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INSIDE

# Santa Monica Daily Press

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THE DATA DUMP ISSUE

## Officials trying to make room for seniors at lunch table

BY AMEERA BUTT

**DOWNTOWN** — Come Sept. 1, Santa Monica's seniors will get priority seating at the lunch table and those living outside the city by the sea will have to start paying for their meals under a change to a City Hall-subsidized program.

Officials with WISE & Healthy Aging, which administers the free or reduced-price lunch program, said the change is in response to a number of Santa Monica seniors who can't access lunch due to the unavailability of seating. Instead, seats have been taken up by out-of-area seniors.

To give locals priority, WISE will no longer accept Los Angeles County funding and is terminating its contract with a community-based organization hired by the county to run the lunch program. WISE will instead rely solely on City Hall funding to provide meals to Santa Monica seniors. In fiscal year 2010-11, City Hall granted WISE \$227,870 for the meals program.

Seniors who are out-of-area are in the process of receiving notices about the change. They will still be able to eat lunches at Santa Monica sites, but they will not be given priority seating and will have to pay \$4.50 for the meal. They can also choose to go to a county-funded site closer to where they live.

"There's only a finite number of seats available," Grace Cheng Braun, CEO and president of WISE & Healthy Aging, said. "Our Board of Directors felt very strongly, from a geography standpoint, seniors who live in Santa Monica should have access to lunch and they should not have to drive out of town or take a bus out of town in order to have lunch. Those who are out of town are bypassing sites and that's their choice."

At the end of this month, WISE will terminate its contract with Oldtimers Foundation, which provides services to Los Angeles and San Bernardino counties, to provide meals for Santa Monica. Instead, the nonprofit will continue to use funding from City Hall's Community Grants Program to serve Santa Monica seniors lunches.

In this fiscal year, 426 seniors registered

for the lunch program, of which 237 were Santa Monica residents. Of the 237 Santa Monicans, only half are able to actually get in to eat a lunch, according to statistics from WISE & Healthy Aging. The total number of meals served was 33,233, of which 19,085 were served to Santa Monica residents, stats showed. That's about 57 percent, Cheng Braun said.

Out-of-area seniors come from as far as the San Fernando Valley, Hollywood, Beverly Hills and Inglewood to eat at Santa Monica sites, Cheng Braun said.

She said out-of-area seniors are choosing to bypass between one to three county-funded sites to eat in Santa Monica because it's by the beach and close to all the attractions that draw tourists every year. She said the meals at Santa Monica sites also taste better.

The current policy allows any senior 60 years of age and older who is a Los Angeles County resident and registered in the Elderly Nutrition Program to eat lunch at a county-funded site. Seniors are given lunch at various locations including the Ken Edwards Center and at Reed and Virginia Avenue parks. The Elderly Nutrition Program also includes home-delivered meals for seniors of limited financial means.

For more than two decades, the city of Santa Monica administered the county's Elderly Nutrition Program before WISE & Healthy Aging took it over five years ago, Cheng Braun said.

That changed 14 months ago when another organization, Oldtimers Foundation, won the contract and then hired WISE & Healthy Aging to provide lunches for the Santa Monica area, Cheng Braun said.

Margaret Willis, human services administrator with City Hall, said her office was approached by WISE and heard complaints from the community about the lunch program. She said making sure local needs are met with local dollars was a priority at City Hall.

"We felt like it was really tragic that folks could not access this free meal program in their own community," Willis said.



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**YUM:** Kathy Osburn prepares meals for seniors at the Ken Edwards Center in May.

She said change was going to be hard for the seniors who come from out of town, and some seniors may choose not to pay the fee and go to another county site that's closer to their homes. But she said there could be other seniors, who have been coming to the sites for years, and have friends there and can pay the fee.

"We are confident those folks will not go hungry," Willis said.

Nancy Volpert, director of public policy at Jewish Family Service of Los Angeles, said she hasn't seen an overall reduction in demand in senior meals through any of the congregate meal sites she works with. Jewish Family Service, a charitable organization that helps the hungry and vulnerable, continues to experience a need in the community for seniors and older adults who are hungry.

She said the last time she spoke to the senior nutrition director, the organization was still experiencing high demand in West Hollywood and other locations. Those other senior center locations include North Hollywood, Los Angeles and Venice.