

Congregate Meals: What's Working in Communities Across the Country

An Interview with the Montgomery County, Maryland Senior Nutrition Program

Located just outside of the nation's capital, Montgomery County, MD is home to approximately 1.1 million residents — nearly 22% of them 60 or older. It is also one of the most diverse counties in the U.S., with roughly 115 languages spoken. That poses some unique challenges to the local senior nutrition program, which is funded by the Administration for Community Living.

Like many senior nutrition programs around the country, prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, Montgomery County was experiencing a decline in congregate meal program participation. Participants were becoming much more vocal about the quality of the meals they were being served, and some even stopped coming, says Program Director Carol Craig.

Craig has worked for Montgomery County's senior nutrition program for the past 10 years, the last three as program director, having been promoted a mere four days before the pandemic hit.

Here's a look at how Craig and her team used the time during the pandemic to reevaluate and reimagine their congregate meal program and re-emerge stronger than ever.

You recently hired a new caterer for your congregate meal program. Why?

The contract with our previous caterer was due to expire. Based on a lot of negative feedback we were getting — seniors were saying, "I can't eat this!" and even throwing out meals — I completely rewrote our request for caterer proposals. I was very specific about what we were seeking. One stipulation, for example, was that you can't serve sandwiches more than twice a week as your cold entrée.

We ended up hiring a for-profit company — our previous vendor was a 501(c)(3). While the new company does a lot of corporate events and private parties, during COVID, they expanded into feeding seniors due to an urgent and growing need in the DC region. The new vendor has been a game-changer for us!

What's different about this caterer?

There's a lot of variety. They don't repeat a main entrée for an entire month. Everything is fresh. They use only whole-muscle meats. They also do a lot of local shopping, buying what's in season and sustainable foods. The quality and the flavor of the meals are so much better.



Program by the Numbers:

5 full-time county staff

1 part-time county staff

39 congregate sites covering
~507 sq. mi.

2,500-3,000 congregate meal
participants/year (and growing)

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caterers, program
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30% in the first month."***

-Carol Craig

What is the feedback from participants so far?

Amazing! After we changed caterers, program participation increased by 30% in the first month. Seniors are actually coming up to us and saying thank you for giving us great food!



What other changes have you made that are having a positive impact on your congregate program?

We are very focused on feedback. We let the seniors drive this program. So, for example, before we introduce a new item on the menu, we do a taste test with some of the participants.

Also, we've recently hired three people whose job is quality control. They go from site to site, visiting with the staff and participants. They sit down and talk with the older adults and get to know them. They know many of the seniors by name, and the seniors know who they are.

Montgomery County is one of the most diverse in the country. What does that mean for your program?

We are a majority-minority county. For example, when we got ready to announce that we had hired a new caterer, we had the announcement translated into 10 languages. We've also recently started translating our menus into Spanish and Chinese. I'm now looking for someone who can translate menus into Korean and Vietnamese.



Your new caterer has been on board for only a few months. Are you concerned the quality might decline after a while?

No, and here's why. I'm a foodie, and I go through the menus with a fine-tooth comb. I visualize what the food will look like when it's served. For example, are there too many brown items? Is corn being served too often? I also have a weekly check-in meeting with the caterer to go over the menu and talk about what went well during the week and what could be improved. I also pass along any feedback we've received from the seniors.



What advice do you have for others in the network who are struggling with bringing people back to their congregate meal program?

The meals are only part of the story. I look at the meal like a lure. We get you into the building, you see people like yourself, and you want to come back.

We've also created some fun and mystery to draw people back to congregate meal sites. In Fiscal Year 2023, we launched the "Year of Surprises," 12 months of surprises and treats, given out during lunch. They range from a special meal to double desserts and more. We try to tie these surprises to an event or national/international day of recognition. For example, during Active Aging Week in early October, we gave out branded pedometers. The only stipulation is that seniors have to be present to receive their surprise.

Not only have seniors told us that these surprises have made them want to come back because they didn't want to miss out, but they've also encouraged their friends to come. During the first quarter, congregate meal participation increased by 7%, and during the second quarter, it jumped to 18%. And this was BEFORE we hired the new caterer!

So my advice to others in the network is to think out of the box, be creative, and have fun. And also, don't underestimate the importance of socialization. While many seniors might have enough food to eat at home, they may not have anyone to talk to, and that's also important, especially as people age.



Find resources and more from the [Nutrition and Aging Resource Center](#), which is funded by the [Administration for Community Living](#) to build the capacity of senior nutrition programs funded by the Older Americans Act to provide high-quality, person-centered services and enhance program sustainability and resiliency.