

BBQ offers seniors chance to chat, learn

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By SAMUEL COOPER, Press correspondent

MIDDLETOWN — About 80 local senior citizens kicked off the summer season with a barbecue at the Middletown Senior Center Monday. The possibility of rain forced the party indoors, where friends and neighbors enjoyed hot dogs, hamburgers, live music and a visit from Mayor Sebastian N. Giuliano.

The annual event is organized by Community Renewal Team, which serves meals for the elderly at eight senior community cafés in the region, two of which are in Middletown, and provides the food delivery service Meals on Wheels. CRT also organizes food programs for children.

It's not just the hot food seniors enjoy, said several attendees of the event Monday. The food programs bring people together, giving many a regular chance to chat and socialize. They also receive nutrition and health education.

Although it was all smiles on Monday, some of the folks behind the steaming food were nervous.

CRT is faced with the possibility of losing a chunk of funding from the city for the upcoming year, organizers said. The program survives on a mix of funding sources, including federal dollars, and traditionally the city CRT serves has chipped in.

In early March, CRT submitted an application for \$46,545 in funding to the Middletown Health Department, said Nancy Pappas, CRT's director of external communications. Of that money, \$22,693 would be spent on the elderly nutrition program, she said.

The remaining money would help fund Head Start Health and Nutrition Services and the Middletown Summer Food Service Program. But in April, the organization was told at a public hearing there may not be money available for the programs in the upcoming year, Pappas said.

Rising food, fuel and paper costs have tightened CRT's budget, making this year's contribution from Middletown even more important, said Jane Coggins, CRT's nutrition manager for Middletown.

Without the money, they would have to let go two vital part-time employees, she said.

"The café managers would be laid-off and [the senior nutrition programs] would be run by volunteers — if we can find them," Coggins said. The café managers are responsible to ensure food is properly prepared, organize volunteers, clean up and deliver food for Meals on Wheels.

In 2010, CRT estimates they will serve approximately 23,200 meals at cafés in Middletown, Portland, Cromwell, East Hampton, Moodus, Haddam and Middlefield. A donation of \$2 is suggested for meals served at cafés, but nobody over the age of 60 is ever turned away.

CRT is reimbursed through federal and state programs \$5.51 for each meal, and \$6.68 for those delivered via Meals on Wheels. That money serves only to cover the cost of food and paper products, Coggins said.

The average donation per meal has also declined, said added. CRT receives about \$1.55 in donations per meal served at the senior cafés, and \$1.03 for those delivered.

Mary Campbell, who volunteers with CRT serving food at the Cross Street A.M.E. Zion Church in Middletown once a month, said the nutrition program is an integral part of many senior's lives.

"What do seniors have to do if they can't come here for a meal?" she questioned. "I think if they can find money to go to the moon, they should be able to feed the people here on earth," she said, before vowing to volunteer even more if needed.