

HOMELESS IN PARADISE

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Column #153

Part 2 – Homeless Hotspots



*A homeless hotspot is any place where unsheltered people
(like this hungry food-hunting dumpster diver)
hang in or hang out in order to hang on.*

WHATEVER HAPPENED TO OLD-FASHIONED FOOD STAMPS?

By Wanda Sue Parrott

CORRECTING this error from last week’s closing paragraph is on my mind: “If you’ve never visited the MCDSS, is now the time?” Remember it?

“It’s a one-story building that floats like a square island in a parking lot at 1281 Broadway Ave., Seaside.”

Did you spot the mistake? Probably not, if you’ve never been there. If you’ve been there, you know it’s a two-story building, not just a ground floor.

So, with my mistake corrected, the next question is:

“Why was the Monterey County Department of Social Services compared metaphorically to an oasis on the sand dunes of the City of Seaside?”

My answer is: Because the traditional oasis is a resting place where hungry, thirsty, and weary travelers take a break. They rest from turmoil. They quench their thirst and stave off hunger.

They do the same at the MCDSS, I discovered, when I spent a recent morning in the waiting room posing as an applicant for food stamp benefits.

Down On Dumpster Diving

I sat by a young man in an undershirt with a day’s growth of beard and pierced ears. The area reminded me of a mini version of the Department of Motor Vehicles lined with chairs and clerks serving people in numerical order.

“Why do you come here?” I asked.

“I don’t want to end up a fulltime dumpster diver.”

“Are you a part-time dumpster diver now?”

He looked at me like I was an old nut, said, “I’m an unemployed student and I’m applying for EBT,” and moved away.

Upping His Dollar Download

An elderly man with nappy white hair ambled toward me, waving as he took the young man's empty seat. He recognized me from an I-HELP dinner at my church. He flashed his toothless grin. "I gotta axe what you all doin' in a place like this?"

"Researching a column," I said. "What, I might ask, brings you here?"

"Man, I'm upping my dollar download."

"Oh," I said. "Please translate what you mean."

"I ain't homeless no more. I got me a nice bed in the Veterans Transition Center, but I still got trouble making ends meet, so I'm trying to get Uncle Sam to raise my disability."

"What exactly is your disability?"

"Old age."

How Does One Get Food Stamps?

Soon I found myself seated before a young man half my age. I said I was researching how to get old-fashioned food stamps.

"They're not called Food Stamps anymore," he said. "Ever heard of EBT?"

"Yes, but I don't know what it means."

"Electronic Benefit Transfer. It's like a credit card." He explained it as the federal CalFresh program that provides low-income families and individuals in California with cash to purchase healthful food. "You use it like you use a bank credit or debit card. Benefits are issued on a monthly basis. Unused benefits will carry over to the next month."

"Would someone like me be eligible?" I asked.

"Tell me about yourself."

"I'm 82 and have been trying to live on \$898 per month social security like many of the homeless people about whom I write are doing. I've been fortunate to get food from the Food Bank for Monterey County at Scholze Community Center, where I dance. Otherwise, I'm not sure I could afford to eat because of rising healthcare costs."

He said that surprisingly, more than 47 percent of eligible residents don't apply for CalFresh benefits. He suggested I submit an application.

"I have a small retirement fund and own my own car," I said. "I do some freelance writing and editing to supplement my income. Doesn't that disqualify me?"

He said a single person earning up to \$1,946 per month can get as much as \$194 per month in EBT benefits for groceries.

"More people qualify for, and receive, Cal Fresh than you might think," he said. "In 2014, in Monterey and Santa Cruz counties, 4,554 adults aged 60 and older received CalFresh benefits. A total of 72,851 people—more than 10 percent of all residents—got CalFresh benefits."

Although EBT cards can only be used for food (no alcohol or drugs), eligibility requirements were recently changed to allow people with drug-related convictions to receive benefits.

Thirty days later I was approved to get CalFresh benefits of \$35 per month.

The young man who said he wanted to avoid dumpster diving was also approved. He approached me outside a local supermarket, slurring, "Wanna buy my EBT card?"

“How much?” I asked.

“It’s worth \$194. I’ll take \$100.”

Last but not least, another class of humans who find respite in an oasis are con artists.

For details about the CalFresh (EBT) program call, 866-323-1953.

Next week: Homeless hotspots as they appear.

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