

DISPELLING MYTHS: SUPPORTING PUBLIC POLICY FOR GREATER IMPACT AND SUSTAINABILITY

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

BACKGROUND

The Older Americans Act (OAA) provides guidance that 56 State Units on Aging, 629 Area Agencies on Aging, and nearly 20,000 local providers use to implement senior nutrition services. The OAA allows states to develop their own policies and procedures. Therefore, states' policies vary greatly which can lead to confusion and misinterpretation of those policies. These misunderstandings may limit the ability of nutrition programs to provide services or leverage available resources in order to serve more seniors.

EXAMPLES OF EXISTING STATE POLICY MYTHS THAT CREATE PROGRAMMATIC BARRIERS:

MYTH: Taking home leftovers is not permitted. This policy does little to foster an inviting environment for senior patrons of congregate meal programs.

TRUTH: *Participants are allowed to take leftovers from their plate home, if state and local food safety codes are followed.*

MYTH: Choice menus are not allowable in the OAA. This policy doesn't allow for nutritious food that looks and tastes good and responds to participants' needs, desires and cultures, as much as possible.

TRUTH: *Choice is allowed under the OAA and should be offered.*

MYTH: OAA Nutrition Programs cannot engage in "for pay" options for meals or nutrition services.

TRUTH: *As a 501(c)3 non-profit or government entity, local nutrition programs are challenged to build diverse and sustainable funding sources. They must look within the communities they serve to build market potential. This could include contracts with healthcare entities, offering private pay meals, or pursuing other entrepreneurial endeavors.*

IN 2015, MEALS ON WHEELS AMERICA, WITH FINANCIAL SUPPORT FROM THE RETIREMENT RESEARCH FOUNDATION, SET OUT TO:

- 1 Increase understanding among stakeholders in the Aging Network about the limitations and opportunities that exist within states' policy administering the OAA Nutrition Program.
- 2 Support the improvement of operations among various stakeholders, particularly SUAs, AAAs, and OAA Nutrition Programs (or providers), based on a clearer and newfound understanding of these policies.
- 3 Provide new information that sparks a modification of state-level policy, as necessary, to address perceived and actual limitations to support development of business acumen, quality programming and targeted service delivery.

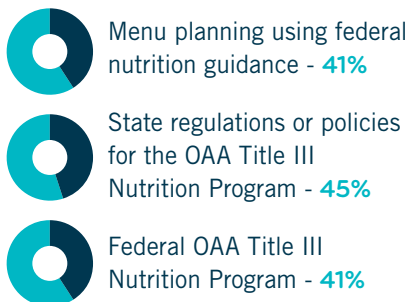
METHODOLOGY

In order for Aging Network professionals to better understand the current nutrition policy landscape, nutrition policies and procedures from each SUA were identified and made available online at www.mealsonwheelsamerica.org/research. Next, three focus groups with professionals representing each level of the Aging Network were convened to identify the key practice and policy barriers to effectively implement OAA Nutrition Programs. This qualitative research informed the development of a 12-item online State Nutrition Program Policy Research Survey. This survey, completed by 245 individuals (61% Local Providers, 29% AAAs and 10% SUAs), was designed to obtain information on training and technical assistance needs, inter-Aging Network communications, practice models related to key OAA Nutrition Program policies and programmatic barriers to meeting the nutritional needs of older adults.

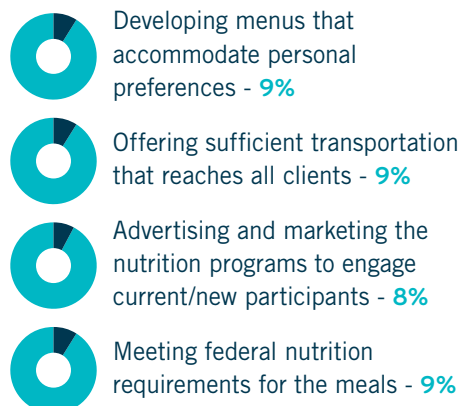
KEY FINDINGS

The State Nutrition Program Policy Research Survey results suggest a need for enhanced technical assistance and training as well as the need for improved coordination and communication among the levels of the Aging Network.

LESS THAN HALF OF THE SURVEY RESPONDENTS REPORTED RECEIVING THE FOLLOWING TRAININGS:



30% OF SURVEY RESPONDENTS CITED FUNDING AS A CHALLENGE IN MEETING THE NUTRITIONAL NEEDS OF OLDER ADULTS. OTHER FREQUENTLY CITED CHALLENGES IN MEETING THE NUTRITIONAL NEEDS OF OLDER ADULTS WERE:



THE MOST COMMONLY CITED APPROACHES FOR ADDRESSING HOW LEFTOVERS (BOTH SERVED AND UNSERVED TO CLIENTS) ARE HANDLED INCLUDE:



CONCLUSION

This research has recognized OAA Nutrition Program policy/practice myths, and identified SUAs, AAAs and providers who are addressing these myths. Aging Network nutrition professionals report a range of training needs on subjects that are key to the implementation of OAA Nutrition Programs. Funding is a commonly cited barrier for these professionals to meet the nutritional needs of older adults – emphasizing the need to identify innovative, effective, and low-cost methods of expanding service delivery to seniors in need.

Armed with a clear understanding of the myths and the SUAs, AAAs and providers who are addressing them, Meals on Wheels America recommends developing trainings to meet the identified learning needs of the Aging Network. In addition, we also recommend providing an online toolkit that raises awareness of new, or ongoing innovative practice models within the Aging Network, and also offers solutions to persistent policy and programmatic barriers.

ABOUT 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. For more information, visit www.mealsonwheelsamerica.org.