

# Power Up Your Congregate Program: Tips to Keep Those We Serve Coming Back to the Table

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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)

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[Go to recording on NCOA website](#)

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

Understanding why older adults attend congregate meals is critical to building a sustainable program. A recent telephone survey of over 600 older adults age 60+ in the Ohio and Kentucky area provides some valuable insights into why attendees may or may not choose to participate in congregate meal programs.

- The majority of seniors (more than 80%) who have attended a meal program do not do so regularly, and 40% say they are unlikely to participate again.
- Transportation is a major factor for seniors and their ability to attend regularly.
- A welcoming atmosphere at the congregate meal site is critical, not only for new attendees but also for those returning. Staff, volunteers, and other attendees all contribute to creating an environment where others feel welcome.
- Opportunities for socialization and an engaging environment are key to keeping people coming back.
- Meal cost is an important factor and can prevent some seniors from attending.

## **Retaining Participants**

### *Menus and dining*

- Leverage local traditions like the Cincinnati Reds Opening Day Parade and familiar holidays like the Fourth of July.
- Offer taste tests of new meals and cooking demonstrations to create interest and excitement.
- Have a restaurant mentality – apply what you like about your favorite restaurant to your program (e.g., culinary staff walks the room and asks attendees what they want/if they need anything).
- Try your meals yourself before serving them to ensure they are scrumptious!
- Offer both regional and international tastes on the menu.
- Consider alternate dining times (e.g., breakfast, brunch, or evening dining)
- Handle attendee concerns about meal cost confidentially.

### *Activities and programming*

- Provide “wrap-around” services to connect attendees with other community resources they may need.
- Introduce or increase special events, including those that celebrate the cultural diversity of your attendees (e.g., Black History Month, Hispanic Heritage).
- “Design on a dime” – doing more with less – and give your congregate meal site a new, fresh look. For example, refurbish current furnishing to create interest and enhance the atmosphere. Let the participants be part of the decision-making process to promote engagement.

- Start with those you serve and work backward. Learn more about them by asking yourself: What is the profile of your attendees? What do they want?
- Rethink how you brand yourself to better embrace your community.
- Focus on your “customer” wants and needs with programming and activities tailored to their interests.
- Address community perceptions and generational change. Consider if your program is relevant to a changing community.

***Transportation***

- Ask your attendees about their transportation needs. Don't assume all attendees can access consistent, reliable transportation to and from the congregate meal site.
- Offer alternate transportation options for seniors if needed.
- Consider mobile food trucks and pop-up sites to reduce the transportation barrier.