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Community Improvement Projects for Marginalized Populations in Monterey County

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Lunch Program

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Abstract

CHISPA is a non profit organization that is located downtown of Salinas, California within Monterey County. Their mission is to improve people's lives and create healthy neighborhoods by developing, selling, owning and managing affordable homes for low income families and senior citizens. Within the senior citizen housing they have a program that is known as the lunch program that provides meals Monday through Friday from 9 a.m. to 12 p.m. The main property that I focused on was Los Abuelitos Senior Housing. For my capstone project I came up with a questionnaire that helped me figure out what they eat, whether or not they want the program to keep running and figured out why these seniors felt isolated. The contributing factors would be the lack of access to good food, mobility, and mental health. The consequences to these contributing factors would be starvation, elderly abuse and/or death, and illnesses. Throughout this process some of the findings that came to surface were sometimes the meals from the program that the seniors would eat would be their only meal of the day, the lack of transportation, and a lot of the seniors have financial issues. The recommendation would be for CHISPA to have the food banks deliver food every two weeks to seniors' doors. This would help by providing free food to the seniors and not having them leave their house or worry about having to miss a meal because they can't afford it.

Keywords: Food Bank, Elderly Abuse, Isolation.

Agency & Communities Served

CHISPA which stands for Community Housing Improvement Systems and Planning Association is a nonprofit organization in Monterey County. CHISPA is actually the largest private, non profit housing developer that houses not only families but has senior citizen housing as well. Since they first came along in 1980 there has been a total of 2,447 homes in which some have been built and some have been renovated throughout Monterey, San Benito and Santa Cruz Counties. According to the CHISPA housing demographics, The total number of residents are 4854 people. Out of 4850 25% (1,231) are children from the ages of 0 to 10 years old. 20% (961) are youth from the ages of 11 to 17. Which leaves 44% (2,135) who are adults from the ages of 18 to 54 and 11% (527) are senior citizens from the ages of 55 and over. The total number of units is 1,386 in which 83% (1,149) are family units and 17% (237) are senior housing units.

Not only does CHISPA offer programs to help families and senior citizens find affordable housing but they also provide a lot of different services for the community. They are partnered with local community organizations and with individual instructors as well. Some of the local community organizations include the YMCA, the Boys and Girls Club of Monterey County, Read to Me Project, Alisal Percussion, Arts Council for Monterey County, and Alliance on Aging. Within these organizations some programs that they offer are the food banks, guitar class, arts class, YMCA after school program, Zumba for seniors, homeownership sessions, covid testing sites and more. It surprised me actually because when I first heard about CHISPA I only thought that they were a program that helped families and seniors find affordable housing. Little

did I know that they were actually very involved within the community and when I learned of everything that they do I gained so much respect for the nonprofit organization.

Problem Description

While being able to see first hand what senior living is like I have noticed that seniors are not getting enough food and necessities that they need as well as seniors being isolated. It is sad to say but seniors lack access to good, healthy, nutritious food. Besides isolation this can lead to other problems such as malnutrition, stress, and loneliness which can then lead to illnesses and diseases becoming an issue in their lives. Getting the proper food for seniors is an important step for them to live a healthy life. However, there are some issues that could interfere with them from doing so. You would think that because they are older, access to healthy food would be one of the least of their worries; however, the lack of access to it is actually one of their main problems for some.

Contributing Factors

There are a few factors that contribute as to why seniors are not getting enough nutritious food that they need. One of the contributing factors would be the lack of access to good food. Seniors being able to access good food is a lot harder than we think it is. Another contributing factor would be mobility. In order for seniors to qualify to live in these apartments they must be at least 65 years of age and most of them are older than 65. Since they are elderly, a few of them have issues with being able to drive, carry heavy items, vision, hearing, etc. which go hand in hand with mobility. Most of them do not go to the grocery store at all and if they do most do not go by themselves. Lastly, mental health issues are also a contributing factor as to why seniors

are not getting enough food and necessities that they need. Being isolated, they do not really speak about the issues they may be going through which can cause them to have difficulty just to simply live a normal life.

Seniors lack access to good food for a number of reasons. One of the reasons being lack of transportation. According to Stellar Transport, within the United States there are 8.4 million senior citizens who can not drive anymore for a number of reasons. With them only getting around by finding a way of transportation it is difficult for them to get the necessities and the food that they need. Especially if they do not have reliable people to either drive them around to go get what they need or even have it delivered to them. Another reason would be the cost of good healthy food. Nowadays, it is cheaper to get food at a fast food restaurant than nutritious healthy food such as fruits and vegetables at a grocery store. According to Feeding America, about 30% of seniors fight between buying food for themselves or paying for medical care. (Bob Aiken, 2014). Nobody should have to make a decision between food and medical care.

Mobility plays a role as to why seniors lack access to good food as well. Not only is it difficult for them to get around because of transportation but also because some just are not able to do so with their health conditions. According to the Institute for Biomedicine of Aging, it has stated that 35% of seniors 65 years and older have mobility issues (Friedrich-Alexander, 2020). One mobility issue that the elderly deal with would be being able to walk for a long period of time. About one in four adults aged 55 and older have difficulty walking a quarter mile. (Powell-Griner, 2006). 10 out of the 25 seniors that I spoke with at Los Abuelitos Senior Housing said that they have difficulty even walking around their apartment building. This would make it difficult for them to not only walk around a whole grocery store but also carry heavier

items. Most of them have someone who goes to the grocery store for them when needed, however, they feel like they are a burden so some stated that they try to stretch their food as much as they can.

A few other mobility issues that contribute to this are muscle weakness, joint problems, pain, disease, and neurological (brain and nervous system) difficulties (HealthinAging, 2022). The main mobility problem that seniors have dealt with would be falls. These can cause injuries such as bruising, fear of falling, and even having a sprained or broken bone. Being older, their healing process can take longer than a younger person's healing process. Depending on how severe the fall is it can lead to wheelchairs and canes being needed. When the seniors at Los Abuelitos Senior Housing had asked if they had fallen while being 65 or older 8 out of 25 stated that they have and 2 out of those 25 stated that they broke a bone in their body and needed someone to look after them for a good period of time. Mobility plays a huge role in why seniors have access to food.

Mental health also plays a role in getting access to healthy food. As we get older overall we start to care less about what we feed our bodies which can lead to illnesses and diseases. Being elderly you are more likely to experience depression, a heart attack, develop asthma and experience heart failure. These can all contribute to not being well nourished and the start of isolation. 28% of all seniors live alone which can cause loneliness and social isolation (Rubin, 2022). Loneliness and social isolation can increase dementia by 50%, loneliness alone can increase strokes by 32%, increase heart disease by 29%, and also increase premature mortality by 26%. (Consumer Affairs, 2022). If seniors were able to get the food they need without any issues it may lead to less social isolation because they may be able to eat with other seniors and it can

prevent other diseases from occurring. We need to make sure we check on the health of our elderly people. However, some may not have any family left so it is more difficult to do so.

Consequences

Lack of access to good nutritious food has quite a bit of consequences for seniors with one being starvation. According to The Anti-hunger Group, 8% of Americans who are over the age of 60 were food insecure in 2017. This means that 5.5 million seniors do not have access to consistent food that they need in order for them to live a healthy life. (Laura Ungar, 2022). Sadly, since 2001 nearly 22 years ago this number has doubled in size and does not expect to stop there. Over the next few years it is expected to increase. Within the United States, Louisiana is the top state where food security is the highest at 12%. One of the reasons starvation has risen is because The Older Americans Act, which was founded in 1972, provides meals for the elderly for anyone who is 60 years and older by providing meals sent straight to their homes as well as group meals. However, this program has not been consistent due to not having enough funds as well as economic inflation. (Ungar, 2022).

Starvation can then lead to illnesses. Malnutrition within the elderly who are 65 years old and older can cause their immune systems to weaken as well as the muscles starting to weaken. (Suzannah Smith, 2016). Malnutrition can also be caused by other illnesses as well. For example, seniors who suffer from dementia may forget to eat because they do not remember if they have eaten or not. Some other illnesses that can also cause malnutrition may be depression, alcoholism, having dietary restrictions, and also reducing social contact. In 2022, about 6.5 million seniors suffer from dementia as well as 6 million who suffer from depression. However,

only 10% get the treatment for it. (Jennifer Casarella, 2020). This is more common within the elderly community that most people know about.

It is sad to say but the last consequence would be death. Not getting the right amount of nutritious food which leads to illnesses end in death. According to Madison Park, 2,000 to 3,000 seniors die due to malnutrition every year. (2010). It is more common for seniors who are 70 years old and older. This can happen by seniors eating too little, having poor eating habits which lack nutrition as well as having digestion problems because of their age. One out of three seniors die from dementia which could be linked to malnutrition. (Alzheimer's Association, 2022). It is more common than we think.

Elderly abuse is also a consequence as to why seniors may have lack of access to good food. According to the National Council on Aging, "Up to five million older Americans are abused every year, and the annual loss by victims of financial abuse is estimated to be at least \$36.5 billion" (2002). In an interview with one of the seniors who would like to stay anonymous she stated that she asked her daughter for \$50 every 2 weeks so she could get groceries because the lunch program was not serving her anymore. When her daughter further investigated why they were not feeding her mother anymore she found out that the program was free, stopping her \$50 every week from coming in. When she spoke to her worker she was finally honest and said that her daughter was keeping her money and the \$50 every two weeks was the most her daughter would give her from her own social security checks. It was hard for her to admit because she did not want to say anything because she did not want her daughter to face any consequences. Family members commit elder abuse in nearly 6 out of 10 cases, according to the National Council on Aging (NCOA, 2022). This happens way too often in seniors.

Approximately 1 in 10 Americans aged 65 years and older have experienced some form of elder abuse. (National Council on Aging, 2002).

Problem Model

Contributing Factors	Problem	Consequences
Factor 1 lack of access to good food /	Seniors are not getting enough food and necessities that they need. Seniors are isolated.	Consequence 1 starve
Factor 2 mobility		Consequence 2 elderly abuse/ death
Factor 3 mental health		Consequence 3 illnesses can increase

Capstone Project Description and Justification

Capstone Project

For my capstone project, I created a questionnaire for Los Abuelitos Senior Housing Apartments located in East Salinas that would give me feedback on how to improve the lunch program that CHISPA provides and also get an insight on how it is difficult for seniors to access healthy food. The Senior Lunch Program that CHISPA offers is a partnership between CHISPA, the Alisal Union School District Food Services Kitchen, Meals on Wheels, and the Area Agency on Aging. This program provides nutritious meals that follow dietary guidelines for seniors which are served every Monday through Friday besides holidays. The questionnaire will give feedback as to how the Lunch Program can improve and give us insight on how often they eat a nutritious meal daily. I have also put together a food bin at Natividad Hospital in the Behavioral

Health section to provide donated non-perishable food and evenly distribute them to each apartment in a food box at the end of my project. I would also come up with a suggestion on how I believe the lunch program should be changed to better accommodate.

Project Purpose

One of the contributing factors that my project would address would be the lack of access to good nutritional food. My project would show the organization if there is a need for the lunch program to keep running. Not only will we get feedback on the lunch program but also shine light on how much the seniors lack access to healthy meals. There is a need for the lunch program because it provides hot ready to eat meals Monday through Friday. Without the program residents would struggle with figuring out what they are going to eat everyday and also struggle with isolation. The program helps residents come out of their comfort zone of their own apartment and socialize with other residents. This can help with loneliness because most of the time when you stay in your apartment you eat alone rather than eating with residents and have them accompany you.

Project Justification

According to Feeding America, comparing food secure seniors to food insecure seniors it was shown that 60% of food insecure seniors were more likely to experience depression, 53% were more likely to report a heart attack, 52% are more likely to develop asthma, and 40% are more likely to experience congestive heart failure. (Aiken, 2014) Looking at this data, it shows that more than half or close to more than half of seniors who were food insecure seniors developed or experienced a health issue that food secure seniors did not experience. About 30% of seniors have to choose between paying for food or paying for health care. (Aiken, 2014). This

would be a never ending issue because if the senior decides to pay for food then they would be going without health care. If the senior does not have health care this can cause problems financially and also health wise. They may not have enough money to afford their medication if needed and if they do not have health care they will not have the medication covered. However, if they pay for health care and not provide food for themselves then this can cause health issues to arise such as depression, loneliness, malnourishment, stress, etc. There would be no winning situation no matter what they decide to choose. Providing a way to be able to make sure seniors are getting the access to healthy meals is something that needs to be focused on more within our communities. Many times it seems to be overlooked and the statistics are rising as time moves on.

Project Implementation

The way I went about implementing my project was first choosing one of the senior housings that CHISPA has to offer. With the short amount of time that I had I decided to choose Loa Abuelitos Senior housing because it was only 25 residents. Since the end of September I started to go to the lunch program at least once a week to see how the program fully ran. Doing so I came up with questions I decided to ask more about. Instead of going to the program weekly during October I went door to door and handed out the questionnaires to most residents. I did this 4 times within 2 weeks to make sure everyone had the time to fill out the questionnaires properly. I also set up a food bin at Natividad Hospital Behavioral Health Office at the beginning of November and separated and delivered a box of non-perishable food to each apartment building. I was thankful to have someone at Natividad Hospital have their husband donate food from Taylor Farms as well. After going through each questionnaire I came up with my end results. To

show my appreciation for the seniors who were able to participate I raffled off two fifty dollar gift cards to a local grocery store near them. A detailed implementation plan and timeline can be seen in Scope of Work in Appendix A.

Assessment Plan

I plan to measure effectiveness by keeping my questionnaires organized and not misplacing them so I can have the most accurate data that I can get. I also plan to walk every resident through the questionnaire and make sure they answer all questions truthfully and correctly while completing the questionnaire. Once the data is collected I will use my calculator to get all percentages that I need to get while completing my assessment. I will go through my questionnaire as many times as I need to in order to cover everything that needs to be covered and not miss anything.

Expected Outcomes

I expect a few things to come out of this project. One of the things that I believe will come out of this project is a complete understanding of how the program runs. It is important to study the program that you are doing a project on so you know exactly what you are working with. Another thing I expect to come out of this project is to make sure the residents are content with the way the program is running. If there is something that needs to be changed then I expect to bring light to some of the changes and if the program is running smoothly then I expect to give great feedback to CHISPA on how the program is running. I also expect to get more insight on how much access to healthy food seniors have. Once I get information on whether or not there could be anything more to be done within the program then it could possibly be a more developed program.

Project Results

The purpose of my providing a questionnaire for residents to fill out was not only to find out whether the lunch program should be continued but also to find out what they consume throughout the day, whether or not they eat alone, if there is any difficulty getting food, (money, transportation, etc) If they have skipped any meals in the past 12 months due to low income, and if they would benefit from the food bank delivering boxes to the residents. I was quite surprised when I got the feedback that I did from the residents.

When it comes to the lunch program continuing for these residents 100% of the residents who participated in the questionnaire which was 21 out of 25 residents stated that they would love for the lunch program to continue. When asked why 13 out of 21 residents simply stated the food however the other 8 mentioned some things such as being able to get out of their apartment for the day, being closer with their neighbors, and enjoying eachothers company. When asked about what they consume in a day for breakfast, lunch, and dinner 8 out of the 21 residents stated that they do not eat breakfast at all. 4 out of the 21 residents stated that they just have coffee for breakfast and the other 9 residents had a mixture of coffee, bread, fruits, oatmeal, cereal, and eggs. Those were the most popular food items. For lunch most of the residents stated that they eat what is provided in the lunch program. A few of the residents do not go daily so they would eat sandwiches, beans, potatoes and eggs, vegetables, and 6 stated that they do not eat lunch. When asked what they ate for dinner 5 people stated that because they had a good breakfast and dinner they would drink coffee or even tea for dinner. A lot of the residents ate soups such as chicken soups and beef stew, rice, beans, fish, vegetables, sweet bread and milk, and pastas.

When the question asked on whether or not they ate alone 13 out of 21 residents stated that if they did not go to the lunch program to eat in a group setting that they do eat alone for breakfast as well as dinner. The other 8 residents either have a family member that comes daily to keep them company, a worker that is able to keep them company or their spouse. When asked if there was any difficulty getting food because of money issues, transportation, or even mobility issues 14 out of 21 residents said yes and 7 out of 21 residents said no. When asked if they have skipped a meal in the past 12 months due to low income 15 out of 21 residents admitted to skipping a meal because of low income. When asked if they would benefit from food bank deliveries 18 out of 21 residents said yes they would.

The project did achieve the expected outcomes. The residents gave their feedback on whether or not the lunch program was an effective program to have. Most residents are impressed by the program and very thankful for it; however there was also some feedback that we got from them that would be able to help improve the program. It also gave us an insight into how many seniors do not have access to a meal on an everyday basis and how many residents actually struggle to have at least one meal a day.

Conclusion & Recommendations

The results from my project had led me to think of how beneficial the lunch program is but it also gave me ideas on how to improve the program. One of the recommendations that I would say would be to have a list of who would like to have their food delivered to them. With some of the seniors having mobility issues a couple of them stated that most of the time they do not go unless their case worker is there to go get the food for them. If the food is delivered to their door they would have a meal for them everyday whether the case worker is there or not.

Another recommendation would be to see if there is a way to get the food banks to deliver to them every two weeks. Some stated that the food banks were beneficial to them when they were getting it while COVID was around but have not gone since because of transportation issues, mobility issues, or even the timing of the food bank. I also recommend this because in the questionnaire 85% of the residents said they wanted it back. My last recommendation would be to figure out a way to get the residents food on the weekends. Some residents stated that they struggle to eat on certain weekends because the program runs only from Monday through Friday. If CHISPA can figure out a way to get the residents meals 7 days a week I feel as it would help the seniors tremendously.

Personal Reflection

During this project, I learned that there is a huge need to continue this lunch program. It is extremely important for seniors to consume healthy food in order to prevent not only malnourishment but also other health problems that can occur as well. CHISPA provides warm healthy meals five days a week to make sure their residents have at least one nutritious meal a day. It saddens me to say but there are quite a few residents who stated that the meal provided to them is their only meal that they eat within the day. Without the program who knows where they would have to find a way to get their meal for the day.

One of my strengths was to simply build a relationship with some of the seniors and we were able to get a better understanding of how it is not only to struggle with getting a nutritious meal but also that health issues come from it. Many of the seniors had mobility issues whether it was being able to walk, hear, see, or even pick up certain items. Another one of my successes was to find out during the questionnaire that they look forward to anytime they are provided with

non-perishable food. Within the short amount of time that I had I was able to provide a box of food for all 25 residents with the help of Natividad Hospital's Behavioral Health Facility donating most of the food. I also raffled two fifty dollar gift cards to two people who participated in the questionnaire to a nearby grocery store.

While I had a great time with this project, there were a few challenges that I did come across. One of the challenges that I had come across was the language barrier. Most of the residents who stay in Los Abuelitos Apartments only spoke Spanish. The first time I went to do the questionnaire I only was able to get about five out of twenty five of them completed because most of them did not speak English and I am not fluent in Spanish. The second time after that I communicated with them through my mother. It was very difficult because I had to find time around my mom's schedule to continuously figure out when I was able to go. Another challenge that I had to face was trying to come up with a new capstone project within one semester. While working on my previous project when it was finally time to implement everything I was told on short notice that I would not be able to work with a certain organization anymore. It was extremely difficult because for the past two semesters it was the only thing I had been working on. So overall, coming up with a new project for the short amount of time I had was extremely difficult in itself.

The health problem my project relates to would be to address the health issues that seniors go through within their daily lives. Not getting enough nutrients in your body can cause other health issues to arise whether you are a senior or not. In this case, it may bring up many health issues. As far as what more I could have done which I believe can still be done was to get the food truck to deliver nutritious meals on the weekends to Los Abuelitos Apartments. This

one one of my ideas however, with the short amount of time that I had I was not able to complete this in a timely manner. Like it was previously mentioned, some of the residents' only meals are from the lunch program. However, the lunch program only runs Monday through Friday and not on the weekends. Being able to provide meals on the weekends as well can make a huge difference for some residents.

One piece of advice that I feel would be beneficial for future capstone students is to make sure the organization that you decide to work with if you are working with one is all in 100%. It is extremely difficult to play catch up at the last semester which also goes hand in hand with not procrastinating your project. This is a 3 semester program and I feel that you should take advantage of the first semester as much as you can and get ahead. I also believe that even though it is a project you should also have fun with it and enjoy it. I feel as if making relationships with the seniors at Los Abuelitos Apartments helped me enjoy my project so much more.

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Appendix A

Scope of Work

Activities	Deliverables	Timeline/Deadlines	Supporting Staff
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Visit lunch Program		September 14	Myself
Visit Lunch Program		September 21	Myself
Visit Lunch Program		September 28	Myself
Build questionnaire		October 5	Myself
Go door to door to help residents fill out questionnaire	Questionnaire	October 6	Michelle Garza
Go door to door to help residents fill out questionnaire	Questionnaire	October 7	Michelle Garza
Go door to door to help residents fill out questionnaire	Questionnaire	October 11	Michelle Garza
Go door to door to help residents fill out questionnaire	Questionnaire	October 13	Michelle Garza
Set up food bin at Natividad Hospital	Non perishable food	November 2	Michelle Garza
Gathered all results from the questionnaire		November 15	Myself
Separated non perishable food in boxes	Food/Boxes	November 29	Michelle Garza
Separated non perishable food in boxes	Food/Boxes	November 30	Michelle Garza
Separated non perishable food in boxes	Food/Boxes	December 1	Michelle Garza
Delivered Food		December 5	Michelle Garza
Figured out end results		December 5	Myself
Raffle gift card		December 5	Myself