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Food Bank Launches Program To Help Elderly Access Benefits

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BY LAURA EDDY: NEWSROOM INTERN

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Thanks to a \$20,000 grant from the Cisco Foundation, the Food Bank of Central and Eastern North Carolina is launching a one-year outreach project in three different counties to help more senior citizens get access to benefits through the Food and Nutrition Services (FNS) program.

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In Moore County, the project is partnering with the Sandhills Moore Coalition and the Sandhills Interfaith Food Pantry. Agencies are working on how to get the word out to eligible seniors who are not taking advantage of the benefits of the Food and Nutrition Services program, formerly known as the Food Stamp program.

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Seniors are often not aware that they're eligible to receive benefits or are not sure how to go about finding out, said Brad Blackwell, outreach coordinator for the Food Bank.

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Some seniors are unwilling to take advantage of benefits because of negative stigmas or because they are too proud to ask for help, Blackwell added. Another aim of the outreach project is to dispel those stigmas.

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"Seniors have paid into this program over the course of their many years of hard work," said Christy Simmons, public relations manager for the Food

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Bank. "Why not take advantage of something you've helped pay for?"

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Of all the seniors in Moore County potentially eligible to receive benefits through Food and Nutrition Services, an estimated 12 percent do not take advantage of the program.

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"Through the partner agencies," says Blackwell, "we hope to share information and dispel the myths of misinformation that exists, especially among senior communities."

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The Sandhills Moore Coalition plans to send postcards to some 960 clients over the age of 60 who may be eligible for benefits.

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The postcards will invite them to take a prescreening test at the Coalition to determine whether or not they should submit an application to the Department of Social Services, which makes the decision on whether or not they are eligible.

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The outreach project also provided a computer to the Coalition and trained volunteers to administer the prescreening test on the FNS Web site.

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The Coalition and the Sandhills Interfaith Food Pantry will also help those seniors who might qualify to submit an application to the Department of Social Services.

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"For instance, if the seniors are unable to make a face-to-face interview in Carthage with social services, they may send a representative to the interview instead, or they can do a phone interview," Blackwell said.

Some seniors living at the poverty level choose between paying for food and paying for medicine, Simmons said, even though they're eligible for benefits.

The purpose of the project is to remove the barriers that stop seniors from taking advantage of this program, namely lack of information, misinformation and stigmas.

"I think it's one of the misleading things about Moore County," said Michael Cotten, outreach coordinator for the Food Bank Center in the Sandhills. "It's seen as a very affluent county, but there are pockets of Moore that suffer more than average. You can go from an affluent section to a poverty-stricken section in less than a mile."

Simmons added, "Retirement is not necessarily golden for all seniors, but we want it to be as golden as possible."

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