

**“Beyond the Meal: The Value of Socialization in Older Americans Act
Congregate Nutrition Programs”**

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National Association of Nutrition and Aging Services Programs

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Final Report

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Executive Summary

This project was funded beginning in July 2016 to study the value of socialization for older adults who participate in Congregate Nutrition programs under the Older Americans Act (OAA) and how this contributes to their health and well-being outcomes. According to the Administration on Aging's 2016 Profile of Older Americans¹, about 29% (13.6 million) of noninstitutionalized older persons live alone and almost half of older women (46%) age 75 and older live alone. In 2015, the mean age of congregate meal participants was 76 years old and the average age of home-delivered meal participants was 79 years old. A study conducted at the University of California, San Francisco published its results in 2012² to show that of the 1,600 people who participated (average age 71), those who reported being lonely were more likely to develop problems with activities of daily living. Controlling for socioeconomic status and health, nearly 23% of those participants died within six years compared to 14% who didn't report loneliness. According to the AARP Foundation³, social isolation affects more than 8 million adults in America and it presents health risks equivalent to smoking 15 cigarettes a day.

The research methodology we used to study the health and well-being benefits of socialization for older adults participating in Congregate Nutrition programs included:

- Conducting a comprehensive literature review to explore existing research on the positive impact of socialization from Congregate Nutrition programs on the health and well-being of older adults

¹ <https://www.acl.gov/sites/default/files/Aging%20and%20Disability%20in%20America/2016-Profile.pdf>

² <http://jamanetwork.com/journals/jamainternalmedicine/fullarticle/1188033>

³ <http://associationsnow.com/2016/12/aarp-foundation-launches-initiative-combat-isolation/>

- Development of a survey tool for Congregate Nutrition program providers and participants, with feedback from existing NANASP Congregate Nutrition experts
- Dissemination of a final survey tool to NANASP member providers and Congregate Nutrition Program participants at national sites
- Collection of survey data from participants and input of data into electronic format for further analysis
- Over 200 face-to-face conversations with older adults at Congregate Nutrition programs which produced important findings

In only three months (January to March 2017), 15 Congregate Nutrition programs in 10 different states participated in our project. 2,305 program participants and 57 program providers responded in total. Survey responses indicate that most of the Congregate Nutrition program participants identified socialization as one of the most important reasons for going to their local program site. Many of these program participants were from low-income, minority communities. Furthermore, many of the Congregate Nutrition program providers agreed that most of their program participants live alone and therefore find great value in connecting with other people at the program site. The most important findings from Congregate Nutrition program participants were the number of:

- Program participants who said socialization is encouraged **2,029 (88%)**
- Program participants who said they have more friends than before visiting the site **1,837 (80%)**
- Program participants who said their physical health has improved since visiting the site **1,365 (59%)**

- Program participants who said they use their car to arrive at the site 1,369 **(59%)**
- Program participants who said they attend the site almost every day **1,064 (46%)**
- Program participants who said they "Like meeting new friends/talking with different people each day" **545 (24%)**

A sample of program participant comments from completed survey data:

- "I just enjoy getting out and making new friends."
- "If not for the senior center I would be very lonely. It's a blessing for people like me."
- "I enjoy coming and socializing very much. Makes me feel better."
- "I come for the people as much as the food."

The most important findings from Congregate Nutrition program providers were:

- Providers had been in their position from a range of 8 months to more than 30 years
- Providers estimated the average age of their participants to be a range of 60 to 96 years old
- 40% of providers estimated that their participants have been in the program for 5-10 years
- Providers said Transportation, Physical Health and Housing are main issues for participants
- 70% of providers who responded said that all the following are reasons participants use their program: Meal, Nutrition Education, Socialization and Physical Activities/Exercise

A sample of program provider comments about the importance of socialization from the completed survey data:

- "Very important. It uplifts their spirits, brings laughter, and I think it gives them reasons to get up out of bed."

- “I feel that socialization is just as important as the hot nutritious meal they receive. Without the sites, they might go all day without leaving their apartment or seeing anyone.”
- “Socialization is very important in seniors’ lives. Most of them live alone.”

These findings confirm that the work of our National Association of Nutrition and Aging Services Programs (NANASP) members is fulfilling a need that older adults have for meaningful personal interaction and engagement each day. Although our project did receive survey responses from 2,305 program participants and 57 program providers, we believe that with our renewed funding from the Retirement Research Foundation we will increase the number of respondents considerably and can specifically target congressional districts with legislators who will be involved in the reauthorization of the Older Americans Act (OAA) in 2019.

In recent years, there has been a noticeable increase in research on the deleterious impact of loneliness on the health and well-being of older adults and the subsequent costs incurred by our healthcare system. The value of our project is that it examines the impact of a critical OAA program on preventing isolation for older adults living alone in their communities, allowing them to live longer at home thereby potentially saving Medicare and Medicaid funds. The data we continue to collect and share will help build the case for additional funding and renewed legislative commitment to the OAA. Our continued work will advance the OAA’s stated purpose of promoting socialization of older individuals.

Grant Analysis Narrative

The first problem faced by the project was that the survey tool was only available in English when it was first disseminated. This impacted our progress because many Congregate

Nutrition program participants were Spanish speaking individuals who therefore were unable to answer our questions which in turn negatively impacted the number of completed surveys we received. When we discovered this issue, we asked the staff at a NANASP member site that primarily serves Spanish speaking individuals to translate our participant and provider surveys and we sent the translated tools to the remainder of survey respondents.

The second problem our project encountered was that our survey tool did not include a question about the respondent's gender. Without a data point on gender for survey respondents, our data cannot be used to make comparative statements between genders. When this was brought to our attention, we asked our largest site respondent (Senior Serv in California) to add a gender question to the survey tool before they disseminated it. This site returned over 600 Congregate Nutrition program participant surveys, providing us with a data set that includes information on gender that will allow for a more robust analysis.

The only significant project modification to our research was that we adjusted our budget so that Bob Blancato's salary line item could be used to fund his travel and lodging expenses for in-person site visits to Congregate Nutrition Program sites nationally. The site visits allowed us to hear directly from program participants and providers on their answers to our survey tool questions and to see first-hand the positive impact of socialization in the lives of older adults, many of whom had attended these sites for more than 10 years. Bob conducted five in-person site visits in California, Indiana, Nevada, Ohio, and Texas.

One unanticipated result of our project was the outcome of our comprehensive literature review on socialization. We found that little if any research has been done to study the positive impact of socialization from Congregate Nutrition programs specifically on the health and well-

being of older adults. We were surprised to find that the gap in research is larger than we anticipated.

To our knowledge, this was the first study of its kind solely focused on the value of socialization specifically in the Congregate Nutrition program of the OAA, even though socialization has been a stated objective by law of the program since the OAA Amendments of 2006, P.L. 109-365. In May 2015, Meals on Wheels of America did release a pilot research study entitled “More Than a Meal” but this primarily examined the impact of meal service delivery on homebound seniors receiving Meals on Wheels, not the Congregate Nutrition Program of the OAA. We learned mostly from our survey and face-to-face encounters that older adults see socialization as a genuine benefit to them and their health and well-being and often use the exact term when asked what do they enjoy the most about the program. If this small sample is indicative it can make a strong advocacy case for investing more in the nutrition program since it is more than just about a meal—and has important cost-saving health implications for those participating.

We learned several important operational lessons that others may benefit from before implementing a similar project:

1. Once a draft survey tool has been created, send it to a researcher for review so that they can suggest improvements that could help in the data analysis phase of the project.
2. Think about the needs of the survey respondent when crafting your survey tool. For instance, larger font, fewer open-ended questions and a survey in their primary language will all contribute to a higher survey response and completion rate.

3. When disseminating the survey tool to Congregate Nutrition program sites, include clear instructions for those who will distribute and collect the survey information. For instance, ask the site to present the survey tool as it is rather than distributing our tool after modifying it with their own survey questions. Modified surveys make data input and analysis difficult.
4. If you anticipate receiving more than several hundred survey responses, a primary point of contact should be identified for receiving data and inputting it into an electronic format.
5. Consider asking each Congregate Nutrition program site for a one pager that outlines their site's current demographics.

The Retirement Research Foundation values investments in the infrastructure of organizations delivering services that enable older persons to safely remain in their communities. Our project results indicate that Congregate Nutrition programs funded through the OAA are providing essential opportunities for socialization for older adults. These opportunities help combat the negative and costly health impact of loneliness and isolation, allowing older adults to remain in their homes and communities. We can use our findings to encourage further investments in the program by local, state, and federal governments as well as by private individuals and foundations. It is critical that we share these findings widely as reauthorization of the OAA will take place in 2019.

Since little evaluation if any has ever been done solely on the benefits of socialization from Congregate Nutrition programs to the health and well-being of older adults, and because reauthorization of the OAA is on the horizon, our efforts are critical and timely. Our

organization has requested, and been approved for, another discretionary grant for \$20,000 from the Retirement Research foundation that will allow us to:

- Focus on key congressional districts where our survey data outcomes would be particularly relevant for legislators.
 - Present our data to legislators on Capitol Hill as well as at national aging and nutrition conferences.
 - Disseminate the report to the NANASP network and national partners such as the Administration for Community Living and the Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services (CMS).
- Further refine the survey tool as well as expand our literature review on the topic of socialization
- Translate the survey tool and the final results report into Spanish
- Engage a part-time graduate student to conduct statistical analysis on the data we have already collected as well as what we will collect so that our reporting of outcomes is robust and shown to be statistically significant
- Expand the number of in-person site visits to Congregate Nutrition programs

Additional funding will allow us to take the data we collect and share it broadly to help build the case for additional funding and renewed legislative commitment to the OAA.

Products:

- Final Nutrition Survey Tool (English)
- Final Nutrition Survey Tool (Spanish)

- Literature Review
- NANASP Webinar Presentation Slides
- NANASP Annual Conference Presentation Slides
- NANASP Congregate Nutrition Data Analysis Site-by-Site Outcomes

Completed Dissemination Activities and Planned Activities:

- February 2017 NANASP Outcomes Webinar (58 people registered)
- Five in-person site visits were conducted by project leader Bob Blancato to:
 - Meals on Wheels and Senior Outreach Services (Walnut Creek, California) – 25-30 older adults participated
 - Aging & In-Home Services (AIHS) of Northeast Indiana – 15-20 older adults participated
 - Wood County Committee on Aging, Inc. (Bowling Green, Ohio) – 25-30 older adults participated
 - WellMed Medical Management, Inc. (San Antonio, Texas) – over 100 seniors participated in the meeting here
 - Pahrump Senior Center (Pahrump, Nevada) – over 50 older adults participated in the meeting here
- June 2017 NANASP Conference Outcomes Session (50-75 people attended)
- Reference made in several presentations made by Bob Blancato at local and national aging conferences
- Potential for publication on our work in NANASP’s newsletter and on their website

- Potential for publication on Next Avenue and Huffington Post where Bob Blancato is a regular contributor
- Once final analysis is given to the Congregate Nutrition Program sites that participated in our project, we will ask if they can share that information on their own websites and social media channels
- Informal conversations with interested Congressional parties, such as the Senate Special Committee on Aging

We applied for an additional discretionary grant of \$20,000 from the Retirement Research Foundation to further the work we began with our original RRF discretionary grant. Our application has been accepted and we will begin work on the next phase of our research on August 1, 2017.

Because of this project, we have strengthened and deepened ties with many existing NANASP providers and have learned through our work even more about the operational aspects of their day-to-day work. The in-person site visits conducted by Bob Blancato were especially effective in strengthening ties to our existing NANASP membership.

Websites:

1. National Association of Nutrition and Aging Services Programs: <https://nanasp.org/>
2. WellMed (Texas): www.WellMedHealthcare.com
 - a. Elvira Cisneros Senior Community Center:
<https://www.wellmedcharitablefoundation.org/senior-centers/elvira-cisneros-senior-community-center/>

- b. Doris Griffin Senior Center: <https://www.wellmedcharitablefoundation.org/senior-centers/doris-griffin-senior-one-stop/>
 - c. Alicia Trevino Lopez Senior One-Stop: <https://www.wellmedcharitablefoundation.org/senior-centers/alicia-trevino-lopez-senior-one-stop/>
3. Area Agency on Aging 3 (Ohio): www.aaa3.org
 4. Wood County Committee on Aging (Ohio): www.wccoa.net
 5. Missoula Aging Services (Montana): www.missoulaagingservices.org
 6. Litchfield Hills Elderly Nutrition Program (Connecticut):
 7. Senior Services of Snohomish County (Washington): www.sssc.org
 8. CAC Office on Aging (Tennessee): www.knoxseniors.org
 9. REAL Services, Inc. (Indiana): www.realservices.org
 10. Benjamin Rose Institute on Aging (Ohio): www.benrose.org
 11. Senior Resources of Guilford (North Carolina): www.senior-resources-guilford.org
 12. Meals on Wheels and Senior Outreach Services (California): www.mowsos.org
 13. Meals on Wheels Fairfield County (Ohio): www.mowfc.org
 14. AgeOptions (Illinois): www.ageoptions.org
 15. New Opportunities Inc. (Connecticut): www.newoppinc.org
 16. Senior Serv (California): www.seniorserv.org

Financial Report

See attached spreadsheet for expenditures for the entire project.

The following line items were used to pay for Meaghan McMahon's time spent on project management, survey dissemination, data collection and data analysis of over 2,000 survey responses for Congregate Nutrition program participants and more than 50 for program providers: Salary, Literature Review, Survey Development, and Survey Testing on Key Expert Members, and Telephone.

Survey responses had to be transcribed from hard copies into an electronic spreadsheet format which was time consuming and so Meaghan's original salary line item wasn't adequate to cover the time spent on collection and analysis which is why other line items were used.

Additionally, funds from Bob Blancato's salary line item were used to pay for travel and lodging expenses for the five in-person site visits he conducted nationally.

We have received permission from the Retirement Research Foundation to take any remaining funds from this grant and roll them over into our renewal discretionary grant.