

Local

Feed Seniors Now kicks off in region

✎ By Austin Ramsey Messenger-Inquirer

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A partnership involving several businesses and organizations in the region is tackling the issue of hunger among at-risk senior citizens this spring.

The Green River Area Development District, along with Comfort Keepers and Independence Bank, kicked off a monthlong food drive Tuesday in Owensboro. Officials involved with the region's sixth annual Feed Seniors Now program say they hope to provide a week's worth of groceries for at least 500 seniors in five surrounding counties.

It's a huge undertaking, said Jennifer Williams, associate director for aging and social services with GRADD. It involves coordination, determination and strength in numbers, but it's worth it, she said, because many seniors in the region need help.

"The need is there," Williams said. "Nearly one in six senior citizens goes hungry in this country. We want to connect with those people as much as we can."

GRADD operates the Home Delivered Meals program in the seven-county region and has the resources to identify which seniors have the most need. Typically, Williams said, groceries donated through Feed Seniors Now are given to individuals on the home-delivery wait list. Resources are limited, she said, but she wants to ensure that no one is forgotten.

Feed Seniors Now is a national initiative sponsored by Comfort Keepers, a respite and advanced care organization that seeks to build independence and quality of life among older Americans. Comfort Keepers in Owensboro sought to sponsor the program in Owensboro in 2011 under the name Stop Senior Hunger.

Comfort Keepers Director of Community Relations Steve Baker said back then, it became obvious early on that such a huge task would require community partners to accomplish. Independence Bank joined the initiative very early on, and both organizations went to GRADD for help identifying seniors in need.

"Now, there are countless people and organizations who want to get involved in this," he said. "It's important to shed light on this, because people tend to turn away from opportunities to take care of seniors. It's uncomfortable for some people. But this is an issue that's not going away and it has to be addressed."

For the next month in Daviess, Hancock, Ohio, McLean and Webster counties, people can drop off nonperishable food items at Kroger, IGA and other locations like Independence Bank branches, Comfort Keepers offices, the GRADD office or senior centers.

Those wishing to make monetary donations can mail checks to: The Independence Foundation Inc., P.O. Box 988, Owensboro, KY 42302, Attn: Feed Seniors Now. Donors can designate in the memo to which county their proceeds will go.

In six years, with the help of partners like Canteen Service Co. and Specialty Food Group Inc., Feed Seniors Now has netted more than 20 tons of food, providing meals for more than 1,474 seniors. But past business partners, it's individual donors that make that possible, Baker said.

"As a company that serves seniors, our goal is to keep mom and dad out of nursing homes," he said. "To know that some of those seniors have to make decisions about whether they take their medicine or eat for a day, you realize how far these donations can really go."

It's a silent epidemic, said Independence Bank President Darrell Higginbotham.

"These are individuals who have been in our community for years," he said. "They have worked, volunteered -- many may have served us as nurses, teachers or more -- and life has presented them with some challenges. They're typically too proud to ask for help. But thanks to GRADD, we've been able to identify them. It's a week's worth of groceries. It's not a solution to the problem, but it's a start."

Local seniors in the five participating counties who have an income at or below 150 percent of the federal poverty level, or who are currently receiving public assistance, are eligible to obtain food through this initiative. The food drive ends April 24. Food will be delivered May 3, during Older Americans Month.

Austin Ramsey, 270-691-7302, aramsey@messenger-inquirer.com, Twitter: @austinrramsey