

San Jose Mercury News (CA)

CITY, COUNTY MUST COOPERATE ON SENIORS' SAFETY NET

May 10, 2010

Section: Editorial

Edition: Valley Final

Page: 11A

Steve Schmoll and Marilou Christina, Special to the Mercury News

Memo: STEVE SCHMOLL is CEO of the Council on Aging Silicon Valley. MARILOU CHRISTINA is director of Older Adult Services for Catholic Charities of Santa Clara County. They wrote this article for this newspaper.

For most of us, our "golden years" do not conjure up an image of going hungry. But that could be the result if we allow our **seniors'** safety net to fray through a series of city budget cuts to **senior nutrition** programs and related **senior** services.

A long-term solution is greater coordination between city and county policymakers and budget managers. They must develop a regional system and funding structure to support the needs of our growing aging population. We applaud the leadership shown by **San Jose** City Councilman Pete Constant and Santa Clara County Supervisor Liz Kniss as they work to bring all the players together. It is not only prudent but essential, given that the aging population -- specifically those over 85 -- are the fastest-growing segment of our society.

Congregate, or community meal programs, were started in 1965, a result of the Older Americans Act. The federal government provides dollars, matched by counties and cities, to feed older adults, recognizing that too many were going hungry in their own homes. **San Jose** supports 14 meal sites, and several others are supported by local nonprofits. Many of these sites also contain opportunities for physical activity, wellness, education and enrichment.

The current city budget proposes closing two of these centers this year, with more possible closures in 2012. Given the draconian cuts that were initially proposed, this is a welcome reprieve. However, more cuts could be in **San Jose's** future. Almost one in five **seniors** is "food insecure," meaning they can't access enough nutritious food--an estimated 43,000 in our county. Without proper **nutrition** older adults are at greater risk for a variety of chronic diseases and acute conditions. Malnutrition, being underweight or overweight can lead to weak muscles, reduced stamina and the inability to engage in physical activity. This in turn results in decreased ability to perform daily living activities, increases risks for falls, and threatens independence. The potential closure of neighborhood centers and the elimination of **senior**

physical activity programming only exacerbate this risk.

The loss of congregate meal sites also puts older adults at risk of social isolation. Research indicates a significant association between social isolation and negative health outcomes. Individuals who lack social connections or report frequent feelings of loneliness are more likely to suffer higher rates of illness, death, infection and cognitive decline.

What's more, if **San Jose** removes some of its support for **senior nutrition** programs, it puts programs in other cities at risk if county dollars are shifted to fill a void in **San Jose**. Other cities may reduce their financial commitment to meals programs as well.

Given **San Jose's** dire fiscal situation, what can we do? We recognize everyone is making cuts. We propose a well-planned, equitable approach. By looking at the issue of **senior nutrition** countywide, policymakers can assess where the greatest need exists and how the cities and counties can best partner to maximize the dollars available. They can also look at creative solutions such as public-private partnerships and consider innovative models like **senior** cafes.

Constant and Kniss have stepped up to the plate, gathering together leaders from **San Jose**, the county and surrounding cities to begin work on this solution. This will not be a fast, easy process, but in the end it will be a better outcome than a haphazard fraying of the safety net.