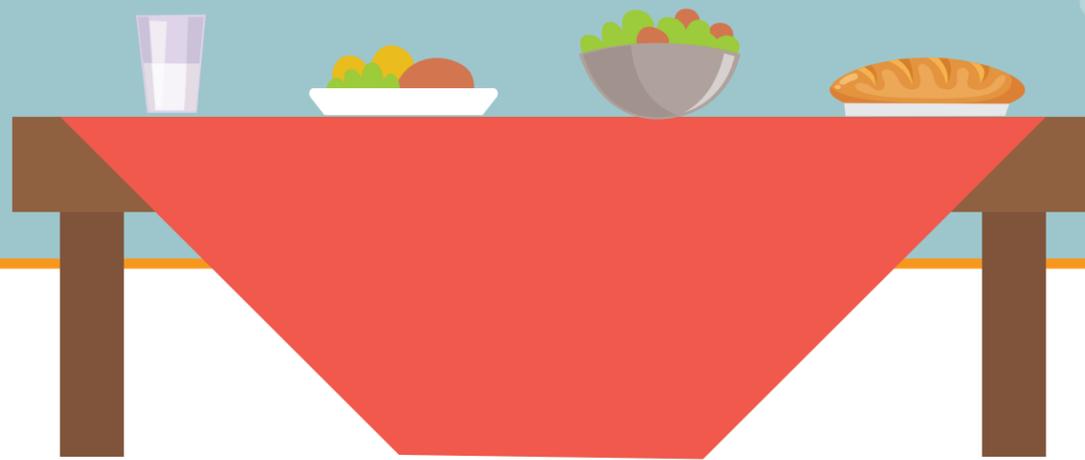
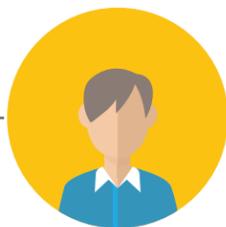


IMPROVING THE DINING EXPERIENCE

FOR OVERALL SATISFACTION



The congregate nutrition program can be fun, engaging and impactful for older adults living in communities across the country. In fact, the three goals of the program – access to a nutritious meal, nutrition education, and an opportunity for socialization – are exactly what participants are looking for! There are several creative, simple ways to jazz up congregate meals. Together we can turn the tide to increase participation AND overall satisfaction.



The critiques/misperceptions about the congregate nutrition program are likely familiar to you

SOME OLDER ADULTS SAY

"These meals are boring"

"They're for old people"

"I wish it was a more fun and engaging experience"

"I can't come when meals are served"

"I would like to take my meals home with me"

"The meals don't meet my needs"

Here are strategies you can use to enhance your congregate nutrition program'

Below are just a few to consider, some of which may or may not be possible or relevant for your particular program.



KNOW YOUR PARTICIPANTS

Gather feedback both formally and informally to address the needs and desires of your audience. The more you can refine the meal and setting to meet their needs, the more they are likely to participate, meet friends and bring others. At the same time, engage the staff – from kitchen managers to cooks and volunteers – to brainstorm how to best address participants' requests.

HOST ACTIVITIES

Cater to multiple age groups, both men and women. For example, offer dancing, raffles, zumba, bridge, art activities, wellness activities, physical activity and even mocktails.



MODERNIZE THE MEAL SETTING

Create a café style format, rebrand meals with a new attractive name, use real silverware, add decorations like flowers and other small changes like soft music, enhanced lighting, restaurant style service, and lemon slices in water. Consider electronic ordering systems and bulletin boards.

IDENTIFY ALTERNATIVE WAYS TO SERVE MEALS!

Several sites have partnered with neighborhood food trucks to serve a variety of meals that still meet the nutritional requirements of congregate meals. Simplify meal nutrition evaluations by using tools like MyPlate or the DASH diet to help ensure food group requirements are met.



IMPLEMENT A WELLNESS MODEL!

Incorporate chronic disease self-management education and resources, health prevention tips, on-site health practitioners and oral health specialists when possible. Collaborate with organizations in your community (local universities, departments of health, healthcare entities, etc.) to leverage their expertise and enhance programming offered.

ENSURE MEALS ARE SENSITIVE TO A RANGE OF CULTURES!

Hire volunteers that speak languages common to your community, share resources in multiple languages, add foods to your menus that reflect the cultural tastes of the community you serve, invite participants to contribute recipes for favorite foods, and offer meals that allow flexibility – like salad bars – and reflect the diversity of the neighborhood.



ALLOW FLEXIBLE MEAL AND SERVING TIMES!

Offer breakfast or dinner depending on participant interest, extend meal serving time, and encourage participants to take the food they plan to eat. Just because the food is available doesn't mean individuals must be served everything offered. Allow participants to bring home meal leftovers and considering teaming up with a local restaurant as another way to offer congregate meals.

ENCOURAGE MOBILITY-LIMITED PARTICIPANTS!

Offer transportation, assistance into and out of the building and other guidance where needed.



PROMOTE YOUR PRACTICES!

Leverage traditional and social media tools to market new meal offerings and activities through channels that reach your target audience. This may include outlets like the local newspaper, community bulletin boards, online social networking platforms, your local community center and nearby libraries.

To learn more about these best practices and to get additional ideas and inspiration on how to implement new ideas at your congregate meal site, check out these key resources:

National Association of Nutrition and Aging Services Programs

National Resource Center on Nutrition and Aging

NRCNAengage – a networking platform for senior nutrition programs

