

Introduction

“Times...they are changing” may be a cliché, but it is true, and the changing times affect how nutrition programs function every day and their need to change to meet both current and future needs. This brief will address components of quality nutrition services and provide key insights that demonstrates that the Older Americans Act Nutrition Program (OAA NP) provides quality products and services. It will also address some aspects of the role that the OAA NP may play in home and community-based services (HCBS) and health care.

What is quality?

The definition of quality depends on who you ask. A common definition might be, “I know it when I see it,” but the components of quality might be more specific than that. The definition may be different if the audience are social service agencies, food assistance programs, home and community-based (HCBS) providers, healthcare entities, public health organizations, publicly or privately funded organizations or an individual. Because the OAA NP is functioning in a social, healthcare, publicly and privately funded HCBS system that is attempting to be more person-centered and appealing to a diverse group of people, there is a wide degree of diversity of definitions.

How does quality apply to the Older Americans Act Nutrition Program (OAA NP)?

The OAA NP is producing products (congregate and home-delivered meals, including special dietary meals or possibly “medically-tailored meals”) and services (nutrition screening/assessment, education, counseling, referrals to food assistance and other economic benefits, senior center activities and coordination/collaboration with services such as transportation). The OAA NP whether at the federal, state, Area Agency on Aging (AAA) or local level needs to look at current quality as well as what quality means for the future given the changes in diversity of the older adult population,



societal expectations, science, technology, media, healthcare, social services, home and community-based care and long-term services and supports, and funding.

How do you measure quality?

Quality measures depend on who (businesses, program participants, funders, others) you ask. Whatever the definition, quality needs to be built into an organization’s business, strategic or funding plans; into product and service requirements; implementation; monitoring; and evaluation. Common to all plans is identifying the vision, mission, goals, objectives, activities and evaluation of those activities to determine if one is successful and how the products and services relate to both the funders’ stated needs and the participants’ needs and wants.

What are different aspects of quality for the OAA NP?

Not only does the OAA NP produce a product such as a meal but it also provides other services by a public or private non-profit organization. As a result, there are various quality aspects that can be monitored and evaluated:

1. *Menu development and implementation*
2. *Meal production*
3. *Meal service, delivery*
4. *Participant satisfaction*
5. *Value (to participants and funders)*
6. *Other service implementation and coordination/ collaborations, such as nutrition education, transportation, social activities, food assistance, etc.*
7. *Communication, marketing, branding*
8. *Administration, including funding and sustainability*
9. *Organizational structure, trust and reputation*

Who is responsible for quality?

Every level of the aging services network is responsible—from the federal Administration on Community Living (ACL) that offers technical assistance on the OAA NP, to state units on aging (SUAs), tribal organizations, AAAs and local nutrition service providers—all play a role in establishing and implementing quality assurance practices.

Summary

The OAA NP is a trusted community service entity, but the data indicate that it can enhance service quality, value, effectiveness and proven outcomes. Every stakeholder within the network of older adults, community members, aging services organizations, and varied entities charged in the OAA are tasked with assuring quality for aging and nutrition programs.



The diversification of the older American population and changes in societal expectations, science, technology, media, healthcare, social services, HCBS, and long-term services and supports (LTSS) influence how the OAA NP changes and how these changes translate into quality. Quality will continue to be measured by performance, adherence to standards or processes, evaluation of value and outcomes but will need to evolve to meet future challenges. Programs, at all levels, will need to consider their participants' needs and wants; funding availability from both public and private sources; the healthcare, HCBS and LTSS environment; prioritization of services; clarification of what quality and success in their own community looks like; and envision their future with their current and future funders as well as more diverse program participants.

In an increasingly competitive environment for public and private funding, and increasingly competitive private industry, OAA NP must continue to demonstrate quality, enhance their products and services to meet the future challenges, and maintain the trust and respect of their participants, the public and their funders.

To extend your learning about this important topic, read the Quality Nutrition Services for Senior Nutrition Programs 101 Extended Brief, available here: www.nutritionandaging.org/briefs.