

# DELIVERING MORE THAN A MEAL® – AN INTEGRATED APPROACH TO IMPROVING HEALTHY AGING

MARCI LEFEVRE, ELISE HERNANDEZ, UCHE AKOBUNDU  
MEALS ON WHEELS AMERICA, ARLINGTON VA

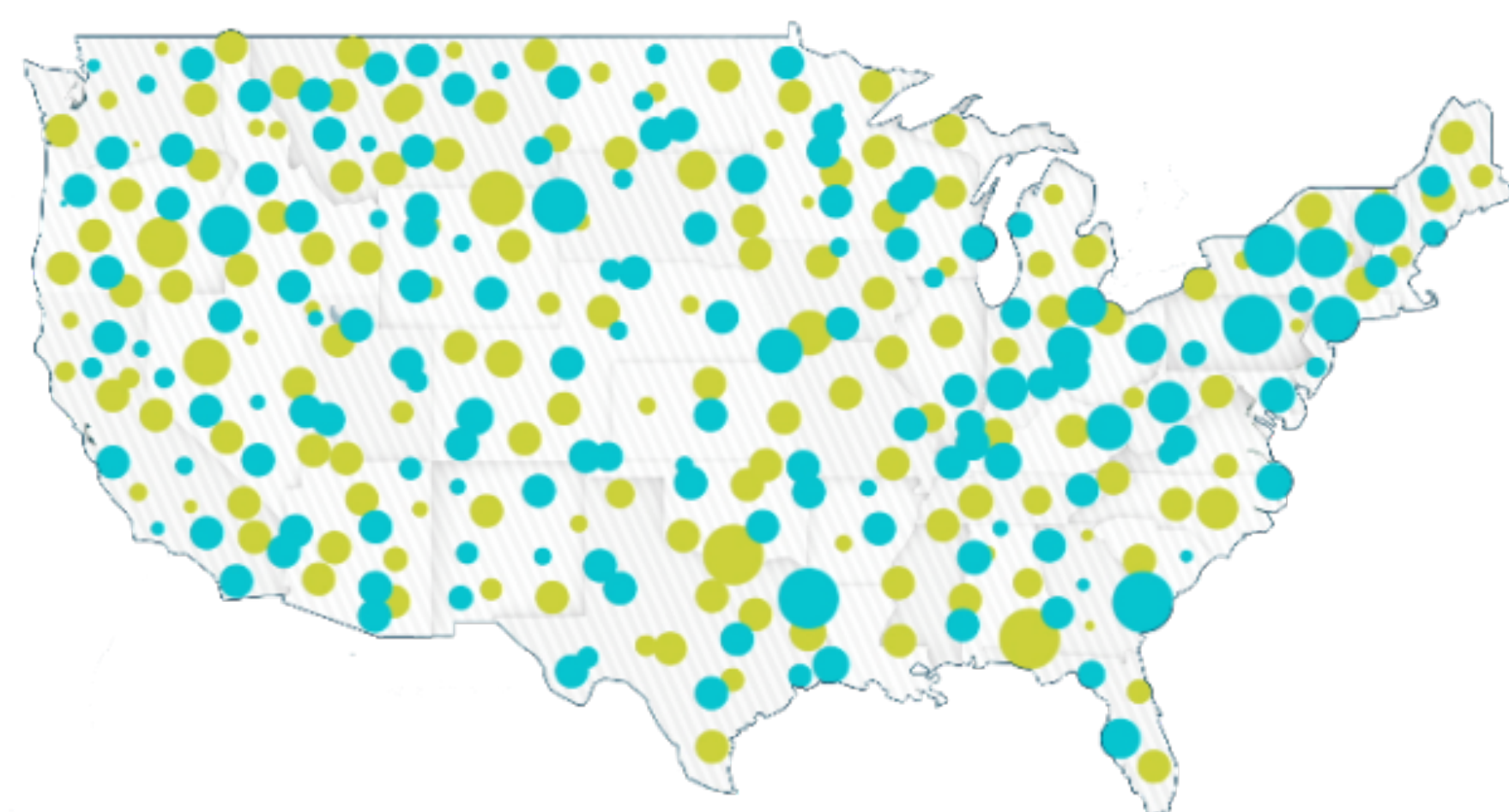


## ABSTRACT

Research demonstrates that Meals on Wheels helps low-risk older adults age in the community and out of costly nursing homes. Community-based Meals on Wheels programs provide client-centered services that address the social determinants of health impacting the populations they serve. This poster provides a conceptual framework, with supporting health and well-being outcomes data, outlining promising, evidence-based approaches to manage or avert the onset of chronic diseases and maintain physical functioning, through the integration of nutrition, socialization, safety and care coordination services. Implications for service are also presented.

## MEALS ON WHEELS AMERICA

A national leadership organization supporting 5,000+ local, community-based senior nutrition programs across the country through advocacy, education, research and national partnerships and campaigns.



## BACKGROUND

An Aging Population Facing Substantial Challenges

- 12K individuals turning 60 each day<sup>1</sup>
- 8.6 MILLION seniors facing hunger<sup>2</sup>
- 1 IN 5 SENIORS living alone<sup>3</sup>
- 6.9 MILLION seniors facing poverty<sup>3</sup>
- 8.5 MILLION seniors facing disability that threatens independence<sup>3</sup>

Every day, Meals on Wheels programs reach out to homebound seniors and disabled individuals with meals, socialization and safety checks that provide the opportunity to assess and monitor the changes in health and behavior critical to remaining independent and living in their communities of choice.



## THE MEALS ON WHEELS MODEL



### NUTRITIOUS MEALS

**Challenge:** Access to healthy food can be a challenge as we age – leaving older adults at risk of poor nutrition and associated conditions. Age-related biological, social, economic and functional challenges can limit an older adult's ability to acquire, prepare and consume nutritious foods.

**Opportunity:** Local Meals on Wheels programs provide consistent access to high quality nutrition services which support an older adult's ability to remain independent and in their own home.

#### Results:

- 83% of home-delivered meal recipients report that nutrition services help them eat better.<sup>4</sup>
- 61% of home-delivered meals recipients would skip meals if not for nutrition services.<sup>5</sup>
- Receiving Meals on Wheels reduces rate of malnourishment by as much as 28%.<sup>6</sup>



### FRIENDLY VISITS

**Challenge:** Older adults with limited social supports and who are less able to access in-home and community-based services can find it difficult to sustain health and remain independent. The association between senior isolation and negative health outcomes like chronic illness and mortality suggests that loneliness is a threat to aging in place.<sup>7</sup>

**Opportunity:** Community-based senior nutrition programs provide regular opportunities for socialization through congregate meal gatherings, friendly visits as part of meal delivery, and extended volunteer companionship.

#### Results:

- Receiving Meals on Wheels services is associated with reduced feelings of loneliness.<sup>6</sup>



### SAFETY CHECKS

**Challenge:** Older adults want to stay at home for as long as possible; however, in-home safety hazards – if left unaddressed – increase the likelihood of a harmful fall and other health problems.

**Opportunity:** Meals on Wheels programs are a first line of sight for potential dangers and fall risks. By leveraging Meals on Wheels volunteers' and staff persons' consistent presence in a client's home, environmental and individual risk factors can be identified and mitigated earlier.

#### Results:

- Access to nutritious meals targeted at older adults, particularly meals rich in high quality proteins and vitamin D, have been shown to decrease falls in vulnerable older adults.<sup>9,10</sup>
- Meals on Wheels helps keep 8 out of 10 recipients who have previously fallen from falling again.<sup>8</sup>



### COMMUNITY CONNECTIONS

**Challenge:** Older adults with complex health needs represent a disproportionate share of healthcare spending<sup>11</sup> and may be at risk of facing costly healthcare services in the near future. There is a need for increased care coordination across different service providers and settings.

**Opportunity:** Meals on Wheels providers cross the threshold into the home every day and act as the regular “eyes” and “ears” on seniors, assessing, identifying and following up on any needs and changes in condition by providing services and connecting clients to other resources and services in the community.

**Results:** Seniors receiving Meals on Wheels receive support from many sources in their communities, ensuring that most of their needs are addressed.

- Participating in Meals on Wheels is associated with a significant increase in the amount of formal services provided;<sup>12</sup> 62% of Older Americans Act home-delivered meal participants receive additional services.<sup>4</sup>
- Nearly 30% of Meals on Wheels clients were referred to additional services as part of a Medicare Advantage Pilot study.<sup>13</sup>

- The core of the Meals on Wheels model is the provision of meals and nutrition services to over 2.4 million seniors in both congregate- and home-based settings.<sup>14</sup>
- Research has demonstrated that nutrition, socialization and safety are inter-related issues. Social isolation<sup>15</sup> and physical impairment<sup>16</sup> are often precursors to food insecurity and malnutrition.
- Nutrition services serve as a gateway to provide a range of other services to a client population with multifaceted needs for support.<sup>4</sup>

## AMONG MEALS ON WHEELS CLIENTS

Based on national survey results<sup>5</sup>:

- 59% LIVE ALONE**
- 25% LIVE IN RURAL AREAS**
- 35% LIVE IN POVERTY**
- 46% REPORT FAIR OR POOR HEALTH**
- 82% MANAGING MULTIPLE MEDICATIONS**

## VALUE OF INTEGRATED SERVICE DELIVERY

- Recent research confirms that the majority of older adults are seeking to age in community<sup>17</sup>, in the comfort of their home for as long as possible - delaying costly placement in institutional care until absolutely necessary.
- By delivering services in the home and in the community, senior nutrition programs can facilitate access to a breadth of long-term services and supports that enable older adults to remain resident in their communities of choice.
  - 93% of home-delivered meal recipients report that receiving nutrition services helps them remain in their home; 86% say it helps them live independently.<sup>4</sup>
  - Specifically, one third of recipients experienced a decrease in feelings of worry about being able to remain in their home after receiving meals.<sup>8</sup>
- This integrated approach can become part of the continuum of healthcare.
  - Receiving Meals on Wheels is associated with improvements in self-rated health and mental health - anxiety, to be specific<sup>8</sup>.
    - Pilot testing for other interventions through Meals on Wheels programs, such as online chronic disease management<sup>18</sup> and telehealth and tele-mental health for clients with depression,<sup>19</sup> show promising potential for Meals on Wheels programs to collaborate with healthcare partners to deliver healthcare services.
- Receiving home-delivered meals reduces risk of costly healthcare service use, such as visits to the emergency room, which disrupt aging in place.<sup>20</sup>
- Meals on Wheels programs also help those transitioning out of the hospital, particularly when accompanied with medication management support, by reducing incidence of hospital readmission<sup>21</sup> and reducing cardiovascular risk factors like blood pressure levels.<sup>22</sup>

## TAKE HOME MESSAGE

The *More Than a Meal*® body of research contributes to the science of healthy aging by addressing current gaps in our understanding about how the alignment of home- and community-based services and healthcare can improve the health and well-being of community-residing older adults aging independently in their own homes and communities.

More than a Meal® is a registered trademark of Meals on Wheels of Central Maryland, Inc. and is being used under a license agreement from such entity. References available upon request.