

Why Meals On Wheels Benefits All of Us

BY ANNE LOVE

WHEN YOU THINK of Meals On Wheels, you likely think of the elderly man or woman who is home alone waiting for their lunch to arrive. Their face brightens as the bell rings and a friendly voice lets them know it's time for the daily visit. This scene is repeated at more than 3,000 doors each day in our state.

At the time of this writing, we are beginning to understand the impacts from the COVID-19 health crisis. Deliveries have changed to protect this high-risk population, the volunteers who continue to deliver, and the dedicated staff. Social distancing is in place and meals are individually wrapped and placed at the door for the senior to pick up. It is not the same as it was, however, the meals are still arriving. The seniors continue to enjoy and benefit from a balanced meal, which is important for good health and resistance to infections. The volunteer is alert to any changes in the senior's well-being. There is an opportunity to catch up although at a distance.

Seniors who receive meals benefit in so many ways

Among seniors who receive the nutritionally balanced meal, 9 out of 10 report that their health has improved. For seniors who have previously suffered a fall, it is proven that the home-delivered meal prevents future falls in 80% of cases. The daily visit and nutritious meal allow 90% of seniors the comfort level to live independently. For seniors on a fixed income, they no longer have the stress of where their next meal is coming from or balancing the costs of food and others of life's essentials. Moreover, social interaction reduces feelings of isolation.

Benefits extend to family members

Family members have the peace of mind to go about their regular workday knowing that someone is checking in on their loved one.



Benefits to the community at large

The Meals On Wheels program offers cost benefits compared to care in a nursing home or hospital stay. It is not a simple equation as many clients with medical conditions receive additional services in their homes. However, the cost of a year of home-delivered meals is equivalent to a 10-day stay in a nursing home or a one-year stay in the hospital ward. This is a significant cost saver to the community.

Population demographics require innovative solutions

Delaware is a retirement destination for seniors. By 2030, Delaware is projected to have the 9th highest proportion of persons aged 65 and

over in the U.S.

Sussex County has the largest percentage of seniors in the state. Already today over one-third (35%) of the population in Sussex County is 60-plus, compared with the state average of 26%. More than 1 in 10 (12%) are 75 and over, and this is projected to grow to 1 in 5 (20%) by 2040.

Although most older adults are under the age of 85, the age 85-plus population is expected to increase the fastest, doubling nationally by 2040 and tripling by 2050. About 9% of this population live in assisted living/nursing homes, and 91% live at home in the community. As this particular population increases, the demand for services will increase.

An innovative pilot program, We Care, is underway in Sussex County. Meal delivery volunteers are trained to conduct a brief electronic wellness questionnaire as part of the meal delivery. A health care professional determines if a medical follow up is recommended and connects with the senior directly. It adds an enhanced wellness check to the informal check that the daily visit from a volunteer already provides.

The community nonprofit, CHEER, provides senior services including Meals On Wheels and has partnered with Educational Health Research Institute / Milford Wellness Village to introduce this new wellness pro-

gram. CEO Ken Bock shares, "The new We Care program is a logical extension of the CHEER Meals On Wheels mission of helping senior citizens maintain their health and wellbeing in their own private homes. We Care may soon become a standard complement to the Meals On Wheels program promoting health and independence."

The value of a home-delivered meal is increasingly recognized as a key component to maintaining health. Medicare and Medicaid now include coverage for meals as they understand the benefits in improved health and decreased hospital readmissions.

Volunteerism is key to continued success

The Meals On Wheels program relies on the daily commitment of a core group of extremely dedicated delivery volunteers that turn up every day no matter the weather. Without their regular commitment to keep meals coming, program costs would increase significantly.

They don't show up for an afternoon, they show up again and again, and are enriched by the bonds they form with the men and women receiving deliveries.

Without the volunteer support of the program, Meals on Wheels would struggle to maintain the current cost structure. Delaware is a small state and each county has its own character. The same is true for the volunteers who turn out in each county.

Volunteers in New Castle County traditionally have come from the

businesses that make their home in Delaware and have community service in their makeup. As the workplace changes, and policies on volunteerism are put in place, it may not be as easy for individuals to take an extended lunch hour to deliver meals. Thanks to all in the business community who continue to commit to this service.

In Kent and Sussex Counties, retirees and civic groups make up the majority of the volunteers. However, as they themselves age, the next generation is needed to step up. We look forward to the evolution of the Meals On Wheels service as new partners step up as volunteers, bridge builders and innovators to sustain our healthy communities. ■



Anne Love is Executive Director of Meals On Wheels Delaware, which raises funds and awareness on behalf of 5 independent Meals On Wheels programs in the State. Programs work with the State of Delaware to deliver the Meals On Wheels program. We are proud to be partners with such dedicated organizations as City Fare Meals On Wheels, Newark Senior Center, Modern Maturity, CHEER and Meals On Wheels Lewes Rehoboth. For more information, visit www.MealsOnWheelsDE.org.

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