

Food program serves needy Lane seniors

By PHILLIP EMERSON
Of the Emerald

A new program, titled "Save Our Seniors" by its originator, has sprung up in the wake of the revised Federal Food Stamp allotments which have curtailed the benefits of Lane County's senior citizens. Starling Williams, who started and runs the program which serves over 500 local people, says "people were calling me every day. They needed help, they were hungry."

Williams, who had previously run the Lane Community Food Bank, started the service with the aid of local friends and sponsorship of the Lane County Democratic Central Committee and Congressman Jim Weaver's office.

"Save Our Seniors" uses volunteers to gather produce donated by local farmers and distribute it to people in need between Eugene and Blue River. The farmers, whose produce would otherwise rot in the fields, get tax credits for their contributions. The seniors wind up with cherries, strawberries, snow peas and "we've had commitments for everything from fruit and vegetables to nuts, as the harvests come in," says Williams. "It's really catching on, in a very exciting way. More and more, people are hearing about the program and bringing in things from their own gardens."

Williams tried to start the program earlier this Spring, originally seeking support from Lane County and the Governor's office. Despite verbal commitments, the support was not forthcoming. "I kept telling them, 'I have the farmers and the trucks ready to go. All I need is your sponsorship for the tax waiver.' But they never did anything." Finally she contacted Bill Morrisette, who involved the party.

"We (the Democratic Central Committee) became involved

because anybody could see it was the kind of thing we should be involved in. It is help to people who need it. A group of volunteers cooperating to make sure people don't go hungry." Morrisette says votes were a secondary consideration, a definite second.

Most mornings the volunteers, many of them seniors themselves, travel to outlying farms and harvest the fruit and vegetables available. Then the produce is loaded in three cars and distributed during the early afternoon. Williams serves 200 seniors from the back of her pickup truck.

"I think one of the nicest things," she says, "is the way the seniors themselves respond to getting out here and picking

the stuff. It revitalizes them. It makes them, well, more spunky. They just seem to enjoy it a lot."

The idea of a "gleaning co-operative," as these ventures are called, is popular in parts of California. Similar organizations exist in Multnomah and Washington counties. At times there are duplications of effort between similar Government agencies such as Food Banks or when the co-operatives overlap. Apparently that is not the case here, but as one of the seniors says, "Either someone here is real good people or someone's scratching out territory for themselves."

"The county's position and mine are completely different," says Williams. "They are primarily concerned with the

institutional client, my interest is the elderly shut-ins." It is possible the two programs may find themselves competing with each other for certain food supplies, such as bread and other items which are not marketable, though nutritious, beyond specified dates.

As for the people who presumably are to benefit, there is a mixed bag of opinions. Most people are glad to get what food they get, but it is still less than what they had last year, which was not that great, either. Laura Workman is 77, and due to a lame leg she doesn't go about much. "One time they had a lot of peas, and they didn't deep-freeze 'em. I was out of luck because I don't have a deep-freeze," she says. Nevertheless,

she went cherry picking one day last month with the cooperative, walking stick and all. "Got a couple buckets, too."

John Warren, 73, went on that cherry picking trip, too. "There were about seven of us there. If there are all these hundreds of people signed up, why were only seven people picking cherries that day? And two of them were newsmen! Why aren't there any people out there?"

Good question. Most of the people served by the program are shut-ins, unable to leave their homes for one reason or another. More importantly, as Williams says, "We cannot help people if we don't know where they are. Many people who would like to help us, as well, don't know about the program."

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