

Aging Without Hunger:

Ending Food Insecurity for Older New Yorkers by 2040



CITYMEALS
ON WHEELS

INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

Citymeals on Wheels was founded in 1981 by members of the culinary community to deliver meals to homebound elderly New Yorkers when city-funded programs are unavailable on weekends, holidays and during emergencies. Since then, Citymeals has delivered 70 million meals. We provide a continuous lifeline of nourishing meals and vital companionship to 22,000 older New Yorkers, helping them remain in their own homes, where they want to be.

A CRISIS OF ELDER HUNGER

The Older Americans Act, which allocates federal funds for congregate and home-delivered meal programs across the country, was established in 1965 as a supplemental food program to fill small gaps in food access for older adults. It aimed to provide one meal a day, five days a week, rather than serve as a comprehensive effort to address high rates of food insecurity. Since then, demographics have shifted, gender roles have changed, life spans have expanded, pensions and benefits have contracted, family caregiving systems are strained, and poverty has deepened among older adults.

Despite these dramatic socio-economic shifts, congregate and home-delivered meal programs have remained largely

unchanged, providing one meal a day, Monday through Friday except where local groups are able to privately fundraise to support additional meals. In New York City, Citymeals privately funds meal delivery on weekends for homebound participants.

In the city today, there are nearly 1.8 million people aged 60 and older. Last year, 146,119 attended an older adult center and 27,547 received home-delivered meals. An increasing number of older adults are immigrants, women, people living alone with limited social support, and experiencing poverty. The impacts of the Covid-19 pandemic have compounded these challenges, dramatically increasing food costs that persist to this day. As a result, we have seen food insecurity among older New Yorkers emerge as a crisis.

For years, anecdotal evidence suggested that many of our meal recipients needed more food, and since the pandemic we have seen this need grow. Therefore, Citymeals partnered with the CUNY Urban Food Policy Institute to analyze the food security of older New Yorkers accessing the city's older adult center and home-delivered meal programs.

The findings of this research are presented below, along with the imperative infrastructure, program and

policy reforms Citymeals recommends in response to this crisis.

We believe that food insecurity for older adults can be effectively eliminated through a paradigm shift around elder hunger, the modernization of public programs and a deeper public investment in the home- and community-based services that support aging in place.

KEY FINDINGS



DEEP FOOD INSECURITY

Food insecurity is a household-level condition of limited or uncertain access to adequate food.

What our research shows is alarming – **almost half of the older New Yorkers surveyed reported some level of food insecurity in the past 12 months**, either

“sometimes” or “often” worrying that food would run out before they have money to buy more.

Among survey participants who receive home-delivered meals, rates of reported food insecurity were even higher at 60%.

These results are startling, given that most of this diverse subset is already accessing the city’s main food programs for older adults.

The data makes it clear that these programs do not go far enough to address food insecurity for older people. Rates of food insecurity this high indicate a significant meal gap for participants, a much bigger gap than these programs were meant to fill.

PROGRAMMATIC LIMITATIONS

Over 50% of those receiving home-delivered meals said the program should provide two or more meals per day.

Notably, **54% also reported interest in receiving home delivery of groceries** through an expanded home-delivered food program.

Considering program expansions they would like to see, **focus group participants often lamented the lack of choices available to them, from limited food options at older adult centers and pantries to fixed delivery times for home-delivered meals.**

Survey respondents also noted the need for more choices in the food they receive and how they receive it.

These findings demonstrate that diverse needs exist among older people, for which a range of solutions are required to adequately address food insecurity. Not only is breadth of service lacking, there is also simply not enough food being provided to older adults. One respondent remarked that the home-delivered meal they receive daily is “appreciated, but just not enough”.

BARRIERS TO ACCESSING FOOD

In our research, older New Yorkers consistently referenced both systemic and age-related challenges associated with shopping and food preparation.

Financial hardship among those we surveyed was striking: **65% are living on \$15,000 a year or less.** And **32% do not receive social security.** Affording healthy food is a clear and persistent issue.

“I usually go buy what’s on sale, but what’s on sale isn’t always good for you. And the stuff that’s good for you, doesn’t really ever go on sale.”

Among those we surveyed, **41% say they are only sometimes or never able to shop for groceries.** Half of respondents walk to the grocery store and report an average of 40 minutes round trip, not including time spent shopping and the effort to carry bags home.

About 38% have limited ability to prepare food for cooking, such as washing

and chopping, and **15% are never able to cook, while 22% are only sometimes able to cook** for themselves.

While much of the research on food access emphasizes the physical limitations, our focus groups also brought to light important psychological barriers for older adults. As people begin to experience cognitive challenges, **the mental aspects of planning and preparing a meal are often overwhelming and sometimes become insurmountable.**

“I do less and less cooking... but I can boil an egg or make some rice.”

While we know that older and more homebound people experience physical barriers, it is notable how many research participants who can still visit older adult centers also experience a number of barriers to shopping and cooking. These findings speak to the continuum of need that many older adults experience as they age and how their ability to manage a variety of daily activities changes.



UNDERUTILIZATION OF SNAP & OTHER SUPPORT

Of those surveyed, **56%** are receiving cash assistance for groceries through the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP). This is more than twice the participation rate citywide and a testament to the efforts of NYC Aging and community-based service providers to enroll eligible older adults in the program.

However, given the number of research participants living alone and below the poverty line, this number should likely be higher. Among non-participants in SNAP, **55% were unsure if they were eligible to receive SNAP benefits**, leading to notable underutilization.

Our research confirmed some of the often-documented limitations of SNAP. **About 34% of focus group participants reported that their SNAP benefits were not enough** to meet their nutritional needs. Several said that their income is just above the SNAP eligibility level and lamented that “the math doesn’t make sense” given that purchasing enough food is a challenge for them. **Nearly one-third of SNAP users reported that reenrollment and recertification is challenging.**

Importantly, **many expressed guilt or shame around using benefits.** One respondent who had been assessed as eligible for SNAP did not apply for the benefit because, “SNAP is for people who

are in need, and I am not one of those people.”

“I do not want to increase the burden on the government by participating in SNAP.”

While food pantries provide much needed nutrition to thousands of New Yorkers, including older adults, they are underutilized by those we surveyed. **Only 18% of survey participants reported using a food pantry and just 4% use a mobile food pantry or grocery delivery service.**

Much like SNAP, food pantries can effectively serve those who are able to travel to host organizations, wait in line, carry bags of food home, and finally prepare and cook a meal – or have someone who can assist them. This is not a viable solution for many older adults for whom one or more of these activities have become too difficult.

“I can only access pantry food when there are volunteers that bring it to me.”

55%

of those not participating in SNAP were not sure if they were eligible to receive SNAP

33%

of respondents enrolled in SNAP reported that SNAP benefits were insufficient to meet their dietary needs

30%

of SNAP participants agreed that while beneficial, SNAP benefits were difficult to keep given the challenges associated with enrollment and recertification



50% of those surveyed do not have friends or family who can help provide meals daily



45% don't have internet access or use it as little as possible.



38% report that loneliness and depression are a problem for them

are a problem for them, **82% had never accessed any mental health services.**

From this data, a picture emerges of how isolated many older New Yorkers are and the lack of support they endure as they grow older. There are clear opportunities for older people to connect online, but that cannot be a replacement for physical community and in-person support.

SOCIAL SUPPORT & ISOLATION

While 45% of New Yorkers aged 60 and older live alone, **85% of those surveyed live alone**, which is a key risk factor for social isolation.

About 45% of all respondents reported they do not have friends or family who can help them with at least one meal a day. Among those who do, 23% reported this help was not enough to meet their needs, leaving them prone to run out of food.

Our research found that **25% of participants don't have internet access and 20% prefer to go online as little as possible.** This suggests that many older adults may be far outside the mainstream information cycle and in need of more frequent and direct contact.

Notably, while **38% of participants report that loneliness and depression**

PROGRAMMATIC SUCCESSES

Despite the limitations of existing food programs identified in our research, we also found a significant direct positive correlation between receiving home-delivered meals and quality of life. Among home-delivered meal recipients:

87%

say home-delivered meals help them remain in their own homes

85%

say home-delivered meals help them eat more healthily

81%

say that home-delivered meals help them manage health conditions

While the existing systems for providing food and social support to older New Yorkers are in dire need of revitalization, our successes show the promise and potential of this infrastructure to provide targeted anti-hunger interventions on a larger scale.

RECOMMENDATIONS

New York City's anti-hunger infrastructure was not designed with older people in mind. While some older adults can access food pantries, farmers markets or SNAP, many are unable due to a variety of physical, psychological or social factors. Congregate and home-delivered meal programs have proven strengths, enabling healthy aging in place for thousands of older New Yorkers. But they offer limited support for those who cannot access food in other ways, providing only one meal per day on weekdays, with limited choice and convenience. As a result, nearly half of program participants are still experiencing food insecurity.

The existing network of home- and community-based services provides a cost-effective solution, but is languishing under decades of underfunding and programming that has not kept up with the vast socio-economic shifts that have left many older adults without comprehensive support. It's clear that well-nourished people are more able to manage their health and live independently. We also know it is much more cost-efficient to provide adequate food programs than the alternative: an otherwise unnecessary and expensive move into a long-term care facility.

Therefore, **there is a financial incentive in support of this moral imperative**

and it is past time for a transformative investment in and prioritization of the health and wellbeing of older New Yorkers. As such, Citymeals recommends the following:

- [Re-envision the goal of congregate and home-delivered meal programs.](#)

Federal, state and city governments must invest in these programs with the explicit aim of eliminating food insecurity among older adults. We must shift from the supplemental, one-meal-a-day model developed nearly 60 years ago, to instead provide the amount and variety of food people need to meet their real nutritional needs. A comprehensive approach to address food insecurity will require significantly expanded funding to adequately support existing programs and invest in new programs.

- [Expand and modernize public food programs targeting older adults.](#)

Our research shows great opportunities for expanded food programs, such as shopping assistance, grocery delivery and a city-wide mobile food

pantry. These kinds of programs provide more targeted solutions that address people's specific needs as they age and their circumstances change. Moreover, optimized food programs should provide more opportunities to exert personal preference and include greater variety to reflect the cultural diversity and range of dietary needs among older New Yorkers.

- **Revitalize older adult centers.** These community centers must be adequately funded to provide expanded programs that are more responsive to the challenges older adults face today. New York City's centers should be able to provide the services needed in the communities they serve, from grab-and-go meals to extended hours, additional meals, transportation services and weekend programs. Moreover, their physical infrastructure should not be an afterthought. These centers must be brought out from the basements to which many have been relegated and offer older adults vibrant, well-designed spaces with well-maintained kitchens, dining areas and delivery vehicles.

- **Increase SNAP utilization.** For qualifying older New Yorkers, whose income is unlikely to change, reauthorization needs to be automatic to reduce burdens and ensure that older adults do not face coverage gaps simply due to a difficult reauthorization process. Outreach campaigns should focus on destigmatizing the use of SNAP and benefits generally.
- **Improve communication to better engage and support older adults.** Outreach and training are needed to help older adults feel more comfortable using technology, so they can stay informed and more easily take advantage of food programs and delivery services. Given that case managers are also a critical avenue of information and support for many older adults, investment is also needed in reducing caseloads, so social workers can have more meaningful interactions with older adults as their needs evolve and challenges arise.

CITYMEALS' RESPONSE

Ageism has created systemic inequalities yet to be addressed at the policy level, and decades of disinvestment in older people has weakened the safety net meant to care for them. Partners at the federal, state and city levels, service providers and funders must better understand the lived experiences of older people, in order to effectively support aging in place and create a more equitable city.

This begins by addressing the tendency to view older adults as a monolith. Older New Yorkers are culturally, economically and socially diverse and programs to address their needs must reflect that diversity and target solutions accordingly. For too long, food-insecure older adults have been put into two categories: those who can shop and cook for themselves and those who cannot. But most people do not go directly from being fully independent to needing a hot, prepared meal delivered to them daily. Rather, they begin to experience changes in their ability to manage certain tasks, which then present challenges to getting groceries, prepping food and cooking that, over time, may become insurmountable.

Congregate and home-delivered meal programs support thousands of New Yorkers, but their one-size-fits-all model that provides only one prepared meal five

days a week leaves too many still hungry. Our research found high rates of food insecurity among program participants and describes the various challenges they face in accessing food. A new, comprehensive approach is needed to fully address hunger for this vulnerable population.

Citymeals **believes we can eliminate elder hunger by 2040** through our work with community-based organizations, advocates and partners in government. Our research points to clear and necessary steps that must be taken to fill the programmatic limitations exacerbating food insecurity, and Citymeals stands ready to do our part.

Citymeals has committed to investing in the development of new food programs that reflect the continuum of need among older New Yorkers. We are:

- **Piloting a program to deliver a second meal** to our most vulnerable recipients.
- **Piloting shopping and grocery delivery services** to provide more food and decrease the burden of shopping for older New Yorkers.
- **Scaling up our existing mobile food pantry to all five boroughs.**
- **Expanding our fresh produce program.**

Finally, more research is needed to examine and understand the many factors contributing to the marginalization of older people and making daily life disproportionately difficult in older age. Citymeals will partner with policy and advocacy groups to engage in further research and amplify the voices of older adults in this important work.

While our research and initial pilot programs will help kickstart this work, we cannot do it alone. If we are to eliminate elder hunger by 2040, our partners at all levels of government must join us in this work.

METHODOLOGY AND POPULATION

Citymeals partnered with the CUNY Urban Food Policy Institute to assess the extent to which supplemental and emergency feeding programs are accessed by and able to meet the needs of older New Yorkers. Using a blended methodology, including analysis of public data, population surveys and focus groups, this study developed a uniquely well-targeted, ethnically diverse population pool. Five hundred older New Yorkers participating in either older adult center or home-delivered meal programs were surveyed over 12 months between January and December 2023.

All methods involving human subjects were reviewed and approved by the CUNY Institutional Review Board:

- Stratified convenience sample survey consisting of 86 questions, conducted online in English, Spanish, Chinese and Russian.
- Sixty-minute focus group sessions with English speaking older adults, conducted in person at older adult centers and online via Zoom.



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