



QUICK FACTS AND KEY MESSAGES

BACKGROUND

The Older Americans Act

The Older Americans Act (OAA) Nutrition Program is an effective public-private partnership through which thousands of community-based organizations – aided by millions of local supporters and volunteers – are addressing the issues of senior hunger and isolation and promoting the health and well-being of older adults. The OAA Nutrition Program ensures that our nation's older adults live more nourished and independent lives in their own homes, thereby saving the country on costly and preventable health care expenditures.

The OAA Nutrition Program and its nationwide network have been essential for the past five decades, and with a rapidly growing population over the age of 60, programs funded by the OAA need funding levels that reflect the rising demand. Notably, the COVID-19 health and economic crises resulted in skyrocketing demand for services offered by local Meals on Wheels providers and other community-based organizations – and the demand has not decreased. In a Meals on Wheels America member feedback survey, local Meals on Wheels programs reported still serving more home-delivered meal clients than before the pandemic, with 7 out of 10 programs facing higher demand for home-delivered meals than before the pandemic. These programs act as lifelines to their communities and work tirelessly to navigate unprecedented challenges delivering nutritious meals and human connection.

QUICK FACTS

Millions of seniors – adults aged 60 and older – experience or are at risk of food insecurity and social isolation. According to the most recent information available:

- In 2023, 12.8 million older adults were threatened by or experienced hunger (i.e., were *marginally food insecure*) in the United States¹
- In 2022, Black and Hispanic seniors experienced hunger at higher rates than those who are white: Black/African American seniors' risk of food insecurity was over two times more than the risk of white seniors, and Hispanic older adults had a food insecurity rate three times the rate of non-Hispanic seniors.²
- In 2021, over 18 million (24.2%) seniors lived alone, and over half (56%) of seniors felt lonely in 2023.³
- In 2022, 55.6 million OAA Title III congregate meals were served, 206.2 million home-delivered meals were served and 262 million total Title III meals were served.

KEY MESSAGES

1. MEALS ON WHEELS SAVES TAXPAYER DOLLARS WITH A PROVEN SERVICE MODEL THAT STARTS WITH A MEAL.

Community-based senior nutrition programs, like Meals on Wheels, are saving taxpayer dollars by helping to prevent unnecessary trips to the emergency room, reducing falls and hospitalizations, and decreasing the need for nursing home care – costs of which are often borne by Medicare and Medicaid.

Funding Meals on Wheels is a smart, cost-effective investment. Investing a modest amount of federal resources in nutrition and social services for our nation's older adults saves significantly on health care and long-term service costs by preventing adverse health effects and other costly consequences. Poor health outcomes and expenses associated with food insecurity and/or isolation among seniors, such as falls and malnutrition, are costly. **It's estimated that older adult falls cost our nation \$50 billion in medical expenses annually,⁴ and the economic burden associated with older adult malnutrition is \$51 billion annually.⁵**

The OAA Nutrition Program represents one of the best examples of a successful public-private partnership. Meals on Wheels services improve self-reported health; reduce feelings of loneliness and isolation; decrease the rate of falls and fear of falling; help participants feel more safe and secure; and reduce worry about being able to remain in one's own home. In fact, responses from a national survey among older adults who receive home-delivered and congregate meals report the following positive results:⁶

	Home-delivered	Congregate
<i>Recipients say meals help them...</i>		
Feel more secure	84%	79%
Improve their health	79%	72%
Eat healthier foods	81%	72%
<i>Recipients say services help them...</i>		
Live independently	91%	75%
Feel more secure	84%	79%
Care for self	83%	80%

2. THE NATION'S MOST AT-RISK SENIORS RELY ON MEALS ON WHEELS

While most older Americans possess at least one risk factor for hunger, malnutrition, social isolation and/or loneliness, the individuals who rely on Meals on Wheels are generally facing greater risk for these threats to their health and independence. Most home-delivered meal clients are women, people over the age of 75 and those who live alone. Meals on Wheels participants are also more likely to have multiple chronic conditions, such as diabetes or heart disease; take three or

more medications daily; and experience functional impairment. For most receiving Meals on Wheels, the meals can often make up half or more of their total daily food intake.

The profile of clients receiving OAA Title III meal services reveals several factors that put them at greater risk of hunger, isolation and/or loneliness:

- 7.2% are 75+⁷
- 53.9% are women⁸
- 10.6% are Black or African American
- 10.3% are Hispanic or Latino
- 0.9% are American Indian or Native Alaskan
- 5.2% are Asian
- 0.2% are Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander⁹
- 45.1% live alone¹⁰
- 12% are veterans¹¹
- 24.2% live in rural areas¹²
- 17.9% self-report fair or poor health¹³
- 29.1% have a disability¹⁴
- 61% self-report 3+ medical conditions¹⁵

The Case for Meals on Wheels: An Evidence-Based Solution to Senior Hunger and Isolation, Meals on Wheels America’s research review of 38 studies conducted between 1996 and 2023, reveals Meals on Wheels is proven to reduce health care utilization and cost, prevent nursing home admissions, increase food security, improve diet quality, reduce social isolation, reduce falls and increase home safety. Thus, growing waitlists due to lack of funding inhibit improving the well-being of older adults who can greatly benefit from Meals on Wheels programs.¹⁶

Characteristics & Health Needs	Seniors on Waitlists	Seniors Nationally
Self-report “fair” or “poor” health	71%	26%
Screen positive for depression	28%	14%
Screen positive for anxiety	31%	16%
Report recent falls and/or fear of falling	27%	10%
Report fear of falling	79%	42%
Require assistance with shopping for groceries	87%	23%
Require assistance preparing food	69%	20%
Have home tripping hazards	24%	13%
Have home construction hazards	10%	7%

3. THE GAP GROWS BETWEEN THOSE IN NEED AND THOSE BEING SERVED.

The gap between those struggling with hunger and those receiving nutritious meals continues to widen year after year.¹⁷

With the onset of the pandemic in March 2020, the Meals on Wheels network faced unprecedented demand. The surge in demand for services required an influx of emergency funding that doubled federal support to address the immediate need. However, this funding has expired while community need continues to grow, and local providers are struggling.

There are 2.5 million low-income older adults who are food insecure and likely need meals but are not currently receiving them. Nearly all (99%) nutrition programs are facing one or more challenges to serve meals to all eligible seniors in their community.¹⁸ Over half of providers report challenges with food prices, funding to pay for meals, and recruiting and retaining volunteers.¹ 1 in 3 Meals on Wheels providers recently reported keeping a waitlist, with seniors waiting an average of four months for vital meals and supportive services.

In a 2024 Meals on Wheels America survey, nearly all (98%) Meals on Wheels providers identified one or more significant challenges to serving meals to all seniors in need in their community. The challenges that providers most frequently noted include funding to pay for meals (71%), food prices (67%), difficulty recruiting and retaining enough volunteers (53%) and gas prices (42%). Increased funding for the OAA Nutrition Program is urgently needed to ensure that community-based providers can deliver proven, life-sustaining nutrition and social connection services to the 2.5 million seniors in need who are currently not served.

Nearly 13 million older adults aged 60 and older worry about having enough food — up from 10 million in 2022.¹⁹ Older adults are at a high risk for malnutrition due to decreased appetite, mobility issues, prescription medications and more.²⁰

While reaching all individuals who need or could benefit from receiving Meals on Wheels is greatly constrained by funding and capacity limitations, the network of programs remains ready and willing to do more with the backing of more resources. Nearly all (97%) local Meals on Wheels providers believe there are older adults in their community who need meals who they are not currently serving.²¹ However, the majority (64%) are confident that they could serve more individuals, if the new clients came with more funding.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES & CONTACT INFORMATION

For more information and resources, please reach out to our Advocacy Team.

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- ¹ Meals on Wheels America analysis of data from the *2023 Current Population Survey Food Security Supplement*, data obtained from U.S. Census Bureau custom tables at <https://data.census.gov/mdat/#/>
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- ³ "Seniors living alone" [#] and [%] figures are from the 2021 Administration for Community Living (ACL) American Community Survey (ACS) Demographic and Household Data, 1-Year Public Use Microdata Sample (PUMS). Data reflects the number of seniors living alone in the state or nation (50 states+ DC) in 2021 who are age 60 and older. Data available in the ACL Aging, Independence, and Disability Program Data Portal (AGID), American Community Survey (ACS) Demographic and Household Data. Release date 1/20/2024: <https://agid.acl.gov/release.html>
- ⁴ Florence, et al., 2018, Medical Costs of Fatal and Nonfatal Falls in Older Adults, *Journal of the American Geriatrics Society*, <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/29512120>
- ⁵ Snider et al., 2014, Economic burden of community-based disease associated malnutrition in the United States, *Journal of Parenteral and Enteral Nutrition*, <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/25249028>
- ⁶ ACL, 2024, *National Survey of OAA Participants 2023*, available via special data request from ACL.
- ⁷ Meals on Wheels America analysis of data from Projected Population by Five-Year Age Group and Sex for the United States, Main Series: 2022-2100. U.S. Census Bureau, Population Division. available at <https://www.census.gov/data/tables/2023/demo/popproj/2023-summary-tables.html>
- ⁸ U.S. Census Bureau. Table: Annual Estimates of the Resident Population by Single Year of Age and Sex for the United States: April 1, 2020 to July 1, 2022 (NC-EST2022-AGESEX-RES). Available at: <https://www.census.gov/data/datasets/time-series/demo/popest/2020s-national-detail.html>
- ⁹ A, National Survey of OAA Participants 2023, available via special data request from ACL.
- ¹⁰ Meals on Wheels America analysis of the American Community Survey data on the ACL AGID website. Tabulations were produced from the 2022 1-Year Public Use 5% Microdata Sample (PUMS) file. Release date 1/20/2024. Available at https://agid.acl.gov/#AmericanCommunitySurvey_ACS
- ¹¹ U.S. Census Bureau, 2023 American Community Survey 1-Year Estimates. Data available in Table S0102 "Population 60 Years and over in the United States." Available at <https://data.census.gov/table/ACSST1Y2023.S0102?q=s0102>
- ¹² U.S. Census Bureau 2023 ACS Table S0101 Age and Sex. Data available at: <https://data.census.gov/>
- ¹³ 2022 Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) Behavioral Risk Factor Surveillance System (BRFSS)
- ¹⁴ U.S. Census Bureau American Community Survey (ACS) 2023 table S0102 Population 60 Years and Over in the United States. Data available at <https://data.census.gov/>
- ¹⁵ 2022 Mapping Medicare Disparities by Population tool from the Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services. <https://data.cms.gov/tools/mapping-medicare-disparities-by-population>
- ¹⁶ Meals on Wheels America, 2015, *More Than a Meal Pilot Research Study*, report prepared by K. S. Thomas & D. Dosa, <https://www.mealsonwheelsamerica.org/learn-more/research/more-than-a-meal/pilot-research-study>
- ¹⁷ Meals on Wheels America, 2019, *More Than a Meal Comprehensive Network Study*, conducted by Trailblazer Research, www.mealsonwheelsamerica.org/learn-more/research/more-than-a-meal/comprehensive-network-study
- ¹⁸ data points are from the Meals on Wheels America 2024 Member Benchmarking Survey, conducted by Meals on Wheels America.
- ¹⁹ U.S. Census Bureau (2023), *Current Population Survey (CPS) Food Security Supplement*, Meals on Wheels America calculation of dataset available at: https://www.census.gov/data/datasets/timeseries/demo/cps/cpssupp_cps-repwgt/cps-food-security.html
- ²⁰ The Gerontological Society of America; National Academy on an Aging Society. Profiles of an Aging Society: What We Know and Can Do About Malnutrition. Washington, DC: The Gerontological Society of America; Fall 2015
- ²¹ Meals on Wheels America, 2021, *Comprehensive Network Survey*, conducted by Trailblazer Research, <https://www.mealsonwheelsamerica.org/learn-more/research/member-perspectives-practices-survey>