

## **Improving the Dining Experience – Congregate Meals**

Congregate meals for older adults can be fun, engaging and nutritionally satisfying. In fact, the three goals of the program - a nutritious meal, nutrition education, and an opportunity for socialization - are exactly what participants are looking for!

There are several creative, simple ways to jazz up congregate meals. Together we can turn the tide to increase participation AND overall satisfaction.

The critiques – albeit some misperceptions – about congregate meals are likely familiar to you...

**“These meals are boring”**

**“They’re for old people”**

**“I wish it was a more fun and engaging experience”**

**“I can’t come when meals are served”**

**“I would like to take my meals home with me”**

**“The meals don’t meet my needs”**

### **Strategies exist to change perceptions about congregate meals.**

Here are just a few to consider, some of which may be more available or relevant to your particular site.

Know your participants! Gather feedback both formally and informally to address the needs and desires of your audience. The more you can refine the meal and setting to meet their needs, the more they are likely to participate, meet friends and bring others. At the same time, engage the staff – from kitchen managers to cooks and volunteers – to brainstorm how to best address participants’ requests.

Host activities! Cater to multiple age groups, both men and women. For example, offer dancing, raffles, zumba, bridge, art activities, wellness activities, physical activity and even mocktails.

Modernize the meal setting! Create a café style format with a new attractive name, use real silverware, add decorations like flowers and other small changes like soft music and lemon slices in water. Consider electronic ordering systems and bulletin boards.

Identify alternative ways to serve meals! Several sites have partnered with neighborhood food trucks to serve a variety of meals that still meet the nutritional requirements of congregate meals. Simplify meal nutrition evaluations by using tools like MyPlate or the DASH diet to help ensure food group requirements are met.

Implement a wellness model! Incorporate chronic disease self-management education and resources, health prevention tips, on-site health practitioners and oral health specialists when possible.

Ensure meals are sensitive to a range of cultures! Hire volunteers that speak languages common to your community, share resources in multiple languages and offer meals that allow flexibility – like salad bars – and reflect the diversity of the neighborhood.

Allow flexible meal and serving times! Offer breakfast or dinner depending on participant interest, extend meal serving time, and encourage participants to take the food they plan to eat. Just because the food is available doesn't mean individuals must be served everything offered. Allow participants to bring home meal leftovers and considering teaming up with a local restaurant as another way to offer congregate meals.

Encourage mobility-limited participants! Offer transportation, assistance into and out of the building and other guidance where needed.

Promote your practices! Market new meal offerings and activities through channels that reach your target audience. This may include outlets like the local newspaper, community bulletin boards, the community center and nearby libraries.

To learn more about these best practices and to get additional details on how to implement new ideas at your congregate meal site, contact: \_\_\_\_\_