

HUNGER IN OLDER ADULTS

CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES FOR THE AGING SERVICES NETWORK

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

FEBRUARY 2017

*Developed for Meals on Wheels America
Prepared by Jean L. Lloyd, M.S.*

FUNDED BY

AARP Foundation®



BACKGROUND

More than 10 million older Americans (16% of older adults) face hunger each year. Currently, vulnerable older Americans can get help through an array of national, state and local programs². However, these programs may be administered by different agencies, operate independently and lack funding, both public and private, to meet the need. Leaders and advocates across the aging, healthcare and anti-hunger networks have the opportunity to improve coordination and collaboration efforts to serve more older adults in need nutrition of services.

AARP Foundation, Caesars Foundation and Meals on Wheels America recognize that awareness of these issues and resources to understand the intersections between them might be limited. This report, *Hunger in Older Adults*, emerged out of a joint effort to expand access by eligible homebound older adults to available food assistance programs. While there is great opportunity to increase the participation by older adults in the nutrition assistance programs, it is clear that any one program on its own cannot address the myriad of health, environmental, physical and economic barriers to food security that confront each older adult.



ABOUT **10 MILLION** OR **1 IN 6**
OLDER ADULTS FACE THE "THREAT OF HUNGER."

There is limited guidance for Aging Network program leaders and advocates who seek to assist both homebound and ambulatory older adults in accessing needed food assistance. In addition, there is a need for all those working across the Aging Services Network to strengthen their understanding of vulnerable older adults, programs that assist them, factors that affect food insecurity, and promising practices and strategies.

METHODOLOGY



In 2016, Meals on Wheels America, with financial support from AARP Foundation and Caesars Foundation, commissioned the *Hunger in Older Adults* report – a first of its kind, in-depth examination of publicly available peer-reviewed research, published topical reports, and popular articles on hunger, food assistance program use, food insecurity, health risks and related outcomes in the older adult population. In addition, this report contains a comparative analysis of federal, national, state and local nutrition assistance, advocacy, health and social organizations that address the nutrition and food insecurity concerns of older adults.

KEY FINDINGS

HUNGRY OLDER ADULTS FACE A MYRIAD OF CHALLENGES

Financial constraints are a primary factor that limit access to food; however, there are other factors that limit an older adult’s ability to obtain, prepare, and consume nutritious foods, as well as participate in income and food assistance programs. These risk factors include: poor physical health, mobility limitations (particularly for homebound older adults), lack of adequate transportation, cognitive and physical limitations, cultural preferences and knowledge about appropriate food choices. Chronic health conditions and increased healthcare costs for older adults also play a role.

MALNUTRITION IN OLDER ADULTS IS A COSTLY AND PREVALENT CONCERN

Malnutrition results when the body does not get the right balance of nutrients and calories to stay healthy. Malnutrition can be found in a nursing home, hospital or one’s own home or community. There are estimates that up to 50% of older adults may be malnourished, and that up to 33% of older adults admitted to the hospital may be malnourished. Malnourished older adults are likely to have higher levels of healthcare utilization, such as more frequent hospital admissions and longer hospital stays.

33% 

About 33% of older adults admitted to the hospital may be malnourished.

50% 

Up to 50% of community-dwelling older adults may be malnourished.

300% 

Malnutrition can increase healthcare costs by 300%.

MULTIPLE NATIONAL SYSTEMS CAN ADDRESS THE FOOD NEEDS OF VULNERABLE OLDER ADULTS

Older adults within their local communities have unique needs and no single system is positioned to meet them entirely. Older adults can benefit from resources and services made available through federally supported agencies (i.e., the United States Department of Agriculture or the Department of Health and Human Services), state programs and local community-based services. However, these sometimes siloed systems do not adequately communicate, cooperate, coordinate or collaborate with each other, or with public and private healthcare systems, to assure the nutritional needs of at-risk older adults are met.

The U.S. population is growing older and more diverse.

In addition, some older adults have demographic characteristics that make them more vulnerable. As a result, the need for increased investments in cost-effective, community-based nutrition services will increase precipitously in the coming years. To meet these needs, it will also be necessary to rethink how these different entities can collaborate and integrate their efforts to better serve the needs of older adults.

CALL TO ACTION

Within different national, state and local networks, there is a need to strengthen understanding about the connection between food insecurity, health and functionality in older adults. To help build understanding of the characteristics of older adults that place them at risk, programs that assist them, factors that affect food insecurity, and promising practices and strategies, Aging Network program leaders and advocates must:

- Strengthen and diversify advocacy efforts
- Leverage multiple funding sources
- Coordinate policy development across the multiple networks
- Form partnerships to scale action for greater impact
- Strengthen existing and/or develop innovative new community-based initiatives
- Use research and program evaluation activities to drive needed change

THE NATION'S SENIOR POPULATION IS EXPECTED TO DOUBLE BY 2050



CONCLUSION

Challenges and opportunities are facing the Aging Services Network in helping the growing number of older adults obtain adequate, safe and nutritious food. As the population of vulnerable older Americans increases, national/ local program leaders and advocates can discover new opportunities for innovative services through greater communication, cooperation, coordination, and collaboration. Collectively, we can strengthen our understanding about the connection between food insecurity, health and functionality outcomes, and expand services to millions of vulnerable older Americans. The *Hunger in Older Adults* report is a unique, insightful and rich compendium of resources and recommendations, designed to enable state and local program leaders as well as advocates to work together to better meet the needs of vulnerable older adults.

FOOD INSECURE SENIORS ARE...

50%
more likely to have diabetes

3X
more likely to suffer from depression

60%
more likely to have congestive heart failure or a heart attack

30%
more likely to have at least one ADL impairment

2X
as likely to report gum disease and asthma

MEALS ON WHEELS AMERICA

Meals on Wheels America is the oldest and largest national organization supporting the more than 5,000 community-based senior nutrition programs across the country that are dedicated to addressing senior hunger and isolation. By providing funding, leadership, research, education and advocacy support, Meals on Wheels America empowers its local Member programs to strengthen their communities, one senior at a time. Learn more at mealsonwheelsamerica.org.

AARP FOUNDATION

AARP Foundation works to ensure that low-income older adults have nutritious food, safe and affordable housing, a steady income, and strong and sustaining social bonds. We collaborate with individuals and organizations who share our commitment to innovation and our passion for problem-solving. Supported by vigorous legal advocacy, we create and advance effective solutions that help struggling older adults transform their lives. AARP Foundation is the charitable affiliate of AARP. Learn more at aarpfoundation.org.

CAESARS FOUNDATION

Caesars Foundation is a private foundation funded by a portion of operating income from resorts owned or operated by Caesars Entertainment. The Foundation is the entity through which Caesars Entertainment funds programs and projects of \$10,000 or more, as well as not-for-profit giving requirements imposed by certain operating jurisdictions. The Foundation's objective is to strengthen organizations and programs in the communities where our employees and their families live and work. For more information, please visit caesarsfoundation.com, [facebook.com/caesarsfoundation](https://www.facebook.com/caesarsfoundation), or follow on Twitter @CaesarsFdn.