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Seniors get free fresh produce in annual Long Island Cares fair to help them cope with rising food prices

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A line forms around the block during a seniors resource fair hosted by PSEG and Long Island Cares in Hauppauge Wednesday. Credit: Rick Kopstein

By **Aidan Johnson**

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As high food prices continue to impact consumers, senior citizens had the opportunity to get fresh produce for free Wednesday at the Long Island Cares Harry Chapin Food Bank.

The fourth annual seniors' farmers market and resource fair, created by a partnership between PSEG Long Island and Long Island Cares, helped seniors gain access to "some beautiful locally sourced fresh produce," Jessica Rosati, vice president for programs and community services at Long Island Cares, said.

Amityville couple Terrence Washington, 66, and Joann Kama, 57, attended the event and said that food prices are leaving them stressed.

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"We are afraid because of the way the economy is going. We are homeowners and we are nervous," Kama said, adding that events such as the free farmers market help them cope.



From right, Terrence Washington and Joann Kama, of Amityville, get their food from PSEG volunteer Jessica Messina, of Ridge, during a seniors' farmers market and resource fair hosted by PSEG Long Island and Long Island Cares in Hauppauge on Wednesday. Credit: Rick Kopstein

Washington, a military veteran, encouraged others to take advantage of the various programs offered by LI Cares, while Kama stressed that seniors should not be afraid to ask for help.

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"People are so ashamed," she said, of reaching out for assistance with food and other needs.

According to LI Cares, 493 seniors and 202 households attended, with 4,815 pounds of produce distributed.

The annual resource fair also offered other services for seniors.

"Inside the training center we have about 18 different senior-focused organizations that are offering an array of different services that are free for seniors to take part in," Rosati said.

"And then outside we have our senior mobile farmers market where seniors have the option to self-select the produce that they would like, or they can take a grab and go bag of fresh produce home with them," she said.

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Rosati said that seniors are "a vulnerable population" that have "limited income" and "limited community resources."

Martin Cantor, director at the Long Island Center for Socio-Economic Policy, described the financial challenges that lead to seniors being at higher risk for food insecurity.

"Since the beginning of the pandemic, inflation has increased food prices by 33 percent. Then when you add in the cost of energy and property taxes, you're squeezing seniors for their available cash," Cantor said in an interview.

He also pointed to the gap between the increase of prices due to inflation and market conditions in the last five years, versus the Social Security cost-of-living adjustments.

"So you have costs exceeding the revenues coming in, and so what happens is now that seniors are faced with all these expenses, they take a look at 'where can I cut back,' " Cantor said.

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"Unfortunately, seniors will cut back on food, and ... that's the genesis of the food insecurity," he added.

Co-sponsor PSEG Long Island spokeswoman Amy Di Leo encouraged people to check out PSEG's programs aimed at helping those with financial difficulties.

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