

Power Up Your Congregate Program: Tips to Attract New Participants Webinar Takeaways

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by the Office of Nutrition and Health Promotion Programs, Administration for Community Living (ACL), and the National Council on Aging (NCOA)

Speakers: Stacy Dye, RDI Sightline; Jennifer Steele, Meals on Wheels Southwest OH & Northern KY; Jeff Klein, Nevada Senior Services; and Mary Jo McKay, Hillsborough County Aging Services

[Go to recording on NCOA website](#)

Free registration/sign-in is required to access event materials.

Congregate meal program participation has steadily declined despite a growing older adult population. These declines were fueled by the COVID pandemic when congregate sites were forced to close, and the pipeline of new participants virtually stopped. COVID plus the inevitable “aging out” of participants due to health have left many congregate sites with significantly reduced numbers.

Congregate Meal Program Research

Understanding why older adults attend a senior nutrition program is critical to building a sustainable program. The following congregate meal findings were revealed in a recent telephone survey of over 600 men and women aged 60+ in the Ohio and Kentucky area.

- Older adults in lower to moderate-income areas are significantly less likely to be aware of senior centers in their area than their counterparts in middle and upper-income areas. However, those in the lower-to-moderate-income group who are aware are most likely to attend (and have attended most in the past), so getting the word out to these lower-to-moderate-income seniors is critical.
- Females are more aware of senior centers than males.
- The “Joiner phenomenon” was believed to play a role in attendance. People who develop programs tend to develop programming for people like themselves. This ends up attracting people with similar backgrounds and interests, sometimes to the exclusion of others.
 - Seek volunteers of different backgrounds and cultures to ensure a variety of programs and services are offered.
- Across income groups, a *welcoming atmosphere* is the most important meal program attribute measured for both men and women.
- If participants can bring a friend or a family member, they are much more likely to come to a congregate site. A personal invitation also increases the chance of older adults attending.
- Among meal attributes, the *quality of the meals* and *nutritional value of the meals* rank highest.

- Word of mouth is a strong driver of congregate meal program awareness, especially among females.
- Older adults (and especially men) need a renewed sense of purpose. They want to help grow and build the program. Their participation in these activities provides that sense of purpose. Everyone wins here.
- Experimenting with other methods of promoting awareness is recommended. For example, seniors are likely to attend church/faith-based activities, which may be an effective place to reach them.
- Thinking about older adults as “consumers” or “customers” is key to a successful congregate meal program. They have choices, and the congregate meal program is just one of their choices.

Attracting New Participants

Enhance menus and hospitality

- Cultural Cuisine
- Fresh selections
- Menu choices
- Recruit staff from outside the aging network for new ideas
- Provide entertainment with meals
- Diverse staff

Increase activities and special events to generate interest

- Cooking demonstrations
- Taste testing
- Culinary competitions
- Billiard and domino competitions, especially among men
- Bingo with large prizes

Offer innovative alternate meal sites to meet the community where they are

- Pop-up dining (libraries, medical clinics)
- Food trucks
- Restaurant dining
- Provide respite care so family caregivers can have a break and socialize

Seek new community partnerships

- Restaurants
- Aging and wrap-around services
- Medical facilities