

The Dining Experience – Congregate Meal Policy Myth Busters

Participating in congregate nutrition programs can be fun, engaging, and nutritionally satisfying for older adults. In fact, the core goals of the program – a nutritious meal, nutrition education, and an opportunity for socialization – are exactly what participants are looking for! There are many strategies that encourage senior participation and program staff creativity – many of which are scalable to a variety of program sites and meal types. Yet, there may be some hesitation to adopt new practices if staff are unsure whether they are allowed under the rules of the Older Americans Act (OAA). This brief addresses some common policy myths about improving the dining experience for older adults in congregate nutrition programs.

Myth: Congregate nutrition programs should focus exclusively on providing meals.

FACT: While providing nutritious meals may be the central focus, there are actually several priorities – including socialization – within the congregate nutrition program. Providing older adults with access to evidence-based health and wellness education and vital community services are also integral pieces of the program, and these activities help encourage attendance and participation. Opportunities for stimulating conversation, challenging one’s mind, and physical activity are all encouraged. For example, some sites offer dance classes, while others may offer bridge games or health classes.

Myth: Only one type of meal can be offered at a specific time of day.

FACT: While there’s been a focus on serving lunch, any meal – breakfast, lunch, or dinner – can be served to congregate nutrition program participants. Sites can set the meal type, time of day, and length of the meal, allowing more flexibility for attendees.

Myth: Participants must be served the complete meal.

FACT: Although meals must meet set nutrition requirements, they may be served a la carte, allowing participants to select which items they would like to eat. Just because it’s served doesn’t mean it must end up on every person’s plate.

Myth: Participants may not take home any food from the congregate meal site.

FACT: While states have specific requirements on take-out meals, participants are allowed to take home leftover meals. Staff should follow proper food storage and handling techniques and should educate participants about using these practices at home.

Myth: There is only one way to assess if a meal meets the nutrition requirements for congregate meals.

FACT: Congregate meals must follow the Dietary Guidelines for Americans (DGAs) and provide a minimum of one-third of the Dietary Reference Intakes (DRIs). Additionally, each State Unit on Aging can set additional nutrition standards to meet the needs of the older adults they serve. Both MyPlate and the Dietary Approaches to Stop Hypertension (DASH) eating patterns can help you adhere to the DGAs.

To learn more about best practices and how to implement new ideas for your congregate nutrition program, check out these key resources:

National Association of Nutrition and Aging Services Programs: www.nanasp.org

Nutrition and Aging Resource Center: www.acl.gov/senior-nutrition