

National Resource Center on Nutrition and Aging

20 Years and Counting: Connecticut Senior Dine Program Provides Flexibility and Choice for Older Adults

Connecticut's Senior Dine Program has been a popular mainstay in the community for the past 20 years, providing older adults with nutritious, economical meals while also serving as a supportive and fun social network.

Today, nearly 1,000 seniors are registered in the program, which is operated by New Opportunities, Inc. and funded by Title III C of the Older Americans Act through the Western Connecticut Agency on Aging. The program is available to anyone age 60 or older, regardless of income, who lives in the Greater Waterbury or Greater Danbury areas.

The goal of the program is to provide more flexibility and choice for seniors. While meals are typically served from a senior center or other congregate setting, the Senior Dine Program allows participants the option of going to a local restaurant for their meals. Partnering restaurants accept the Senior Dine debit card, which allows for easy payment and tracking. A registered dietitian works closely with restaurant owners on menu development to ensure that meals meet Title III C nutrition requirements, and that food choices are available for those with special dietary or medical needs.

Seniors like that the program gives them the independence to choose when and what they want to eat, from a diverse array of options. It's also a chance for them to socialize and meet new friends. As one participant says, "It's been a lifesaver for me because I'm pretty much isolated. When I come into the restaurant, this is my friend-family and I really enjoy being with them."

Like many other nutrition programs, when the pandemic hit, the senior center and participating restaurants quickly transitioned to grab-and-go meals so that they could continue to serve the community. In July, the restaurant program was able to resume in-person dining in addition to keeping the grab-and-go option.

To help protect the health and safety of older adults and restaurant staff now on-site, the program started using a contactless card system to replace the Senior Dine debit card. The new card has a scannable QR code and is available in either a credit card style or as a small key chain tag that can be attached to a key ring. In addition to the card, the program now offers a Senior Dine app for seniors to download and store a photo of their card for the restaurant to scan. The app also displays helpful information, such as the number of credits remaining on the card, activity history, and nutrition education.

Even with the challenges of the pandemic, the Senior Dine Program believes the restaurant program has several advantages over a traditional congregate meal site. For example, because the staffing and facilities costs of preparing and serving meals are managed by the restaurant, the program can put more money towards the meals themselves. They also don't have to worry about food waste during closures or bad weather that prevents seniors from coming in, or deal with the last-minute scramble when a café manager calls in sick.

It's also a way to help the local economy by bringing business to local restaurants, especially during COVID-19 when many have been hard hit. More than that, the restaurants value the opportunity to give

back to their community. As a participating restaurant, Monteiro's gets to see firsthand how the program makes a difference in people's lives. "It's helped a lot of people," says the owner, Rich Monteiro.

For more information about the Connecticut Senior Dine Program, call 203-757-7738 or email nutrition@NewOppInc.org.