

Senior meals coming back to senior center in July



Three of the South Morrow County Seniors Matter board members who have helped bring in-person senior meals back to St. Patrick's Senior Center. L-R: Jerry Conklin, Jackie Alleman and Molly Rhea. Not pictured are board members Sheryll Bates and Dennis Wiser. -Photo by Andrea Di Salvo

By Andrea Di Salvo

Area seniors will again have a time to gather over a meal at St. Patrick's Senior Apartments, thanks to a new organization in South Morrow County. South Morrow County Seniors Matter will be starting in-person meals Tuesday, July 11.

Founding board member Jackie Alleman calls the movement "more than a meal."

"Which is really true," adds another founding member, pastor Jerry Conklin. "Our goal goes beyond just feeding seniors. We want to make it warm and inviting. We want to see seniors helped beyond just a meal."

"We hope that senior meals will become a contact for the over 200 seniors in this area," says Alleman.

Starting up the senior meals has been a work in progress since last November. Both Alleman and Conklin work for Morrow County Health District's hospice program, Alleman as volunteer coordinator and Conklin as chaplain.

In the course of their visits, they often either picked up meals for families or went with families to senior meal sites. They couldn't help but notice that Boardman, Irrigon, Arlington and Condon all had weekly meals for seniors. They started asking questions and trying to figure out how to get senior meals back in Heppner.

Heppner senior meals used to be provided at St. Patrick's Senior Center through CAPECO (Community Action Program of East Central Oregon). Those in-person meals were discontinued for a time during the COVID-19 pandemic and now take the form of take-and-go meals served through Bucknum's Tavern in Heppner on Wednesdays.

"We're glad for that," says Conklin, "There's a lot of people who love the Bucknum's meals."

At the same time, both Conklin and Alleman say their goal encompasses much more.

"Where we're coming from, we're more concerned with caring for the whole person and their needs than just feeding them once a week," Conklin says.

While providing a well-rounded, nutritious meal once a week is important, Conklin and Alleman say they also want to connect seniors to other seniors.

"There are a lot of seniors who don't get out much," says Conklin. The in-person senior meals would be a chance for seniors to get out and socialize with each other.

They also want to connect seniors to community resources they may not be aware of or know how to access. Conklin says a goal is to have a portion

of the meal time in which different entities come and either provide entertainment or give talk about health, safety, legal matters or caregiving.

"There's a lot of things available to help seniors," says Conklin, adding that many of those resources are online but that a lot of seniors are not computer literate.

"They're kind of left out there in the desert," he adds. "We want to be a resource that way."

The group also wants to connect seniors to helping hands, whether that means outside volunteers or connecting seniors with needs with those who have those gifts—needs and giftings such as rides, cleaning and paperwork, to name a few.

"There's a lot of seniors who have gifts and abilities to do things, and there are other seniors who need help," Conklin says. "We want to match those needs—a resource where seniors can find out about help that they can get and help that they can give."

It was a big plan for two people.

"We're just a couple of people who think something should be done about this," Conklin says.

They formed a task force, which became the South Morrow County Seniors Matter board. Other board members are Molly Rhea, Sheryll Bates and Dennis Wiser.

"Finally, we just bit the bullet and said we'd form a nonprofit," says Conklin.

They began to pursue funding. Kim Cutsforth helped them secure \$15,000 per year for the next two years from Willow Creek

Valley Economic Development Group (WCVEDG). Nicole Mahoney suggested they approach the county and ask for leftover COVID relief funds. The Morrow County Board of Commissioners agreed to that in April and supplied a grant of \$33,984 per year for the next two years.

"At that point, we had promised funding but still had a lot of work to do," says Conklin. "There's been a lot of hoops to jump through, for sure."

One of the biggest hurdles was finding a cook, which they found in the person of Jodi Segraves. They're still in the process of hiring an assistant cook.

Another problem was the day. They didn't want to hold the meals on Wednesdays, since that is the day Bucknum's distributes its CAPECO senior meals. They have settled on Tuesdays—that's bingo day at the senior center, but bingo will move to 2 p.m. once the senior meals begin.

They say they've had a lot of positive response from the community, both individuals and organizations, but Conklin and Alleman say they are still looking for volunteers to help. They are also open to more funding as they look to the future.

"We're funded for two years, but only two years," Conklin says.

The grand opening of the senior meals will be July 11 from 11:30 a.m. to 12:30 p.m. Anyone looking for more information or wishing to volunteer can check out the South Morrow County Seniors Matter Facebook page or contact Alleman at 541-667-7865 or Conklin at 541-256-0758.

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Miller and Sons worked to tear down a house that had been an eyesore on Chase Street for many years. - Photo by Andrea Di Salvo



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COMMUNITY EVENT
3 - 7 PM

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