‘Elder orphans’ face challenge of getting through life on their own

By Abbey J. Porter

“Aging is not for the squeamish,” a friend in her 60s said to me recently. To be sure, growing older can bring challenges as one’s physical and mental capabilities change and, often, one’s independence diminishes. Those challenges loom especially large for “elder orphans” – seniors who live alone and do not have family members available to help them.

From having someone to care for you when you’re sick to knowing who to list as an emergency contact, needs or concerns that may be easily surmounted by seniors with family members to rely on can be obstacles for those who are on their own.

The phenomenon of elder orphans is common and thought to be growing, especially as fewer Americans opt to marry or partner. According to the Census Bureau, only 38 percent of those 65 and older were married or living with a partner in 2015, down from 44 percent in 1980. In Philadelphia, the percentage of adults who had never been married as of 2015 was the highest among the nation’s 10 largest cities. That year, nearly 52 percent of adult Philadelphians reported never having married, up from 43 percent in 2005, according to census data. The percentage of never-married adults also grew nationally during that period.

The dangers of isolation

“They’re vulnerable to a lot of things,” said Joe Snyder, director of PCA’s Older Adult Protective Services (OAPS) department, of elder orphans. “They’re certainly more vulnerable to being exploited or being abused. The more isolated you are, the easier it is for a perpetrator.”

By Marcia Z. Siegal

“Everything is fresh, and the price is right,” says Willa Mae Knight in her emphatic way. “I especially enjoy the blueberries, mangos, string beans, collards and kale, strawberries, cilantro, and lemons.” Knight is a member of the food buying club operated by the Asociación Puertorriqueños en Marcha (APM), a health, human services, community and economic development nonprofit primarily serving Eastern North Philadelphia.

APM Food Buying Club (FBC) staff purchase fruit and vegetables in bulk every other Tuesday from the Philadelphia Wholesale Produce Market at 6700 Essington Ave. in the city’s Eastwick neighborhood. Members’ orders, along with cash payments, are collected in advance of the purchase. Because the FBC buys produce in bulk at wholesale rates, the prices members pay are much lower than they would be at most grocery stores. For instance, a pound of sweet potatoes costs 50 cents; a pound of carrots, 40 cents; and a pound of strawberries, $2.

By Paola Nogueras

“My family was in Puerto Rico working on farms,” says Trudy Mione, a member of the food buying club operated by the Asociación Puertorriqueños en Marcha. “My brothers and I were raised there and came to Philadelphia in the 1960s.”

“I especially enjoy the blueberries, mangos, string beans, collards and kale, strawberries, cilantro, and lemons,” Mione said. She is a member of the food buying club operated by the Asociación Puertorriqueños en Marcha (APM) in Philadelphia.
Look out for problem of malnutrition

More than 10 percent of adults experience malnutrition, a condition caused by not eating enough healthy food, according to the National Council on Aging (NCOA). A key warning sign of this condition is unplanned weight loss.

Malnutrition can be caused by medical factors, such as disease or disability; dental problems, such as poorly fitting dentures; social and lifestyle factors, such as isolation, poverty and lack of access to healthy food; and alcoholism, which can interfere with the digestion and absorption of nutrients. Psychological factors, such as depression or dementia-related confusion, frequently precipitate this condition.

Older adults are more likely to have chronic conditions that place them at nutritional risk. Cancer, diabetes, Alzheimer’s disease and other conditions can make eating difficult, change metabolism and require dietary restrictions that can affect appetite, Mayo Clinic experts say.

Malnutrition often flies under the radar, particularly in seniors, “because the focus is on treating their primary condition,” said Robert H. Miller, Ph.D., then a divisional vice president at Abbott Nutrition, in a 2014 press release. Left untreated, malnutrition can lead to other serious problems, including reduced cognitive function and increased risk for infection, anemia and falls. It also can exacerbate chronic disease; complicate wound healing; impair muscle function; decrease bone mass; and lead to apathy, tiredness and depression. In addition, it is associated with higher-than-normal hospital re-admission rates and longer hospital and rehabilitation facility stays.

Tips from the American Academy of Family Physicians, the Mayo Clinic and NCOA to address malnutrition include:

- Request screenings for nutrition problems during routine doctor’s visits. Alert your doctor to problems such as unexplained weight loss or decreased appetite. Ask the doctor to identify – and address – contributing factors such as medications.
- Eat foods packed with nutrients, such as fresh fruits and raw vegetables.
- Flavor foods with fresh herbs and spices, avoiding salt, to help counteract bland or restrictive diets or the diminished senses of taste and smell that can occur with age.
- Consider pre-packaged supplements, such as nutrition shakes.
- Consider outside help such as a home-delivered meal program or a home health aide to shop for groceries and prepare meals.
- Ask for a nutrition assessment by a registered dietician and request advice about how to regain weight or prevent further weight loss.
- Try snacking on healthy foods to get extra nutrients and calories between meals.

Sources of help with nutrition

Philadelphia Corporation for Aging (PCA) – information and referral for aging services and resources including home-delivered meals and senior community centers (which offer communal meals): 215-765-9040; pcaCares.org.

BenePhilly – an initiative to enroll people for benefits including the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), formerly known as food stamps: 844-848-4376; bctrust.org.

Coalition Against Hunger – SNAP enrollment, and referral to food pantries and soup kitchens: 215-430-0555; hungercoalition.org.

Chronic Disease Self-Management Program – a workshop-based program developed by Stanford University to assist adults 60 and older with chronic conditions. Participants learn about healthy eating and managing symptoms: 215-765-9000, ext. 5119; email dbrown@pcaphl.org.
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Fresh Food

Farmers’ markets bring just-picked produce into your neighborhood

By Alicia M. Colombo

Having access to fresh food, which many of us take for granted, often goes hand-in-hand with positive health outcomes. But almost 40 percent of Philadelphia seniors 60 and older say the quality of groceries available in their neighborhoods is fair or poor, according to the Public Health Management Corporation’s annual Household Health Survey.

If you live in an area where access to fresh, quality and affordable food is limited, sometimes called a “food desert,” farmers’ markets can provide a welcome source of fresh fruits, vegetables, herbs and other foods. This time of year, direct access to fresh, locally grown produce is at its peak. Philadelphia boasts dozens of farmers’ markets in communities throughout the city, many of which opened for the season last month.

The Food Trust, which runs 20 markets across the city, is working to combat food scarcity by locating 80 percent of its markets in high-need, low-access neighborhoods. “We do a lot of work around improving access to affordable and nutritious foods,” said Katy Wich, senior associate of the farmers’ market program at The Food Trust. “If we can lower the number of blocks they need to walk or avoid the need to get on a bus to buy fresh food, seniors will eat healthier.”

In addition to making fresh produce more readily available, most farmers’ markets are also more economical than supermarkets or convenience stores. All of The Food Trust’s markets and many other markets in the city accept Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) benefits, formerly known as food stamps. For those who use an ACCESS card (an Electronic Benefits Transfer debit card) to purchase food through SNAP, the Food Trust’s markets also offer an additional program. Through Philly Food Bucks, for every $5 spent on fruits and vegetables with the ACCESS card, customers receive a $2 coupon for additional produce. “It really helps low-income customers stretch their food budget,” Wich said.

Low-income seniors can also take advantage of the Senior Farmers’ Market Nutrition Program, which provides $20 in vouchers to purchase Pennsylvania-grown fruits and vegetables. (See story on page 6 for details.)

Fresh is best

Buying produce from a farm stand is the next best thing to growing it yourself because the fruits and vegetables sold there have generally been picked within the previous two days. “Because the produce is freshly picked, straight from the farm, you’re getting the opportunity to buy things with the highest nutritional content,” Wich said. “When stored correctly, you’re going to get a much longer shelf life out of produce that is picked at the peak of freshness.”

Pennsylvania farmers and growers use cold storage, hydroponics (growing plants in water) and other methods to greatly expand the season of locally grown produce. That’s why certain crops, such as mushrooms, apples and lettuce, are available year-round. While most farmers’ markets close in the fall, some stay open all year, including locations in West Philadelphia at Clark Park, 43rd Street and Baltimore Avenue; Center City at Headhouse Square (Second and Lombard streets), Rittenhouse Square (18th and Walnut streets), Fishtown Square (23rd and Pine streets) and the Reading Terminal Market (51 N. 12th St.); and Chestnut Hill at Winston Road and Germantown Avenue.

Markets not only supply tasty produce, they also work to educate people on how to cook and enjoy the food. During the summer months, most Food Trust markets provide free cooking demonstrations. “Our cooking staff buys straight from the farmer. They wash, prep and cook it right in front of the customer,” Wich said.

Market vendors tailor their wares to the cultural tastes of the communities they serve. For example, Wich said, greens are especially popular in African-American neighborhoods. In those communities, “seniors have been cooking collards and other greens all their lives. They are a traditional comfort food,” Wich said. “In the Northeast and other Polish neighborhoods, beets are a staple in traditional cooking, while certain peppers and herbs are popular in Latino neighborhoods.”

In addition to fresh produce, many markets also sell a variety of canned items (including jams, preserves, fruit butters and pickled vegetables) that were made using local ingredients.

Whether you are looking for fresh spices and produce to complement your favorite dish or want to expand your cooking repertoire, you will find a wealth of ideas, inspiration and fresh food at your local farmers’ market.

* * *

For more information about farmers’ markets and the health benefits of fresh produce, go to FoodFitPhilly.org, farmtocity.org or TheFoodTrust.org.

Contact Alicia Colombo at acolombo@pcaphl.org.
In Season

What healthy, tasty dishes are cooking this summer at your local farmers’ market?

Many of the city’s farmers’ markets provide cooking demonstrations that will give you ideas of how to use the fresh, tasty produce you can buy there. Here are some recipes that will be showcased at some of The Food Trust’s 20 markets this summer.

Cucumber Limeade
(Servings: 4)

Ingredients:
1 medium cucumber, peeled and thinly sliced
1 lime
2 tbsp. honey or real maple syrup
Salt
4 cups cold water
Ice cubes

Directions:
Set aside four of cucumber slices, and put the rest into a bowl.
Scrub the lime and cut it into quarters from end to end (lengthwise). Put each quarter on the cutting board, flat side down. Cut one quarter into four pieces and set aside. Cut each of the remaining quarters into thin slices and add to the bowl of cucumbers slices.
Add the honey or maple syrup and a pinch of salt to the cucumber and lime slices. Use a wooden spoon or potato masher to mash them really well until the lime gives up its juice, the cucumber is completely smashed, and the honey or maple syrup is dissolved, about two minutes. Add water and stir well.
Set a strainer over the pitcher and pour the limeade mixture through it. Use a wooden spoon to mash the mixture against the mesh of the strainer to release as much liquid as possible. Serve right away with ice, garnished with the reserved cucumber and lime slices.

Source: ChopChop Magazine

Broccoli Ramen Noodle Salad
(Servings: 8)

Ingredients:
2 large collard leaves
1 tsp. olive oil
½ cup mashed ripe avocado or hummus
1 carrot or small beet, scrubbed or peeled, and grated on large holes of a box grater
¼ cup toasted pecans, cashews, walnuts, almonds or pumpkin seeds
Lemon or lime wedge
Salt

Directions:
In a large bowl, combine the broccoli, carrots, cabbage, green onions, sliced almonds, sesame seeds and noodles.
For the dressing, mix together the honey, oil, vinegar and seasoning.
Pour over salad and toss to coat evenly.

Source: SNAPed4Me.org

Apple and Pear Stir-Fry
(Servings: 2)

Ingredients:
2 tsp. vegetable oil
2 chopped apples
1 chopped pear
2 tbsp. lemon juice
¼ tsp. cinnamon
¼ tsp. ground nutmeg

Directions:
Heat oil in a large pot over medium heat. Add apples and cook for three minutes.
Add pears and lemon juice. Cook for another three minutes.
Sprinkle cinnamon and nutmeg. Continue to cook for another three minutes. Serve warm.

Source: Just Say Yes to Fruits and Vegetables program

Mercy LIFE: Keeping Seniors Healthy and Independent

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Source: SNAPed4Me.org

Source: Just Say Yes to Fruits and Vegetables program
Did you know that nearly 32,000 Philadelphia seniors skip meals due to a lack of money? One way to help combat hunger among the elderly is to increase their access to affordable, healthy foods. Food programs like the Senior Farmers’ Market Nutrition Program (SFMNP) do just that. Each summer since 2000, Philadelphia Corporation for Aging (PCA) has distributed $20 worth of SFMNP produce vouchers per person to nearly 37,000 seniors. The 2017 program began June 19 and will continue while supplies last. Eligible Philadelphia seniors may receive the vouchers once per year and use them to purchase seasonal Pennsylvania-grown produce at any of 55 certified farmers’ markets throughout the city.

“The Senior Farmers’ Market Nutrition Program is huge among our senior population. With the warm weather, participants have a great opportunity to check out what’s in season and try different produce then they usually would,” said Amanda De Leo, registered nutrition and dietetics technician, who manages voucher distribution for PCA.

The vouchers are being distributed at PCA, 642 N. Broad St., on weekdays from 9 a.m. to 4 p.m. and at other sites throughout the city, including senior community centers. A popular distribution location where the vouchers can be used on-site is the Reading Terminal Market, 12th and Arch streets. Vouchers will be distributed there on Wednesdays, July 12 and 26, from 10 a.m. to 2 p.m.

This program meets a real need among older adults. “Food deserts, which are areas that are scarce in fresh, healthful foods, are sprinkled throughout the city, which largely inhibits our seniors from consuming the proper amount of fresh produce,” De Leo said. “This program gives our seniors the opportunity to take advantage of the produce they wouldn’t usually have available to them in their neighborhoods.” The vouchers can be spent in $5 increments through November 30. “The beauty of this program is that the vouchers can be spent at the leisure of the participants. They can pick up strawberries in June and then save a few vouchers to use for apples in September and October,” De Leo said.

Fresh produce that is in season is always the best, most healthy option. “The Pennsylvania Department of Agriculture has an established list of certified farmers, which gives

• continued on page 15

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“I can enjoy the luxury of living in the community with access to care whenever I need it.”
-Ricardo
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<th>Day</th>
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<td>Monday</td>
<td>Indie Day</td>
<td>Philadelphia Art Museum. 11 a.m.-4 p.m.</td>
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<td>Tuesday</td>
<td>Independence Day Celebration</td>
<td>Parkway Central Library. 11:00-3:00 p.m.</td>
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<td>Waterfront Sessions Live Music Series: Hispanic Fiesta</td>
<td>6:30-9:30 p.m. Great Plaza at Street Harbor Park.</td>
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<td>Philadelphia Zoo. 10 a.m.-4 p.m.</td>
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<td>Friday</td>
<td>Waterfront Sessions Live Music Series: Long Cosmetic x The Whigs</td>
<td>6:30-9:30 p.m. Space Shuttle Harbor Park.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Saturday</td>
<td>Independence Day Celebration</td>
<td>Parkway Central Library. 11:00-3:00 p.m.</td>
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Fresh Food
Communal cooking program serves up healthy soup to West Philly seniors

By Marcia Z. Siegal

It's a Thursday morning, and water is simmering in two big stainless steel pots on the stove at Philadelphia Episcopal Cathedral. Volunteers from the church and community chop cauliflower, carrots, scallions, onions, garlic and celery. Pungent scents of turmeric, nutmeg and cumin suffuse the small room. This communal soup-making venture is one of a series of intergenerational cooking sessions sponsored by Food & Company, a project of Ralston Center's Age-Friendly West Philadelphia Initiative.

The morning's effort will yield 120 servings of creamy cauliflower soup, some of which will be offered that afternoon when the church, located at 23 South 38th St., hosts a meal for people in need. The older cooks and those enjoying the meal that day will also take containers home. The rest of the soup will be distributed in freezer-ready containers to other West Philadelphia seniors who could benefit from the nourishing food.

A nonprofit providing health and social services to older West Philadelphians, Ralston Center launched its Age-Friendly initiative in 2016 to create a more livable community for older adults and maximize their independence, well-being and social engagement. For Food & Company, the center partners with host sites including houses of worship and senior community centers for vegetarian soup-making. A member of the Ralston Center team delivers ingredients and cookware to each site and leads the process. Volunteers can take soup for homebound West Philadelphia friends and neighbors, and the center partners with community organizations to distribute any remaining soup to seniors in need, says Greta McKnight, center volunteer coordinator and social worker.

The center purchases in-season vegetables, herbs and other ingredients for the soup from local farms and grocery stores. Recipes are chosen based on available fresh produce and herbs.

Food & Company resulted from listening sessions the center conducted prior to launching its Age-Friendly initiative. Lack of access to healthy food emerged as an important issue, McKnight notes. "Getting to a grocery store was not convenient for many people. It was especially hard for senior residents without a car," she says. "Soup can be a meal in itself and is very nourishing. We thought a project that would involve cooking healthy soups would enable volunteers to be hands-on and engaged. We also did not want seniors to feel they were getting a hand-out when they received this soup. We encourage them to volunteer as cooks if they are able to do so in order to have a part in creating this food."

Since the project was launched a year ago, it has engaged more than 190 volunteers of all ages and provided soup to 2,200 older West Philadelphians, says Jean Papaj, the center’s director of communications and marketing.

Sandra Fair is a volunteer cook and soup recipient. She is part of a core group involved in the monthly cooking project at West Philadelphia Senior Community Center at 41st and Poplar streets and also volunteers for the monthly soup-making sessions at Philadelphia Episcopal Cathedral. "I like to cook different things, and I especially love making soup," she says. Prior to becoming a volunteer with Food & Company, Fair's soup repertoire was quite limited. Through the program, she has learned to make more varieties, like chickpea and kale, butternut squash and cream of carrot with ginger, and expanded her appreciation of vegetables and herbs. She has adapted the recipes to cook the soups on her own at home. She has also made new friends through making soup. McKnight isn't surprised. "The cooking program brings people from the community together," she says. "They socialize and feel good about what they are doing."

Ralston Center seeks more community partners in West Philadelphia to host communal cooking sessions, as well as partner organizations to help reach out to West Philadelphia seniors. Volunteer cooks are also welcome. For more information, call the center at 215-386-2984, email gmcknight@ralston-center.org or visit ralston.org.

Contact Marcia Z. Siegal at msiegel@pcaphl.org.

Crossword puzzle solution
(See page 15 for clues.)

Milestones 10
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• Be a Personal Care Assistant

• Benefits and Life Insurance
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• Do you have a Health Condition or Disability?
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• Benefits & Life Insurance for Caregiver, Excellent Pay

1-800-HOMECARE
AmeriBest.org
Elder orphans

Among the danger for elder orphans is financial exploitation by professional scam artists. “If you’re alone, they become your best friend,” Snyder said. “They’re great at what they do.”

Snyder noted that a high percentage of the calls responded to by OAPS are for self-neglectors – seniors who no longer can care for themselves adequately and who have no one else to care for them.

But perhaps the greatest risks for elder orphans stem from loneliness and isolation. “Loneliness makes people vulnerable,” Snyder said. “When nobody’s interested in what you did today, when no one wants to hear your point of view, that’s crushing. The social connection is essential for mental health, physical health and cognitive health.”

Research backs him up. Studies have shown isolated older people to have much higher rates of death from chronic diseases such as breast cancer, high blood pressure and heart disease. In fact, research shows isolation to be just as bad for you as smoking and worse than being obese. Isolated older adults are also more prone to depression.

“One of the main things you need to do is get connected to something,” Snyder said, such as a senior center or hobby. “The better connected you are, the better things will be for you.”

A life raft

Leigh Gresham, 66, has taken Snyder’s advice to heart. She has lived by herself in her carriage house in Manayunk since her sister, who had lived with her, died in 2013. For the most part, Gresham is alone – although, she said, “I do have a cousin in upstate New York who would love me to move up there.” Gresham, who has lived in Philadelphia since she was 17, has no intention of relocating.

Gresham recently gained some new company in the form of Snickers, a Yorkshire terrier/poodle mix who helps to keep her busy – and socializing. “I like talking to strangers,” she explained, noting that she takes the dog to the dog park and gets to know people there. Plus, she said, a barking dog provides a welcome alarm: “When you’re living alone, you want to know when someone’s coming in.”

But Gresham’s main form of socialization comes from the Center at Journey’s Way, a senior community center at 403 Rector St. in Roxborough, which she visits two to three days a week. She eats breakfast and lunch there; takes part in fitness programs, including a walking group; and helps to teach children to read. She also has made friends she sees outside the center.

“I think the whole answer to living any kind of life in older age is finding a senior center or some kind of group you can be involved with,” she said. “The hardest part of being older is to become out of touch with the community.” For her, the senior center provides a vital source of connection. “You feel like it’s extended family,” she said. “That is my life raft. If I suddenly couldn’t go there, I don’t know what I’d be doing.”

At times, Gresham feels the pinch of living alone. “I feel, sometimes, at the holidays, you can do things with friends, but it’s just not the same,” she said. “There are times when nothing can replace being helped by someone.” She credits Journey’s Way with helping her stay positive.

“It’s a very important part of my sanity,” she said. “You can’t laugh alone; that’s the thing. If you have a sense of humor and you thrive on a sense of humor, you have to be around people.”

Her advice to seniors in situations like hers: “Don’t get depressed. Get in community.”

Sudden solitude

Trudy Mione, 67, never anticipated being alone. That’s largely because, until recently, she had two brothers she relied on. Tony, 63, lived in North Philadelphia, a short drive from her apartment in Center City. “If I needed him, he could be there in five minutes,” Mione said. “It was comforting to know there was somebody there if I needed him” – and someone to list as her emergency contact when she went for doctors’ appointments. “We basically depended on each other,” she said. And although brother Stephen, 69, lived in Denver, he also provided a source of support; the two talked every day.

In July 2016, Tony died suddenly of unknown causes. Stephen died in November of melanoma.

The dual loss has left Mione reeling – and asking to be taken in. “So I stay alone and I need of aging services – but being less able to stay optimistic that I don’t become sick if I suddenly couldn’t go there, I don’t know what I’d be doing.”

At times, Gresham feels the pinch of living alone. “I feel, sometimes, at the holidays, you can do things with friends, but it’s just not the same,” she said. “There are times when nothing can replace being helped by someone.” She credits Journey’s Way with helping her stay positive.

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Her advice to seniors in situations like hers: “Don’t get depressed. Get in community.”

A population at risk

One group of seniors is particularly vulnerable to becoming elder orphans: members of the LGBT, or lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender, community.

Terri Clark, prevention services coordinator for Action Wellness (formerly ActionAIDS), has been providing training on gender and sexuality for nearly 25 years. Clark, who serves on the leadership council of the American Society on Aging’s LGBT Aging Issues Network constituent group, says LGBT seniors are prone to aging alone – and facing related challenges – for multiple reasons.

Typically, LGBT seniors have lived with a lifetime of stigma associated with their lifestyle, she said. That experience leaves them leery of aging-services providers. “Living with lifelong discrimination and prejudice, their perception of aging services – and often, the reality – is that people will not welcome them,” Clark said.

In addition, LGBT individuals, who may have estranged from their biological families, often establish “families of choice.” But because their “family members” tend to be close in age to the LGBT individual, they are likely to need increasing care at the same time.

Finally, LGBT older adults are less likely to be married than their heterosexual counterparts – indeed, until 2014, same-sex couples could not legally marry in Pennsylvania. Unmarried LGBT seniors whose partners die do not have access to the spousal benefits that married individuals would have, such as Social Security, pensions and medical coverage, leaving them more financially vulnerable.

Those factors contribute to LGBT seniors aging in isolation and, often, having more need of aging services – but being less able or likely to access them. “Reports have documented LGBT older adults’ experiences of accessing aging services and encountering discrimination and prejudice,” Clark said.

“Many of these folks have fought for the rights they have today, and how are we taking care of them? We’re not,” Clark said. But she is striving to change that situation. Through groups like Services & Advocacy for GLBT Elders (SAGE), a national organization dedicated to improving the lives of LGBT older adults, Clark has been working with aging service providers to create a more welcoming and inclusive environment. PCA also has been conducting training for providers and has supported the efforts of the local LGBT Elder Initiative, which is committed to pursuing rights and opportunities for LGBT seniors.

Clark noted that there are about 3 million LGBT older adults in the United States – a figure projected to double by 2030. “Aging services need to catch up,” she said.

Abbey J. Porter is editor of Milestones.
Email her at aporter@pcaphl.org
‘Elder orphans’ should take legal steps

The population known as “elder orphans” – seniors who live alone and don’t have family members to help them – weighs heavy on the heart and mind of Debra H. Kroll, a professor at the Temple University Beasley School of Law. Kroll, who runs the school’s Elderly Law Project (which receives funding from PCA), knows many people, both personally and professionally, who struggle with aging alone. (See related story on page 1.)

“It’s a major problem in our society,” Kroll said. “I think it’s something people either don’t recognize or don’t talk about.”

Among the issues elder orphans face is putting in place the legal documents that will ensure their wishes are honored in medical, financial and other matters, should they become unable to do so. The time to do that is while they are mentally sharp.

“I don’t need somebody to make decisions for me because I can make decisions for myself, but there might come a day when that changes,” acknowledges 67-year-old Trudy Mione. “If you don’t have family, there’s no one to do that.”

Kroll appreciates the difficulty that elder orphans may encounter in finding someone to act on their behalf. Nonetheless, she said, they should, if possible, put in place a power of attorney – a legal document that can designate someone to handle their affairs if they should become mentally incapacitated. Powers of attorney should be designated for both medical and financial matters; the same “agent” can handle both, or the responsibilities can be split.

A medical or health care power of attorney names an agent to oversee your medical care and make health care decisions if you are unable to do so, helping to ensure that you receive the care you want – and don’t receive care you don’t want. In the absence of such a designation or the availability of a family member or friend to make decisions, “the health care stuff is frightening,” Kroll said. “There’s literally nobody but a stranger who’s going to make a decision about what a person would want.”

Kroll recommends writing an advance directive, or living will, in which you specify what kinds of medical treatment you do and don’t want; it will kick in if you are terminally ill and incompetent or in a persistent vegetative state. Such a document can be filed with your doctor or hospital. Financial or general powers of attorney can cover a range of responsibilities, from paying bills to buying or selling property to deciding on living arrangements. They can be as broad or as narrow in scope as the senior wishes to make them.

If selecting a friend to serve as one’s agent, Kroll said, seniors should try to choose someone who is younger than themselves and who they’re confident will be available. In the absence of a friend, hiring a lawyer to serve as one’s agent is also an option. But above all, she said, be sure to choose carefully. “It has to be someone the senior really trusts because that person will have the opportunity to really take advantage of them,” she said. “You’re almost better off not having it than giving it to someone you don’t trust.”

For more information and assistance

Free legal services to assist Philadelphia residents 60 and older:

- Community Legal Services of Philadelphia Aging and Disabilities Unit – 215-227-2400
- SeniorLAW Center – 215-988-1242
- Temple University’s Elderly Law Project – 215-204-6887

The Philadelphia Bar Association has a free lawyer referral service, and your initial consultation costs $35 for half an hour. You can get a referral either by phone at 215-238-6333, Monday through Friday from 9 a.m. to 5 p.m., or on its website at philadelphiabarlawyers.com.

The PA SeniorLAW Helpline is a free and confidential telephone legal service operated by SeniorLAW Center that provides legal advice, counseling, information and referrals for any Pennsylvania senior 60 and older. Call 1-877-727-7529, Monday, Wednesday or Friday from 10 a.m. to 2 p.m.
Once the biweekly shopping is finished, staff, volunteers, and neighborhood “community connectors” – people from the community who receive a stipend to engage with residents at a grassroots level – gather to pack up orders. The produce is distributed at eight pickup sites throughout the Eastern North Philadelphia and Juniata areas, including several senior housing facilities. Volunteers and neighbors deliver the food to participants who are ill or homebound.

Meeting a need

While the majority of the FBC’s participants come from Eastern North Philadelphia and Juniata, the club “is open to anyone and everyone. We currently have members from all over Philadelphia, south Jersey and Delaware,” says Daniel Shea, the club’s community outreach and volunteer coordinator.

Since the FBC was founded three years ago, it has served more than 600 families, saved more than $112,000 on members’ behalf and delivered more than 50,000 pounds of produce. Half of the group’s members are older adults ranging in age from their 60s to their 90s.

Philadelphia is the nation’s sixth largest city, but it has the highest level of deep poverty of the nation’s 10 largest cities, says Bridget Palombo, APM director of community economic development. Half of the population of APM’s Eastern North Philadelphia service area is food insecure – meaning they lack consistent access to enough food for an active, healthy life. The neighborhood’s population has higher-than-normal rates of hypertension, diabetes and obesity – problems often linked to or exacerbated by poor nutrition.

APM had built a supermarket in its service area to provide access to healthy food, but doing so did not completely address the issue because prices were still too high for many struggling residents. “We asked families, ‘What do you want?’, and they told us, ‘We want the highest-quality food at the cheapest price,’” says Angel Rodriguez, APM vice president of community economic development.

A food buying club is an especially good fit for the group’s community, APM leaders say. The availability of the Philadelphia Wholesale Market makes it possible to buy in bulk and offer produce to members at about one-third regular supermarket prices. APM also leverages two other assets: people who need this kind of program and are willing to make it work, and partner organizations such as social service agencies and residential facilities. These partners help disseminate information to their consumers or residents and facilitate the collection and distribution of produce orders.

Food and community

The FBC was formed with three goals: to save members valuable time and money, to provide more consistent access to healthy food that members want to eat, and to build a stronger community. People can join at any time by placing an order for any amount. “We’ve had orders as small as 35 cents for a pound of bananas,” Shea says. There is no requirement to order on a regular basis. Conveniently located neighborhood distribution sites provide an additional convenience for residents who would have trouble finding transportation to a grocery store.

By saving on produce, club members can stretch their dollars and/or use Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) benefits to purchase other types of food, like meat and dairy products. They can also put their money back into the community by purchasing other goods and services.

The club has hired five community liaisons, or “relationship managers,” to help spread the word about its service, distribute and collect orders, and check on members’ satisfaction. Word-of-mouth is an increasingly effective recruitment tool as well.

Club member Knight, who resides in Gray Manor, a North Philadelphia senior housing facility, is one of the group’s most determined publicists. Whenever order sheets are distributed in her building, she approaches fellow residents, asking, “Are you ordering today?” and explaining why they should.

Gray Manor Social Services Coordinator Irene Robinson says the club has been a boon to participating residents. “They enjoy the produce and are happy to have access to fresh fruit and vegetables at such a low price. It really makes a big difference in the lives of our residents,” she says.

Gray Manor resident and club member Landora Van Kirk is enthusiastic about the bounty she receives: “I especially love the string beans. They are most delicious.” The beans are just one of the items she purchases regularly. Often the Wholesale Produce Market provides more food than ordered, and participants receive extras with their orders.

When the quantities are too much for her to consume, Van Kirk shares the food with visiting family members.

A life-changing venture

The FBC launched in 2014 with eight families. Melinda Martinez’s family was one of them. “From the very first, I fell in love with this idea,” says Martinez, who is now an FBC relationship manager. The club “has changed my family’s life,” she says. “It made us eat healthier. We don’t have so much junk food in the house anymore, and we have saved money.”

The club has become a Martinez family affair. Martinez’s two preteen children help pack up orders at the community room at the Paseo Verde Apartments, 1950 N. Ninth St. The packing is a sociable endeavor in which they join with other volunteer packers and meet representatives from FBC partner sites, as well as members who come to pick up their orders. Martinez’s husband participates when he can and also helps to deliver orders to people who are homebound. “We’ve gotten to know more people in our community as a result of the club,” Martinez says.

As a relationship manager, Martinez keeps in close contact with customers. “After the food comes, I ask them how everything was with their order,” she says. “If something they ordered was not available, we always give back the money we did not spend. We build trust, and that is very important.”

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For more information about the Asociación PuertoRriqueños en Marcha Food Buying Club, including placing orders, finding distribution sites or volunteering, call 267-296-7350 or email bridget.palombo@apmphila.org or philly.foodbuyingclub@gmail.com.

For more information about APM programs and services, call 267-296-7200 or 888-276-5408 (toll-free), email info@apmphila.org or go to apmphila.org.

Contact Marcia Z. Siegal at msiegel@pcaphl.org.
Don’s Column

Thoughts on modern developments

By Don Harrison

Fancy footwork versus escalation

I used to be afraid of the escalator. Only my last-minute fancy footwork prevented me from being swallowed up in its entrails. It worked, too. I never was.

Remember Ronny?

Watching old “M*A*S*H” reruns brought back memories of the Hotel Senator and its Rendezvous Room. The hotel was a small place on the 900 block of Walnut Street, and it introduced Philadelphians to all the grand old Dixieland combos, the newly popular folk singers — and Ronny Graham.

Ronny was a stand-up comic whose “Freudian Fables” were immensely popular. He disappeared from the local scene when the Senator (and Rendezvous Room) came down. I learned that M*A*S*H’s program consultant on a whole series of episodes was none other than Ronny Graham. Googling, I learned he was a major figure in Hollywood after leaving Philadelphia.

The Hotel Senator is gone, so is the Rendezvous, so is Ronny Graham (he died in 1999 in L.A.), and so are most of us who flocked to enjoy him.

Vouchers

• continued from page 6

gives participants the freedom to explore more of what Pennsylvania farmers have to offer,” De Leo said.

Older adults also can gain new ideas, recipes, and the inspiration to try new foods or cooking methods. Nutritional information is provided along with the vouchers, and farmers’ markets offer cooking demonstrations, to help promote healthy eating throughout the year.

Eating a diet rich in produce helps prevent digestive issues and disease while maintaining a healthy weight and heart.

Eligibility

In order to receive the vouchers, you must be an income-eligible Philadelphia resident who will be 60 or older by year’s end. The 2017 household income limits are $22,311 for an individual and $30,044 for a couple. (Add $7,733 for each additional household member up to six people). Proof of age and residency are required.

For more information, including distribution sites and farmers’ markets that accept the vouchers, call thePCA Helpline at 215-765-9040. The vouchers are made available through funds from the U.S. Department of Agriculture and the Pennsylvania Department of Agriculture.
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