

Enhanced Training for Congregate Meal Staff

Congregate meals are designed to support older adults, specifically those facing social and financial difficulties. Meals are typically offered at senior centers, churches and other facilities but sometimes fall short on meeting the needs of those they are set up to serve. Meal providers have indicated that staff training is needed to better understand the intricacies of the program, what's allowable, what's not, and how to create flexible meal offerings that meet the continually evolving needs and desires of current and eligible participants. From food safety to funding, congregate meal staff are hungry for information.

There are several ways to strengthen staff knowledge, foster creativity and enhance resources available to best meet the needs of a community's congregate meal participants. The strategies noted below have been cited as effective practices by meal sites across the country. Consider what may work for your site, and how to tailor these practices to best meet your needs.

Invest in professional development. Encouraging professional development also empowers staff to be successful in their roles and can help with staff retention. Staff knowledge can be bolstered with local, regional and national conferences. It can be supported with outside experts – like nursing students – that can offer falls prevention, nutrition and other workshops to both staff and participants. If staff do move on, staff loss can be buffered by cross training volunteers and employees to work in a variety of settings within congregate meals.

Institute food safety training, like ServSafe, for volunteers. This can reinforce good handling and storage practices, and ensure that if meals are brought home, they are done so in a way that meets requirements.

Address the variety of cultures and socioeconomic backgrounds of your participants. This may mean staff can speak multiple languages, it may mean training specific to low-income groups.

Identify possible partnerships with other agencies and organizations. The local Area Aging on Aging, United Way and other national organizations with local chapters often have resources, best practices and materials available for dissemination to a variety of audiences. Some organizations may also provide grant-writing assistance, some may donate food, and others may even serve as non-traditional partners that provide additional funding.

Ensure staff understand their role(s) within the congregate meal setting. Hang posters with meal guidelines/requirements, encourage open communication between staff and management, conduct group trainings and consider creating an opening and closing list to make sure all responsibilities are completed each day. Bring together staff at all levels (kitchen managers, site managers, cooks, volunteers, etc.) to determine what's working at a congregate meal setting.

Incentivize creative thinking while creating efficiencies. Share recipe ideas that are new and exciting to both prepare and serve and still meet the congregate meal nutrition requirements. Simplify meal planning by using MyPlate as a mechanism to follow the Dietary Guidelines. Consider using technology to enter both meals and attendance electronically.