NO RESERVATIONS REQUIRED:
ESTABLISHING SENIOR NUTRITION PROGRAM & RESTAURANT PARTNERSHIPS IN THE AGE OF COVID-19
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Introduction

The need to provide affordable, accessible, nutritious meals to our most vulnerable population – older Americans – has always been a priority. This priority has been challenged by barriers limiting access to senior nutrition services, brought on by the COVID-19 public health pandemic. The Older Americans Act Nutrition Program (OAANP), administered by the Administration for Community Living, provides grants to support access to community-based nutrition services for older Americans. However, according to data from the Government Accountability Office, the OAANP is utilized by less than one-quarter of older adults that need its services. According to the "2019 Congregate Nutrition Programs: An Exploration of Current Challenges and Opportunities" report, between 2001 and 2012, the percentage of adults age 60 and older that are food insecure increased by 66%. Additionally, budget cuts – coupled with increased operational costs – have forced closures of low-performing Senior Nutrition Program (SNP) sites or reduced the number of days they are able to offer meal services. Though community-based senior nutrition programs remain a popular, well-liked, and impactful service for older adults, they face persistent operational barriers – further exacerbated by the COVID-19 public health emergency.

Evolving Business Challenges for Senior Nutrition Programs

COVID-19. While the increased risk of older adults becoming seriously ill from COVID-19 is of note, we cannot forget the epidemic's effects on their basic needs. The COVID-19 pandemic led to further restrictions to access and the widespread closing of community-based locations (i.e., senior centers and churches), which were hosts for congregate meals through the Older Americans Act Nutrition Program (OAANP). The closure of these meal sites jeopardized the health and well-being of their participants.

Evolving client population. The face of older Americans is changing. With that, traditional congregate dining sites have been challenged to meet the needs of this new generation of seniors. Efforts to deliver services that are inclusive of all cultures, races, religions, and persons of diverse gender and sexual orientation are ongoing and prove to be difficult at times for SNP operators.

SNPs around the country face a diverse set of challenges as they evolve to meet the needs of seniors today and tomorrow. Almost all SNPs offer congregate meals, and more congregate meal programs offer breakfast, dinner, and weekend meals (in addition to lunch, which all sites offer). SNPs also increasingly offer more options for "modified" meals, which are lower in fat, sodium, or calories. This broadening of services and meal types is an effort to meet the needs and wants of a more diverse senior population. Findings from a cross-section of SNP evaluation studies suggests that modifying meal services to appeal to a broader, younger, and more diverse audience is vital. For example, "Evaluation of Senior Community Centers in Rural and Urban Pennsylvania," a report published in March 2020, found that the centers surveyed for this report noted that while meals are still important, the high-calorie, high-carbohydrate congregate meals seniors typically get from Meals on Wheels are not attractive to younger seniors. Those younger participants did not come for, nor do they partake in, the meal, preferring to leave and go out for options in the community. Variety appears to be the biggest draw for those centers that can offer their own food choices. Not having a large noon meal but salad bars and sandwiches are the main draw for younger seniors. Similarly, respondents to SNP evaluation surveys in

Iowa and Ohio noted that increasing the menu choice/meal variety would boost satisfaction and serve as a welcome change.

Fundraising. A 2019 AARP Public Policy Institute report finds that total Older Americans Act Nutrition Program (OAANP) funding is not keeping pace with inflation — and that, when adjusted for inflation, program funding has fallen by 16 percent since FY 2001. AARP also found that when adjusted for inflation, total funding appropriated for OAA nutrition services over the past 18 years fell by 8 percent, a decline of $80 million (in 2019 value). This situation underscores the increased need for additional fundraising efforts on the part of SNPs for which COVID-19 has interrupted fundraising events traditionally held in-person.

Serving older adults residing in rural communities. Providing meals to rural communities has historically been more expensive for SNPs. Feeding America reported that 2.3 million households in rural communities face hunger. Rural communities make up 63% of counties in the United States and 87% of counties with the highest rates of overall food insecurity. In 2019, the Census noted that 17.5% of the rural population was 65 years and older compared to 13.8% in urban areas. According to a recent Health and Human Services publication, rural local officials and service providers stated that reaching older adults in remote, sparsely populated areas adds to the cost and effort of providing services. A dwindling working-age population means fewer caregivers and volunteers to help older residents successfully age in place. Transportation remains a barrier to accessing services in many communities – OAA-funded transportation is in demand yet often limited in availability, especially in rural areas, despite collaboration at state and local levels.

Need for inventive partnerships. Senior Nutrition Program providers have admirably risen to meet the challenges brought on by the COVID-19 public health emergency. Critical to these efforts has been the ability to leverage existing relationships and forge new ones with key stakeholders (e.g., restaurants, food system partners, technology providers). Seeking win-win opportunities has proven to be among the most successful. For example, the restaurant industry suffered the significant declines in sales and revenue losses during the COVID 19-outbreak, jeopardizing the livelihoods of a large portion of the economic sector within every community across the country. Combining these two industries' models during COVID 19 provides an opportunity to offer seniors with needed meal services while bolstering the restaurant business during a difficult economic situation. SNP-restaurant partnerships can be a cost-effective answer for two industries hard-hit by the COVID-19 public health pandemic.

Strategic partnerships that enable SNPs and restaurants to collaborate and meet the nutrition needs of the hard-to-reach communities, diverse ethnic populations, isolated seniors, and a population of the younger generation of seniors who prefer menu options and dining time choices. Senior nutrition program and restaurant partnerships currently exist across the country on a limited basis. These collaborations have proven to fill a gap in meeting the meal and socialization needs of older adults. Now more than ever, the Senior Nutrition Program network will need to adapt to the "new normal" business environment while continuing to meet the nutrition service needs of the older adults they serve.

Why Restaurants and SNPs Can Make Good Partners
According to a recent food service industry business assessment (Technomic's "2018 Healthy Eating Trend Report"):
- 40% of all consumers surveyed say their definition of health has changed over the past two years, taking on a more personalized and holistic view demanding quality and freshness of prepared foods and beverages;

- 66% of all consumers surveyed look for calorie counts on restaurant menus at least some of the time;
- 34% of all consumers surveyed say they'd be likely to order dishes made with vegetables, instead of carb-rich items.

These trends mirror some of the goals and requirements of the Older Americans Act, which requires SNP meals to comply with the Dietary Guidelines for Americans (DGAs). The DGAs target specific groups of foods that Americans need to consume to be healthy (whole grains, fruits, vegetables, dairy and dairy alternatives, low-fat protein foods, and oils). It also focuses on some foods and nutrients that Americans do not consume enough of such as dark leafy greens, orange vegetables, or nutrients like potassium, vitamin D, calcium, and fiber. As consumers get more health-conscious and aware of the implications of their dietary dining decisions, restaurants have become more open to tailoring their menus to meet the growing trends of consumers. These shifts in both service provider and consumer behavior make it easier for both restaurants and senior nutrition programs to establish a partnership. Consequently, registered dietitian nutritionists (RDNs) affiliated with SNPs who develop a senior-focused menu in partnership with restaurant owners, will find it easier to develop a menu that meets Older American Title III-C meal requirements. To do so, RDNs can easily leveraging the restaurant's existing menu – particularly a menu that is responsive to consumer trends towards health-consciousness.

Advantages of Restaurants:
- Restaurants with a diverse menu, who cook from scratch and have a willingness to work with an SNP RDN, are good candidates for an SNP partnership. With SNP input, the restaurant can offer many healthy meal choices, some having the ability to provide breakfast, lunch, and dinner. Restaurant days of operation are often more expansive than most SNP sites.
- Restaurants can serve small rural communities who either lack a SNP or have a SNP open on a limited schedule.
- A restaurant/SNP partnership can be targeted in urban neighborhoods that lack transportation to a senior center or those that are located within neighborhoods that are inhabited by culturally or ethnically diverse populations.
- Restaurants can be chosen for their ethnic food offering to provide seniors with culturally authentic meals.
- The restaurant concept can also be used in grocery store cafés, as well as hospital cafés – such SNP/restaurant partnerships can benefit from using the grocery store or hospital dietitian to provide additional services.

In addition:
- During the initial months of the COVID-19 public health emergency, restaurants were either closed for a short time or never closed. Regardless, the volume of their business has been severely diminished. Food service providers, such as restaurants and food retail locations within hospitals and grocery stores that were operating during the pandemic, were under close supervision of local and state health department's COVID protocols. Consequently, these establishments had the ability to pivot to socially distanced service delivery models such as outdoor dining, grab-n-go, take-out, and delivery. As a result, some SNPs with food retail partnerships of these kinds have been able to continue uninterrupted meal services to their seniors through the pandemic.

SNP Challenges Solvable via Restaurant Partnerships

1. **Providing generationally inclusive services.** Meeting the needs of a multi-generational senior population has been and will continue to be challenging for SNPs as the senior population continues to increase. Recently, the U.S. Census Bureau data indicates that the 65-and-older population grew by over a third (34.2% or 13,787,044 individuals) during the past decade. SNPs have made strides in meeting the meal needs of these "new seniors" by implementing choices, including a lighter fare option; offering other meal-time options such as breakfast, dinner or an ongoing salad bar; or establishing a café-style alternative to the traditional congregate site. However, those variations have not been widespread and tend to have additional costs and administrative overhead.

2. **Providing culturally inclusive services.** Providing meal options to culturally diverse, sometimes hard-to-serve populations, either within existing congregate dining sites where diverse populations co-participate or stand-alone dining sites specific for that population, can be challenging and expensive. The "2020 Older Americans Information on Key Indicators of Well Being" report noted that in 2018, 52 million people age 65 and over lived in the United States, accounting for 16 percent of the total population. The older population is projected to become increasingly diverse, reflecting the demographic changes in the U.S. population over the course of the last several decades. As the senior population becomes more ethnically diverse, SNPs will continue to be tested on how to meet the meal and nutrition service needs of these populations.

3. **Increasing opportunities for socialization.** A congregate dining site provides socialization as well as a nutritious meal. According to the National Association of Nutrition and Aging Services Programs' (NANASP) Beyond the Meal Study, 88% of congregate dining participants stated that "socialization" is encouraged at the meal sites. However, it is well known that language barriers, cultural differences, or feelings of exclusion due to sexual orientation could impede an older adult's ability to socialize. Seniors attending restaurant programs have the choice to attend alone, as a couple, or as a group – expanding opportunities for seniors to be socially engaged.

4. **Offering cost competitive meals.** According to the "2015 OAA Nutrition Program Evaluation: Meal Cost Analysis," the average congregate meal cost is $10.69. Increases in the costs of paid food and vendor services between 1996 and 2015 appear to be primarily responsible for causing per-meal costs to increase faster than inflation. Many SNPs are facing lower participant donations because of an increasingly challenging economic climate forcing older adults to make sacrifices when resources are limited and basic need expenses accrue. The voluntary SNP meal contribution is an easy "trade off" when older adult households are struggling with paying utilities, transportation, medical care, and housing.

5. **Meeting changing demand for nutrition services.** COVID-19 has tested SNPs ability to provide meals when senior center and meal site closures have impeded the traditional delivery of in-person nutrition services. Home-delivered meal services are strained as SNPs struggle to serve congregate participants through the provision of home-delivered meals. Securing sufficient volunteers and staff to ensure home delivery of meals has been a challenge.

Developing A Restaurant Program: Key Considerations

Selecting a Restaurant – Steps to Consider:
1. When considering a restaurant, SNPs should determine the food access challenges or business limitations they are trying to address, such as rural isolation; lack of transportation; lack of

cultural, authentic meals; or meal site closures due to COVID 19, and identify restaurant partners with whom they can partner to address these central concerns.

2. SNP staff are encouraged to discuss the restaurant concept and plan with their State Unit on Aging (SUA) or Area Agency on Aging (AAA) and secure their approval to proceed. SNPs should include local community-based organizations serving the senior community in the planning and implementation of a restaurant program. It is important that the restaurant program not reduce participation in the services and activities offered by the SNP and other community-based organizations; instead, it should be offering a solution to the older adult's inability to access meal services in the community.

3. SNPs should identify 1-3 restaurants that have the geographic location, culinary ability, and a managerial willingness to work under the SNP's requirements and guidelines. Sometimes there is only one restaurant option, often a situation that occurs in rural areas. Once the restaurant partner is identified, SNPs should develop a contract, similar to one they would have with any other food service provider, outlining the OAANP Title III requirements.

4. SNP staff are invited to confirm restaurant compliance to local sanitation regulations, licensing, and insurance requirements. Staff should plan to review the contract with the restaurant owner. If the restaurant owner can adhere to the contract, schedule a meeting between the owner and registered dietitian to develop the menus. Once menu development is complete, SNPs are encouraged to negotiate an "all inclusive" price. The price can be different for breakfast, lunch, and dinner meals or the same for all three meals. Utilizing an electronic point-of-sale (POS) system will make these complexities easier to manage. The SUA and/or AAA may need to approve the location and menus at this point (depending on the state).

For more details about engaging a restaurant or food retail partner, please visit:
Guide to Working with Restaurants and Grocery Stores for Meals
https://acl.gov/sites/default/files/nutrition/Step-By-Step-Guide-Working-with-Restaurants-and-Grocery-Stores-For-Meals-Final-Updated-7.14.20_508.pdf

Typical Restaurant Concerns. Restaurants are used to being paid by their customers immediately. A SNP will need to be clear on payment terms so restaurants do not have unrealistic expectations and the restaurant partner is able to meet partnership-related expenses until payment is received. In general, restaurant staff expects a tip for good service. It is important to explain to the identified restaurant partner, and their staff, that some of the senior participants are low-income and although tipping is a common practice among many restaurant diners and may be mentioned in the restaurant/SNP program partnership literature, it is not required. Some café style restaurant partnerships, as well as grocery stores and hospitals do not involve tipping.

Data Management for SNPs. An electronically-managed SNP/restaurant partnership eases the tracking functions and simplifies the reporting requirements of SNP state and federal funders. The electronic system is advantageous as it relieves the restaurant partner from collecting vouchers, tracking attendance, and generating invoices manually. The establishment of the electronic system is the responsibility of the SNP. It starts with engaging a software company that specializes in POS software applications. With this system in place, SNPs should provide a QR-coded card linked to the selected system to seniors when they register to participate in the restaurant program. The card electronically links the participant to their restaurant attendance which is transmitted back to the SNP in real time. The SNP provides the restaurant with a smart device containing an application that is designed to track participant attendance specifically for the SNP. If the restaurant is already utilizing a smart device then the application may be loaded onto the device, saving the SNP the expense of purchasing a device.

Meal Tracking Considerations *(for SNPs using an electronic POS systems).* SNPs will need to decide how meals will be placed on a senior's dining card or fob for tracking purposes. Senior dining cards or key fobs function akin to a debit card. For each older adult, the dining card or fob tracker is electronically loaded with meals. When the SNP participant attends the restaurant to consume a meal, one meal is debited from their account. SNPs can allow the participant to add their own meals through the SNP website or the electronic system could be configured to add meals automatically. Either method can place limits on the number of meals a participant can order based on SNP budget limitations.

Additional Meal Tracking Considerations
1. SNPs determine the donation process for the restaurant program. The SNP participant can place an order for the number of meals they want on their card and pre-donate for the meals (donate to the SNP before meals are consumed) or post-donate (or donate to the SNP program after meals are consumed).
2. SNPs can automatically place a specific number of meals per day on each participant's dining card. The meals that are not consumed are automatically removed if not used and a donation statement is generated at the end of the month requesting a donation for the number of meals consumed by the participant. This method is used if a program has budgetary limitations allowing them to serve a set number of meals.
3. The type of dining card used for the restaurant program and the dining card dimensions and design (size, color, etc.) will impact cost. For seniors who are adept at using mobile applications, a contactless alterative to the dining card, in the age of COVID-19, can include use of POS systems that allow for scanning of QR codes on a participant's cell phone.

Marketing and Outreach. SNPs can partner with a variety of stakeholders (such as local senior centers, local municipal employees, senior housing resident service coordinators, local libraries, town social workers, and elected officials) to assist with getting the word to those seniors who could most benefit from the program. During COVID-19, marketing the restaurant can pivot to using social media and traditional media outlets, like the news media and local cable access television, as well as digital/telephonic outreach via robo-calling and email. It is beneficial to have SNP staff to do in-person registrations for the restaurant program, although COVID-19 restrictions places limitations on that process. Under normal circumstances, information and registration sessions would be held at the senior center, senior housing community room, library, or other public location. However, during COVID-19, a restaurant program application process can be established on the SNP and/or senior center's website, with restaurant cards being mailed to the participant after they enroll. When it is safe to do so, following the COVID-19 pandemic, SNP staff registration events can resume and be held at a satellite location, at the SNP office, or at the restaurant partner site. The establishment of satellite registration sites to assist seniors in engaging in the SNP-restaurant program, at a local senior center, or town social service office, for example, is especially beneficial approach in rural communities. Following the COVID-19 pandemic, it is important to resume the initial in-person registration process so that participants in need of other services, can be access additional needed programs/services.

SNPs must update their program webpages to include information on restaurant programs, including restaurant listings with hours of operation and sample menus, registration satellite locations, and a mechanism for seniors to check their meal credit card balance and to order additional meals if the SNP is allowing pre-ordering. Another key marketing component is the development of print or online brochures with the restaurant program information, as well as program rules and regulations – to distribute on-site at the restaurant, the SNP, or at varied locations throughout the community.

Participant Registration. Seniors wishing to participate in a restaurant program are required to complete the state-issued program intake form, just like any other Title III service. A dining card or fob is provided to the senior at the time of registration or mailed to them directly during COVID-19. The number on the card is recorded and then entered into the restaurant database. The restaurant database could be stand-alone or, in most cases, integrated with the SNPs existing meal database. The participant's email address and cell phone number is recorded to enable timely communication on any changes/updates with the program, email donation statements, account balances, and upcoming fundraising events. Participants only need to have their card scanned at the restaurant to receive the SNP/restaurant menu. This will track their day and time of attendance for reporting and invoicing purposes.

Operational Costs. Restaurant meals in some cases can cost less than a traditional congregate meal. Often the labor cost for a congregate meal is more than the food costs. Restaurants use existing wait-staff to serve the seniors, allowing more money to support food costs. Seniors enjoy the restaurant food quality and the ability to choose their menu and meal time. As a result, treating this as a more "upscale" form of dining, the senior participants tend to increase their donation level. The average cost to manage the restaurant data through an electronic POS system is on average, $0.20 per meal. In addition, the card cost will range $0.30-$0.99 based on card size, design, and quantity. SNPs can control the card cost which is dependent on card size (wallet-sized or smaller), color (color or black and white), printing (on one side vs both sides of the card). A smart device or tablet provided to the restaurant by the SNP will range from $240-$430, depending on the size of the device. On average, there is a one-time set-up fee of $995-$1,995, depending on integration into the SNP's existing meal management system. The set-up fee includes technical assistance throughout the process of establishing a restaurant program.

Training. It is vital to ensure restaurant employees staffing the restaurant program receive comprehensive training to support the SNP-restaurant partnership. This staff, going forward, will serve as the "eyes and ears" of the partnering SNP organization. As part of a comprehensive training program, SNP staff are encouraged to provide the restaurant staff with general program information including the SNP's goals and other community resources that are offered by the agency. If restaurant staff identify that a participant needs additional supports or services, restaurant staff are instructed to contact the SNP to follow up with the participant in question. Note: Satellite outreach locations should be provided with all SNP/restaurant materials and the staff overseeing the satellite outreach location needs to receive training on SNP/restaurant program eligibility, intake requirements, card assignment procedures, and the process for transmitting new restaurant participant's info back to the SNP.

Community Education & Awareness Raising. Keeping the community, especially the program participants, informed on updates and available services is important. When it is safe, SNPs can take advantage of restaurant space to hold nutrition education sessions and other community resource events and sign-ups, such as Energy Assistance, SNAP, and SHIP counseling. If space is an issue, seek out a nearby location, such as a library or senior housing community room, to hold these sessions. Announcements should be posted and distributed to participants in the most efficient manner. Communication with participants, especially during COVID-19, can be include emails, texting, and notices distributed with "to-go" meals from restaurants. Socially distant methods (e.g., social media) for keeping the local community aware and up to date with the SNP-restaurant partnership and related changes should be used until in-person gathers are deemed safe for older adults.

Conclusion

The challenge of meeting the nutritional needs of older adults has been hampered by the closure and/or limited reopening of SNPs, social distancing/stay at home requirements, and personal protective equipment constraints experienced by SNPs – limiting their ability to remain open to serve their community during the COVID-19 pandemic. Considering this evolving operating environment, SNPs need viable avenues to continue providing meal service to seniors. Exploring inventive collaborative opportunities, such as working with restaurant partners, can provide a viable path forward. A SNP-restaurant initiative can provide an opportunity to address the persistent programmatic challenges but most importantly, can provide SNPs a way to address emerging COVID-19 service constraints while adjust to the "new normal" business operating environment.

Appendix A. Examples: Existing SNP Restaurant Programs

1. Program Name: Senior Dine
   Organization: New Opportunities Inc.
   Service Area: State of Connecticut
   Website: http://www.newoppinc.org/senior-dine

2. Program Name: Choosing Healthy Appetizing Meal Plan Solutions for Seniors (CHAMPSS)
   Organization: Johnson County Human Services
   Service Area: Johnson County, KS
   Website: http://www.jhawkaaa.org/services/nutrition/

3. Program Name: Choosing Healthy Appetizing Meal Plan Solutions for Seniors (CHAMPSS)
   Organization: Self-Help for the Edlerly
   Service Area: San Francisco, California
   Website: https://www.selfhelpelderly.org/our-services/nutrition-services/champss

4. Program Name: Senior Choice Meal Program
   Organization: Barry County Commission on Aging
   Service Area: Barry, Carlton, Hope, Irving, Maple Grove, Orangeville, Prairieville, Rutland, Thornapple, Woodland, and Yankee Springs, Michigan
   Website:
   https://www.barrycounty.org/commission_on_aging_new/senior_choice_meal_program.php

5. Program Name: Meals on Love
   Organization: Senior Resource Alliance
   Service Area: State of Florida
   Website: https://mealsoflove.org/

6. Program Name: Senior Dining
   Organization: SEMAC
   Service Area: Dodge, Fillmore, Freeborn, Goodhue, Houston, Mower, Olmstead, Rice, Steele, Wabasha, and Winona Counties, Minnesota
   Website: https://www.semcac.org/senior-services/senior-dining/

7. Program Name: Discount Dining Program
   Organization: AgeWell Services
   Service Area: Muskegon and Oceana Counties, Michigan
   Website: https://agewellservices.org/senior-discount-dining-program/

8. Program Name: Dining to Improve Socialization and Health
   Organization: Area Agency on Aging 3
   Location: Allen, Auglaize, Hancock, Hardin, Mercer, Putnam, and Van Wert Counties
   Website: https://www.aaa3.org/nutrition

9. Program Name: CHAMPSS – Choosing Healthy Appetizing Meals Plan Solutions for Seniors (New Program)
   Organization: Wyandotte/Leavenworth Area Agency on Aging
   Service Area: Mission, Kansas
   Website: https://www.wycokck.org/Departments/Area-Agency-on-Aging

EXTENDED BRIEF

Resources (Accessed December 2020)

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