participants described their deliberate efforts and methods to reduce their sodium intake from canned foods by rinsing before use. Here are two respondents describing their concern:

“Well, I use canned food but you can rinse some of that salt out. So all you do is rinse it out with water – like the string beans and all of that– all you have to do is rinse them.”

“I don’t like too many of the canned goods. I like applesauce, but I can’t have too much of the canned goods because they have a lot of salt.”

“You know those steamer bags? Could they start to use something like that? The aluminum inside the cans – I don’t know. I’ve heard it’s not good for you.”

Transportation and budget pose the greatest challenges for seniors in acquiring the quantity and type of food they need.

Transportation and budget were the two most frequently mentioned barriers to acquiring the quantity and types of food needed. While most residential buildings provide a weekly trip to local grocers, many residents indicated that insufficient time is allotted to get through the store, and they physically can’t handle heavy/large packages. Manna’s on-site delivery service to these communities is extremely important to them, and greatly appreciated, and receives high marks for convenience and timing.

Food preparation does not appear to be a major challenge for most seniors.

Interestingly, across all focus group sessions, no severe challenges to food preparation were mentioned by participants. While a few participants did have some problems chopping foods or standing for long periods of time, and a few mentioned lack of motivation to cook for just one person, overall there was a general “can do” attitude among these seniors, best exemplified by two residents at the Franklin apartments, who responded to our question about challenges in preparing meals with this comment:

“I think it’s individual because everybody has their own way of doing things. I cannot see, but I have ways for what I have to do. So for me, I have no challenges, really. The only thing I may have a challenge sometimes with frying – to turn it over. I have to be so careful not to get myself burned. But that’s my only problem – I can bake. Some things I don’t do because I am lazy.”

“I have arthritis pain but I have a nice comfortable stool in my kitchen and I sit and prepare everything in my bowl and chop up everything, and then I cook.”

Lack of documentation posed a problem for several residents, hampering access to food services.

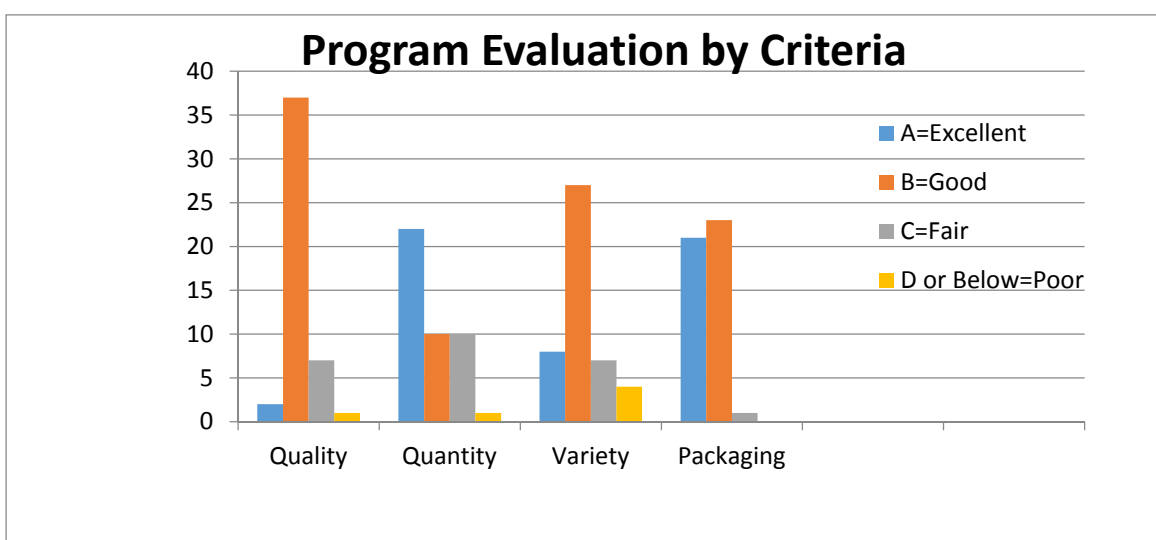
We encountered several residents who indicated that they are currently undocumented, and therefore ineligible for federal assistance which was another barrier to food acquisition. The interpreter described their situation:

“Some people in here are not citizens. If you are not a citizen, you do not qualify for government services. They maybe have \$15 for food stamps (those that qualify).”

SENIORS EVALUATE MANNA FOOD CENTER “FOOD FOR FAMILIES” PROGRAM

Each focus group was asked to give Manna Food Center a report card, using the grades A through F to evaluate the Food for Families program on several criteria. Unfortunately, because of recording malfunctions we were not able to capture this data for all seven groups. The chart below represents responses from four sessions, reflecting a total of 50 participants.

Overall, Manna appears to be doing a good job of meeting the food needs of seniors in Montgomery County. On every criterion, the overwhelming majority of participants graded Manna “excellent” or “good.” Manna received generally “good” marks for the quality and variety of food, and excellent marks on quantity, but there are areas for improvement. The following chart shows how seniors graded the program on each criteria, and indicates several areas where seniors think Manna could do better, particularly on quality and variety.



While seniors are genuinely pleased that Manna is able to provide fresh produce, a frequent complaint was that the produce they receive is damaged or spoiled. This is the main reason why the majority of participants gave Manna a B for “good” quality rather than A for “excellent.” The few who gave a “poor” grade for quality usually cited problems with meat, fresh fruit and bagged salads/greens.

“Honestly, I know for most residents it would be easier to receive the fruits mixed, but if they see a kiwi or a spoiled strawberry, they think it’s not good quality and won’t eat it.”

“My experience is that the salads...by the time we get them they are starting to go – the mixed salads in the bag or clamshell. First of all, the bag is too much for one person, so I guarantee the mixed salad bag is going to be wasted. So if I use it, I have to throw about half of it away, because it is spoiled.”

“Sometimes bread and cake are too old and stale but that’s up to us to check the date. Last week muffins fell apart they were so dry and I had to throw the whole thing away.”

“We don’t want quantity, we want quality.”

Several participants point out that the quantity of fresh produce provided is sometimes overwhelming, and it spoils before they have the opportunity to use it. And, seniors say, they often receive more canned goods than they know what to do with.

"I really commend the Manna program. It's very good in so many ways. The only complaint that I have is that sometimes the green vegetables, by the time they come to us they turn yellow, and I have to put everything out to be trashed which, you know, that's wasteful. I don't eat some of the tinned food so I have to give that away to other people."

"We do get a lot of vegetables, but the problem with the vegetables is sometimes they come already spoiled."

"...I see great improvement but I sometimes don't see consistency. Especially with the fruits and not all but certain vegetables. Yesterday was a real plus... They had fresh squash which I haven't eaten in a long time. Asparagus, that was a good thing. Of course now we get into foods that need a little more preservation and if you don't use them fast they spoil and that's a waste. But all in all, I think it's been a very good program."

"I agree -- "C" because it's too much in the canned goods. I practically return all of them."

"I would give a "D" – the canned goods is too much. I don't use that personally and the fruits is mushy"

Variety is another area where seniors give Manna "good" grades, primarily because they'd like to see some improvement in what we offer. Packaging and delivery also earned high grades, with no major complaints.

"I have no problems with the program. The only thing is, I hate black-eyed peas, and I have five cans of them. That's my only complaint. Everything else is fine."

SENIOR SUGGESTIONS

Seniors who receive Manna had several suggestions for how to improve the food program. Primarily, they want to see more fresh foods, better quality produce and more fish (canned or fresh). Smaller portion packaging would also be appreciated.

In addition to better quality and variety in the food packages delivered, seniors say they could use more information on the nutritional content of foods and package dates to help them make better dietary choices and smarter purchases when shopping for groceries. They would also welcome instruction on food storage, preparation and preservation techniques.

"Maybe you can have a suggestion sheet for meals that can be made from what's provided."

<u>Suggestion</u>	<u># of Mentions</u>
Smaller Packages	8
Product Dating Information	8
More Fresh Food	7
Food Prep Education	6
More Fish Items	6

Better Quality Produce

3

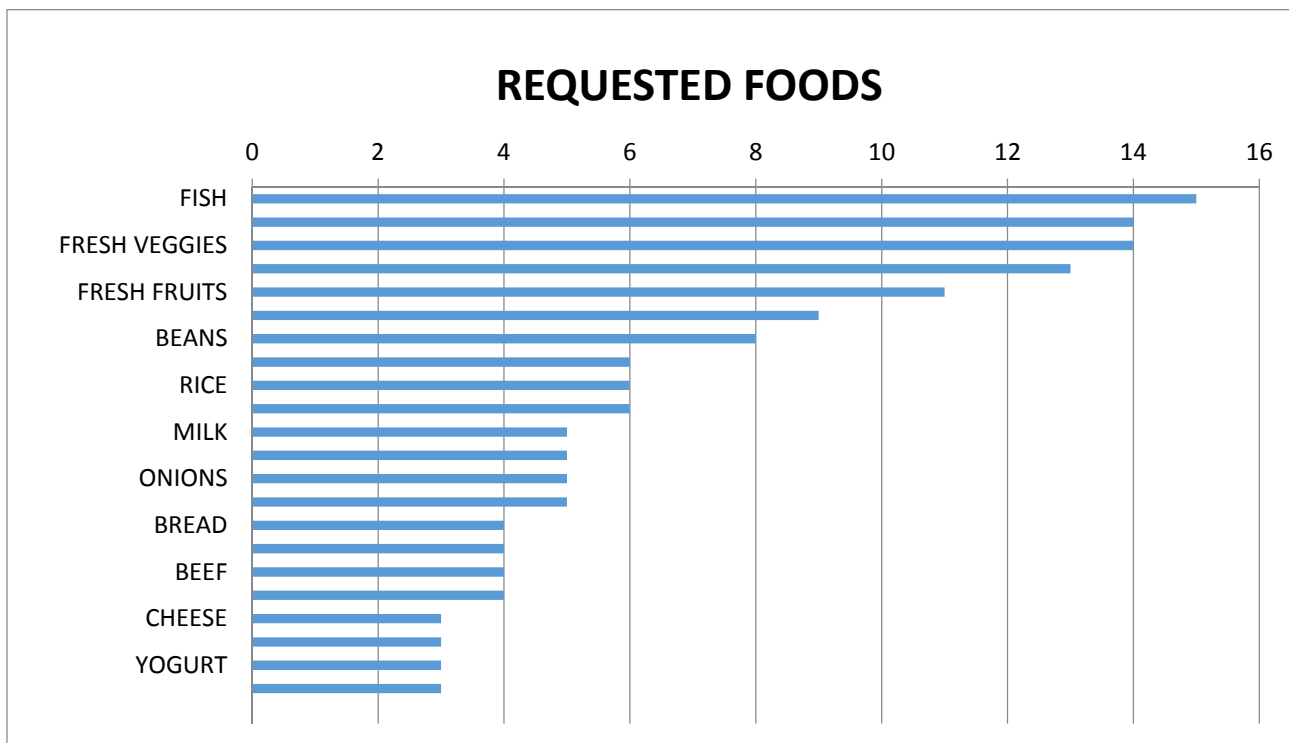
Many seniors commented that breakfast is an important meal for them, so fresh, frozen or dry items which fulfill these needs are especially valuable. Many also point out that they depend on soup as a central item in their diet:

“Another thing I liked that we had in the food bank that we did years and years and years ago – we used to get a lot of soup. For people in this building that’s terrific. Because a lot of time you may not feel like fixing something or have the energy to cook a meal. And in the stores now, soup is unbelievably expensive. I can’t believe what they want for a can of soup. We used to get a lot of soup, and now we are lucky to get even one. I don’t need five cans of carrots and potatoes.”

“I use soup as a backup, and I add use water to dispel the sodium. And as we get older we eat less – we don’t need as much food. You can put the canned vegetables in the soup.”

At Rebecca House, where ten (10) Chinese individuals participated in the focus group, the following specific food items were mentioned: pork, beans, rice, peanut butter, oil, tea and the requested fresh vegetables were: sweet potato, potato, onion, cabbage, and celery.

The following chart lists other requested/preferred foods by number of mentions:



RECOMMENDATIONS FOR MANNA

- ❖ Given the transportation challenges expressed by so many participants, every effort should be made to deliver food assistance services to senior places of residence. Budgetary obstacles could be further ameliorated by providing information and assistance on the application for SNAP benefits to seniors that are not yet receiving those benefits.
- ❖ The most effective channel through which to communicate to seniors is the residence services manager or similar function. Information should be sent to the key individual performing this position at the residence community, rather than relying on printed information placed in food boxes.
- ❖ An appropriate senior food package would include a variety of high-quality fresh fruits and vegetables and a reduced number of canned items. Any non-perishable products provided should be low in sodium and sugar.
- ❖ As available, an ideal senior food package would emphasize the provision of fresh or frozen meats, specifically chicken and fish, and breakfast items, specifically cereal.
- ❖ Special consideration should be made for seniors who may need to avoid particular foods due to potential food-medicine interactions.
- ❖ Seniors would benefit from clearer information about the safety of foods that are past the freshness date indicated on the package. This is especially true for the frozen meats donated by area grocery stores that are frozen before the “sell by” date. There is a misperception that this food is no longer consumable. Additionally, because the fresh foods provided by Manna often have a short shelf-life, education on proper food storage and preservation methods would help senior recipients maximize the benefit of their food supports.
- ❖ Given the wide range of culinary traditions represented in this sample, every effort should be made to provide foods that are culturally familiar to the recipient.
- ❖ Further evaluation of senior-specific distribution sites is needed and will be aided by the data regarding income guidelines and food assistance program availability aggregated for and during this assessment.

Resources:

1. Maryland Department of Aging. 2030 Projected Percent Population 60 and Older for Maryland Jurisdictions. Maryland Department of Planning
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2. Maryland's 2013 Population, Selected Age Groups. U.S. Census 2013; MD Dept of Planning. MD Dept of Aging.
<http://www.aging.maryland.gov/egov/Documents/MD2013Population.pdf>. Updated Dec 2014. Accessed October 28, 2015.
3. Senior Demographics Information. Maryland Dept of Aging.
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4. Feeding America and National Foundation to End Senior Hunger. Spotlight on Senior Health: Adverse Health Outcomes of Food Insecure Older Americans.
<http://www.feedingamerica.org/hunger-in-america/our-research/senior-hunger-research/or-spotlight-on-senior-health-executive-summary.pdf>.