



Written Testimony of Ellie Hollander, President and CEO, Meals on Wheels America  
Submitted to the 2016 Democratic Party Platform Committee

June 18, 2016

Dear Chairman Cummings and Members of the Platform Committee:

Thank you for allowing me the opportunity to submit written testimony regarding the urgent and growing need of senior hunger and isolation. As you continue your process to develop the 2016 Democratic Party Platform, I appeal to each of you to recognize the severity of these issues and to commit, as a Party, to addressing them. Ensuring that both today's and tomorrow's seniors receive the proper nutrition needed to maintain health and independence is not only an investment in their wellbeing and quality of life, but it is also a preventative prescription for significantly reducing Medicare and Medicaid expenditures.

Meals on Wheels America is the oldest and largest national organization supporting more than 5,000 community-based senior nutrition programs across the country dedicated to addressing senior hunger and isolation. These programs, including their staff, senior clients and volunteers, represent more than 4.5 million voters.

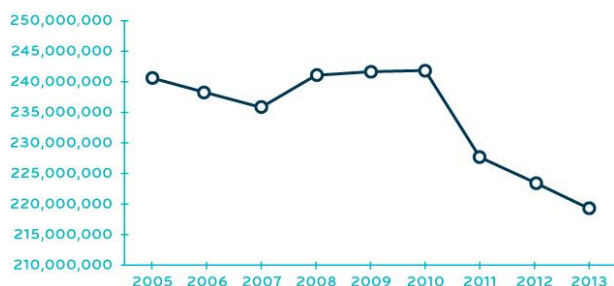
Meals on Wheels programs – both congregate and home-delivered – are delivering vital social and nutrition services to our nation's most vulnerable seniors 60 years of age or older every day. These programs are big and small, rural, suburban and urban, and serve nutritious meals in both the home, where one's mobility is limited, and/or in congregate settings, such as senior centers; serving a total of roughly one million meals daily. While each program is certainly unique in regard to its daily operations, all are unified in their mission to support seniors to live safely, healthfully and independently in their own homes for as long as they wish.

Each Meals on Wheels program is faced with the challenges of addressing the growing needs of a rapidly aging population that is increasingly struggling with hunger and paying for basic living needs, like rent, utilities and prescriptions. At no other time in our history, has the issue of senior hunger been at a more critical level. Regardless of what statistic you see, it is undeniable that the problem is grave, growing, and expensive. Today, more than [10 million seniors](#) – or one in six – may not know from where their next meal will come. Since the start of the recession in 2007 to 2014, the number of seniors age 60 or older experiencing “very low food security” – or “hunger” as expressed by the [National Commission on Hunger](#) – has [increased by 73%](#). And with the senior population set to double by 2050, this problem will worsen if left unaddressed.

Furthermore, a [Government Accountability Office report](#) released last summer found that about 83% of food insecure seniors and 83% of physically impaired seniors did not receive meals [through the Older Americans Act (OAA), the primary federal funding source for Meals on Wheels], but likely needed them. Tragically, the Meals on Wheels network overall is serving 21 million fewer meals annually to seniors in need than we were in 2005 due to declining federal and state grants, stagnant private funding, and rising food and, transportation and other operational costs. At a minimum, we must stave off this continuous decline not only for the health of our seniors, but for the health of our nation at large. The graphs below illustrate this troubling trend.

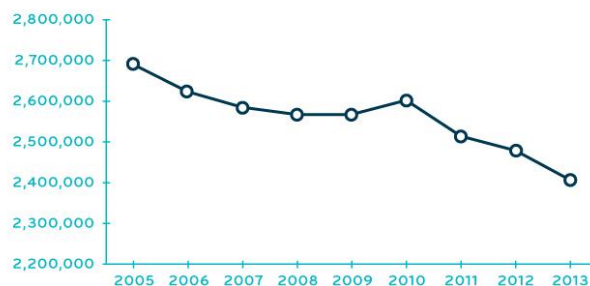
**TOTAL MEALS SERVED BY OAA NUTRITION PROGRAMS**

The number of meals served by the Older Americans Act is **DECLINING**.



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Source: Older Americans Act (OAA) Title III Programs data derived from the AGing Integrated Database (AGID) system, the AGID State Profiles. Full reports available at: [www.agidnet.acl.gov](http://www.agidnet.acl.gov)

As you know, the consequences of hunger and food insecurity are both socially and economically profound. For seniors, however, even a slight reduction in nutritional intake can exacerbate existing health conditions, accelerate physical impairment, impede recovery from illness, injury and surgery, and increase the risk of chronic disease(s). Findings from a 2015 study entitled [More Than a Meal](#) – commissioned by Meals on Wheels America, underwritten by AARP Foundation and conducted by Brown University – showed that seniors on Meals on Wheels waiting lists are among our nation’s most at-risk populations when compared to a nationally representative sample of aging Americans. Specifically, the seniors included in the study were significantly more likely to:

- Report poorer self-rated health (71% vs. 26%)
- Screen positive for depression (28% vs. 14%) and anxiety (31% vs. 16%)
- Report recent falls (27% vs. 10%) and fear of falling that limited their ability to stay active (79% vs. 42%)
- Require assistance with shopping for groceries (87% vs. 23%) and preparing food (69% vs. 20%)
- Have health and/or safety hazards both inside and outside the home (i.e., higher rates of tripping hazards, (24% vs. 10%), and home construction hazards, (13% vs. 7%)

The same study found that those who received daily home-delivered meals (the traditional Meals on Wheels model of a daily, in-home-delivered meal, friendly visit and safety check), experienced the greatest improvements in health and quality of life compared to a senior who received frozen, weekly-delivered meals or no meals at all. Specifically, between baseline and follow-up, seniors receiving daily home-delivered meals were more likely to exhibit:

- Improvement in mental health (i.e., levels of anxiety)
- Improvement in self-rated health
- Reductions in the rate of falls and the fear of falling
- Improvement in feelings of isolation and loneliness
- Decreases in worry about being able to remain in home

At this critical juncture, when both the need and demand for nutritious meals are substantial and growing, we implore this Platform Committee to make the needs of our nation's hungry and isolated seniors a higher priority. It is imperative that proven and effective programs designed to meet their unique nutritional and social needs are further strengthened. Our nation can either invest a little in senior nutrition now, or spend much more on the negative consequences later.

Again, thank you for your leadership and service. We hope this testimony has been instructive and are pleased to offer our assistance and expertise as you work to finalize the 2016 Democratic Party Platform.