

Rensselaer County Senior Nutrition Program serves its five millionth meal

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SCHODACK — Rensselaer County Senior Nutrition Programs celebrated a milestone Thursday, serving its five millionth meal during a Thanksgiving-themed luncheon at the Edward C. Swartz Senior Services Center.

Close to 100 seniors gathered at the center to commemorate the program's achievement, and enjoy a lunch of turkey, stuffing, mashed potatoes and gravy, green beans, cranberry sauce and, naturally, a slice of pumpkin pie. Joan Stoffels of East Greenbush was the lucky five millionth meal recipient, but said the honor was secondary to her regular enjoyment of meals at the center, which she visits a few times a week.

"I think it's a wonderful service they do," she said. "Just another day down here."

Also pleased with the county's services was Sherry Gardner, of Castleton, who donned a plastic tiara she won last year after being dubbed the center's Senior of the Year.

"It's fantastic. A lot of the people who come here (would otherwise) probably have just soup or a bowl of cereal, and here they're getting a nutritious meal," she said. "It's important nutrition-wise, and it also helps for the camaraderie. Just to have friends around, I think you eat better when you're around (people) than by yourself."

The center serves between 35 and 65 seniors on a typical weekday, said Swartz Center Director Barbara Fausner, who's been in her position for 11 years. Aside from proving a hot meal — and letting seniors take leftovers home with them for an additional meal — the center hosts an array of activities ranging from knitting and whittling groups to dart leagues to card games to singing and dancing. Seniors seeking respite from extreme heat or cold during the winter and summer months can find comfort in the center's air conditioning and heat, Fausner said, keep their thermostats — and energy bills — low.

"This is just like my family," she said, gesturing around the full room.

Joseph Cybulski, United Family Services Commissioner, said the county has been providing senior nutrition programs since the 1960s, and expanded its meal programs during the rollout of the Federal Older Americans Act, introduced in 1973.

It's natural for the county to be concerned about the nutrition habits of its seniors, he said,

because good nutrition is the basis of good health, preventing hospital stays and enabling them to continue to be productive, active members of the community. Cybulski encourages all seniors to take advantage of the services the county provides for them, especially through its senior centers in Schodack, Grafton, Hoosick Falls, Rensselaer and Troy.

Speaking to Gardner's feelings of camaraderie, Cybulski said many seniors suffer from loneliness when they're unable to leave their home, and coming to the center invigorates them. They meet up with friends and acquaintances they might not have seen in years, he said, and some seniors even find romance, reconnecting with an old flame or seeking companionship and consolation after the death of a partner.

"It's a continuation of life, and if we can keep people healthy, happy and living in their homes and the community, it's a win-win for so many areas," he said.

Another benefit to keeping seniors healthy and active is the prevention of premature institutionalization, something County Executive Kathy Jimino said was a boon for both the government's and seniors' pocketbooks. Seniors continue to support the society that they've already served so well, she said.

"It's really important for us to be able to give back to the seniors who have given so much to us, whether as parents, whether as community leaders, whether as people who served in the military," she said. "They're still making a difference, they're still making a contribution, and can do that I think more readily because of the support services they receive."