

Spotlight on New Opportunities' Conexion (Connection) for More Healthy Aging Program

Q&A With Lisa Labonte, Director of Senior Nutrition Services, New Opportunities, Inc.

Note: This document presents an interview conducted by the Nutrition and Aging Resource Center to spotlight the work of ACL grant recipients and share practices with the aging network. Responses are presented verbatim.

Program Introduction

Conexion follows the model Senior Center Without Walls. The focal point of the Conexion program is meals provided through restaurant partnerships. A plethora of classes and programs are designed to meet the physical health, social, and nutritional needs of the population being served with a focus on reducing health challenges and increasing socialization. The program formed 40 partnerships with many community-based organizations (CBOs) and a few businesses to offer an array of services within each CBOs or business's expertise. The targeted population for this program was in downtown Waterbury, Connecticut, within a two-mile radius from the Waterbury Green. This area is surrounded by low-income senior housing buildings and small community church-based senior clubs, some private apartments. The population is primarily a low-income, Spanish-speaking, senior population who have limited transportation and access to other senior services in the city of Waterbury.

Interview Insights

Tell us about the “why” and motivation behind your project.

New Opportunities had administered the elderly nutrition program in the greater Waterbury area for 38 years at the time that we applied for the Conexion grant. We always had challenges throughout the time providing congregate meals to this population who are the lowest income, highest minority population in our entire 13-town service area... Our efforts to provide meals through our agency food truck had capacity limitations and weather challenges given the Connecticut weather. Post-COVID exacerbated the need to address this population's meal needs, health challenges, and social isolation.

How did you go about finding appropriate partners and partner organizations?

The downtown area of Waterbury is surrounded by CBOs and businesses and several restaurants, mostly in walking distance for Conexion's members. We met with some of the CBOs during the application process to get their support. After the grant award, we surveyed members as they signed up for the program on their needs and interests and then scheduled additional meetings with CBOs to discuss the

grant in detail and to find where they could align their existing services, programs, and classes to support the Conexión mission. New Opportunities agreed through a memorandum of understanding to recruit and register members and set up an electronic tracking system for classes and programs and for reporting purposes. We also agreed to market all the classes and programs with members and provide class support when needed.

The two downtown restaurant partners welcomed our business. Waterbury's kind of a depressed downtown area, so this was really a boost for them. Our registered dietician worked with them to develop menus that met our requirements and meals were tracked using the electronic card, which every senior received when they registered for the Conexions program. Private businesses also provided some free classes like banks and some little businesses in downtown area, or there was a small fee for classes.

In your opinion, what is the most important personality trait or strength someone would need to be successful throughout this project?

It's really important for them to be creative, compassionate, ambitious, motivated — not only motivated within themselves, but the ability to motivate others. Friendly is also very important because this person is the liaison between the seniors and the CBOs and restaurants who collaborate with the CBOs to meet the needs of the seniors. So these traits are really necessary for the program to be a success.

What do you wish you would've known prior to beginning the project?

One of the things that we really felt was important that we did not do was involving our state unit on aging and our area agencies on aging and some other funders, as well as elected officials, in the very early stages of the program development to get their support when the program exceeded their expectations and goals and outcomes and funds ended up expiring. So we really brought them in more in the middle of the process once we got up and running, and the seniors registered, and the CBOs and our partners all on board. Then we started bringing in organizations and agencies when I really think if they were in the beginning stages, they would've had more of a buy-in into the program.

Also, the need and popularity of the restaurant program really exceeded our expectations. It did drain our budget earlier than expected. So I think we would not have set our goal so high by providing 20 meals instead of 10 meals to the seniors, because we ran out of our funds towards the end of the third year. It's also important to get the media coverage on the program from the inception to the end. We only got coverage more towards the end, and it was a little bit late for us to get funders interested in supporting the program.



Learn more from the [Nutrition and Aging Resource Center](#), funded by the [Administration for Community Living](#) to build the capacity of senior nutrition programs funded by the Older Americans Act.