



Case for Support
January 24, 2011

Introduction

Good food is a staple of family time and of relationship building. There's nothing enjoyable or pleasurable about eating alone, or sitting down to a meal from a box. It's not what our souls - or our bodies - crave from life.

If life was fair, we would not confront loneliness or poverty at the dinner table as we age. We would be surrounded by more people, and enmeshed in the life of our community. We would be active, happy, and healthy for as long as our bodies hold out.

Unfortunately, life is not fair. For far too many seniors, aging is a depressing downward cycle. It may start with a health issue, such as surgery or illness that confines them at home for weeks or months. They lose touch with friends as they become progressively more isolated. Then the depression sets in, and food loses its appeal. They stop eating, and become weak. Then they fall and break a bone. The downward spiral just continues to spin.

The same cycle can start if money is tight, and a senior has to make tough choices about paying for medication or paying for food. Cheap food with low nutritional value, eaten alone, compounds the depression and introduces isolation and illness, which again can lead in only one direction: down.

If we are going to live longer, as medicine has helped us do, then senior nutrition cannot be ignored. Good food is not just a luxury. It has been scientifically and anecdotally proven that nutritious food, provided in a social context, can transform a senior's physical health, financial well-being, and emotional outlook.

This is why Senior Meals Program exists.



Senior Meals Program provides more than 750,000 tasty, nutritious meals to seniors throughout Kent County each year.

Senior Meals Program has provided tasty food and caring support since 1984 to more than 6,000 people annually in Kent County and beyond. As an affiliate of the Meals on Wheels program, their committed drivers deliver more than 600,000 appetizing, nutritious meals to homebound seniors each year. Senior Meals is also the "mobile chef" for thirteen senior centers, delivering freshly-prepared healthy meals to 2,500 seniors at congregate dining sites around West Michigan. And finally, Senior Meals operates a food pantry serving approximately 500 low-income seniors each week. This allows them to choose their own food and maintain their independence, while freeing up precious dollars for other living expenses.

Food is important on so many levels. At its most basic, food is essential for existence. We can't survive without food. However, food that is of poor quality or low nutritional value is almost as bad as no food at all. Many of the chronic diseases that plague our seniors and drain dollars from their budget - such as high blood pressure, high cholesterol and diabetes - can be partially controlled by diet.

But food is also a social magnet. A meal draws people together, whether it's a driver connecting with a homebound senior, or a group of friends who come together at a congregate dining site, or a senior who comes to the pantry to see friends and talk with the volunteers as they pick up groceries.

So what is more important: nutritious food, or the social opportunities provided by food? The answer is that both are equally important. A person who does not eat well will not be healthy. A person who is isolated and alone will not eat well. Healthy seniors need both food for the body and food for the heart.



The social benefits of a meal are just as important as the nutritional benefits.

But seniors are not the only ones who rely on Senior Meals Program. It is agonizing for a child to watch their parent age, especially if they are unable to provide personal care due to distance or job requirements or lack of income. Knowing that Mom or Dad is receiving a healthy meal from a caring person every day brings peace beyond price. *“For us to know that he (our father) is eating a little healthier, and there are individuals stopping in does help to eliminate some of our family’s apprehension.” (Daughter of a Meals on Wheels client)*

A good nutritious meal, delivered with care, serves up dignity along with nutrition. The leftovers, which are savored repeatedly until the next meal, are serenity and joy.

What is Changing?

“Eating right” is not as simple as it sounds. Senior nutrition is a complex subject, and it is becoming more complex as the result of several trends in our society.

First is the rising incidence of seniors living in poverty. Poverty does not have one simple cause, but this we know for sure: medications take a big bite out of a senior’s income. Among Medicare beneficiaries, 90% use prescription drugs during the course of a year, and they pay an average of \$2,322 a year for them. Total spending of senior citizens on prescription drugs rose an estimated 44% from 2000 to 2003.¹ This means that a senior in Kent County who lives in poverty spends 16-21% of their income on medications. Add the cost of housing to that bill, and there’s not much left for anything else, including food.

Second is the unfortunate trend of isolation. More and more seniors are living alone, in many cases because their spouse has died, and/or because the continuing poor economy in Michigan has forced family to move away in search of work. Often this leaves elderly parents alone, with no one to rely on for transportation, food preparation or general care.

Third is the trend towards more food safety regulation. While food safety is an important topic and not something to be taken lightly, the regulations impose tremendous cost on smaller organizations that serve seniors. Many of them are unable to provide the healthy, nutritious, age-appropriate food that their clients need because they cannot afford the initial investment and ongoing cost associated with the regulatory requirements.

So where does this leave the seniors in our community? They face rising costs, isolation and lack of transportation. At best, a senior on a fixed income eats a poor diet of prepared foods that contain high sodium, high sugar, and little nutritional value. At worst, they skip meals because there is no money, or because they are alone and just don’t care.

¹ Source: www.therubins.com: “Prescription Drugs and the Elderly”

The challenge of senior nutrition is not going to disappear any time soon. The “silver tsunami” of aging baby boomers is about to hit. Senior Meals is already receiving more calls than they can handle, and the real impact of the aging population has yet to reach Kent County.

So we have more people, with less access to resources, who are living longer, and who are isolated. This is a disaster waiting to happen.

Good nutrition is vital to good health. A senior with diabetes can successfully control the disease through a combination of diet and medication. A senior with high blood pressure or high cholesterol can do the same. But if their diet does not adjust to manage these diseases, they end up in the emergency room or the physician’s office and the downward spiral (not to mention the cost) increases with fierce speed.

Here is the good news: if poor nutrition has a negative impact, good nutrition has been proven to have an immensely positive impact. Nutritious food combined with social connection is a sure way to improve overall health and well-being of seniors, and manage chronic diseases such as diabetes and high blood pressure that often have poor nutrition as a contributing cause.

Well-prepared, nutritious food is not just enjoyable. It is essential for maintaining good mental and physical health.

The Proposed Solution

Senior Meals Program currently operates from a central kitchen located near Leonard and Fuller. The organization provides more than 750,000 meals from the kitchen, at an average cost of \$5.25 per meal, delivered. The process is extremely cost-effective, from the negotiated bulk pricing on ingredients, to the cooking and packaging process, to the regular delivery routes.

However, this facility is bursting at the seams. There is literally no room for another ingredient, or another prepared meal. The facility is at maximum capacity for safe food handling. Unfortunately, this building is also “land locked.” There is no room to expand the existing facility to meet the rising demand for standard meals, much less to address the growing need for special meals such as low sodium or low sugar.

The Board of Directors for Senior Meals Program proposes to move the kitchen to an expansive space adjacent to its administrative offices on Wilson in Grandville. This location is just a minute away from the highway, with centralized access to all the markets. It provides ample parking for volunteers, as well as truck docks for convenient loading and unloading.

What will this do for the seniors in our community?



The new kitchen will double the meal capacity.

First and foremost, it will double the meal capacity. Senior Meals Program estimates that the expanded kitchen and storage areas will allow them to prepare and serve more than 1,500,000 meals each year.

Second, the expanded space will provide room for Senior Meals to do more fresh food preparation that will increase nutritional value and decrease unnecessary ingredients such as excess sodium and sugar. This will also provide the facilities to prepare low sodium and diabetic meals for seniors who do not currently have another resource for this service.

Finally, the new kitchen will also provide the capacity for Senior Meals to serve other counties and / or new congregate dining sites. Due to the expense of installing equipment, hiring staff and following regulatory laws, many of the surrounding counties find it more cost-effective to source their meals from a place such as Senior Meals Program than to build the infrastructure themselves. This will bring sustaining revenue to the organization while ensuring that more seniors have access to nutritious meals.

Conclusion

Senior Meals Program gives of its heart to thousands of seniors each year who enjoy delicious, savory, nutritious meals thanks to their faithful service. As one client put it so well, *“Give my regards to the cook who comes up with all the good tasting menus and everyone else who helps put the meals together. When you are disabled and cannot help yourself, this service is very helpful.”*

Nutritious food is essential to physical health. But it is also a social magnet around which people gather to renew relationships, reconnect with friends, and remember why life is worth living. Good food nourishes the soul while it strengthens the body. *“I don’t know what I would do with my life if I hadn’t found this place.” (Congregate meal client)*

Seniors face challenging barriers to good health. Income level, chronic illness, transportation, isolation and so much more can easily come between the senior and the table. But these barriers can be overcome...they ARE overcome...by the thoughtful, friendly, reliable services provided through Senior Meals Program.

Seniors in Kent County deserve the dignity of an enjoyable meal and fellowship with other people. Their children count on the peace of mind that comes from knowing a parent is receiving the care that cannot always be given in person. *“I can’t thank you and your staff enough for this wonderful program! It has been such a blessing to my mom and our family. She loves the meals and looks forward to them!” (Daughter of a Meals on Wheels client)*

Will this community support Senior Meals Program and the expansion of its kitchen so that they can continue to enhance senior living through nutritious food and social connections?

