



June 8, 2021

The Honorable Jim McGovern
Chairman, House Committee on Rules
United States House of Representatives
Washington, DC 20515

The Honorable Tom Cole
Ranking Member, House Committee on Rules
United States House of Representatives
Washington, DC 20515

Dear Chairman McGovern and Ranking Member Cole:

On behalf of Meals on Wheels America and the nationwide network of senior nutrition programs that we represent, we thank you and your colleagues on the House Committee on Rules for hosting a series of events to raise awareness about food insecurity and hunger in America and examine ways Congress and the Administration can address them. We are particularly grateful for your attention to older adults and families of diverse make-ups by holding the roundtable, *Ending Hunger in America: Examining Hunger Among Seniors and Multigenerational Families*.

Senior hunger is an issue historically less discussed, as it is often hidden, out of sight and mind in the public forum, especially when related to food insecurity and malnutrition among homebound older individuals. However, the COVID-19 pandemic starkly revealed the unique challenges that older adults face and called attention to the services and supports needed to serve this growing population of Americans. The experiences of the pandemic further underscored the need to focus on older adults' access to nutritious and affordable food, as well as the value of strong investment in federal programs that support older adults, such as the Older Americans Act nutrition programs (i.e., Meals on Wheels).

Before the pandemic, nearly 9.7 million (13%) older adults ages 60 and older were threatened by hunger (i.e., *marginally food insecure*) – 5.3 million of which (7%) were *food insecure* or *very low food secure*.¹ Social isolation – which has been amplified over the past 15 months amid safety and social distancing measures – is another threat for the nearly 17.5 million (24%) seniors that lived alone in 2019.² One in five older adults reporting frequent feelings of loneliness prior to the pandemic and many more seniors have experienced feeling lonely or a lack of social connection since then.³ Most older Americans possess at least one trait that puts them at increased risk of experiencing food insecurity,

¹ J. Ziliak & C. Gundersen, *The State of Senior Hunger in America in 2018*, an annual report prepared for Feeding America, 2020. <https://www.feedingamerica.org/research/senior-hunger-research/senior>

² U.S. Census Bureau, *American Community Survey 2018*, available on the Administration for Community Living Aging, Independence, and Disability Program Data Portal (AGID), 2020. <https://agid.acl.gov/CustomTables/>

³ AARP, *Loneliness and Social Connections: A National Survey of Adults 45 and Older*, 2018. <https://www.aarp.org/research/topics/life/info-2018/loneliness-social-connections.htm>

malnutrition, social isolation and/or loneliness, thereby increasing the likelihood of myriad negative and consequential health effects. Despite the wide recognition of the relationship between healthy aging and access to nutritious food and regular socialization, millions of seniors were struggling to meet these basic human needs pre-COVID, and these issues have only been exacerbated since.

55% of adults age 60 and older reported at least one unmet need as of late 2020, and that percentage was higher among those who have a lower income, are Black, are age 75 and older or live alone.⁴

Many older adults continue to face unique and significant challenges to their health, independence and financial well-being. With the onset of the pandemic in March 2020, the Meals on Wheels network faced an unprecedented surge in demand as the number of older adults sheltering in place increased and congregate centers shifted ways of operating – including transitioning congregate services to fully home-delivered or to grab-and-go and curbside pick-up alternatives, as well as offering virtual socialization activities and wellness checks over the phone. Most Meals on Wheels programs overcame great challenges to rapidly scale their operations to serve more older Americans in need of nutrition and social services. This was made possible in part with the assurance and support of emergency funding provided through the various federal coronavirus relief packages.

In a survey conducted on behalf of Meals on Wheels America, local programs reported delivering an average of 100% more home-delivered meals at their highest number served during the pandemic than they served before. At that time, programs also reported serving home-delivered meals to 84% more clients on a weekly basis, and four out of five local programs agreed that “new clients are here to stay.”⁵ Nearly a third said they would need to nearly double or more than double their home-delivered efforts to serve the unmet need for home-delivered meals in their community, as many reported increased numbers of seniors forced to go on waiting lists. Local programs additionally report increased operational costs and the belief that these costs will likely remain high.

86% of local senior nutrition programs reported unmet need for home-delivered meals in their community. Only 14% believed the need was met.⁵

It's important to note that even before March 2020, there was significant documented unmet need for senior nutrition services, with pre-existing waiting lists in communities across the county. Now, nearly a year and a half into the COVID-19 public health crisis, many more older adults continue to request person-centered and innovative services to assist them access daily meals, and local programs are continuing to provide these services at sustained high rates. Most local Meals on Wheels programs report that funding is the primary factor impacting their ability to serve individuals most directly affected by the pandemic.

⁴ Meals on Wheels America, nationally representative survey of older adults conducted by NORC at the University of Chicago, November 2020.

⁵ Meals on Wheels America, *COVID-19 Impact Survey*, research conducted by Trailblazer Research, November 2020.

98% of local programs said they have reworked one or more areas because of COVID-19; 66% were serving congregate clients in alternative formats; and 54% of programs reported making changes to local partnerships due to COVID-19.⁵

Innovation has always been a key factor in senior nutrition programs' ability to effectively adapt to and address the needs of older adults in the changing and diverse landscapes in which they live. A few of the countless examples of pandemic-driven reinventions include creating drive-thru and pick-up services when congregate dining is not available, utilizing kitchens and access to fresh fruits and vegetables to serve the wider community, engaging new community partners like food banks, restaurants and healthcare providers, offering social connection and safety checks through phone calls and virtual interactions, creating opportunities for peer-to-peer support, and figuring out ways to serve more young people with disabilities, families who were immunocompromised and seniors experiencing homelessness. Most recently, there are examples of Meals on Wheels programs assisting with COVID-19 vaccination efforts, including hosting vaccination clinics, providing transportation to vaccination appointments and coordinating in-home visits for homebound older adults requesting a vaccine.

The Meals on Wheels network, along with other federal community-based food and nutrition programs, has played a critical role in addressing the ongoing hunger crisis. We understand that the issues of food insecurity, isolation, and poverty existed prior to the pandemic and have only been exacerbated by COVID-19, but there is growing awareness and support from the public for the services and programs that help address existing gaps and challenges. There is a long way to go before we meet our collective goals to improve nutrition and food security across the country, but there are solutions available. Along with individuals with lived experience, senior nutrition programs can and should be considered and consulted when looking at ways of addressing hunger among older adults and their families.

Thank you again for the dedicated efforts of the Committee. We are eager to continuing our critical work together in this restored effort to end hunger in America.

Sincerely,



Ellie Hollander
President and CEO