

Analysis of the Senior Nutrition System in Mat-Su

Executive Summary

October 2019

Report Objectives

With a growing senior population in Mat-Su and an increase in requests for funding senior nutrition programs, the Mat-Su Health Foundation commissioned a study to determine:



What programs and funding exist for senior nutrition in Mat-Su,



How these programs work together, and



What options exist for service coordination and alignment to enhance access to nutrition for older adults.

The Landscape of Senior Nutrition Services

Mat-Su has a wide variety of senior nutrition program options that allows older adults with varying mobility to access nutritious food. However, the current service capacity in the region will not be enough to address the growing population of Mat-Su residents.

The senior campus model offers a unique opportunity to fully serve senior nutritional needs in the region.

Methodology

Primary Research

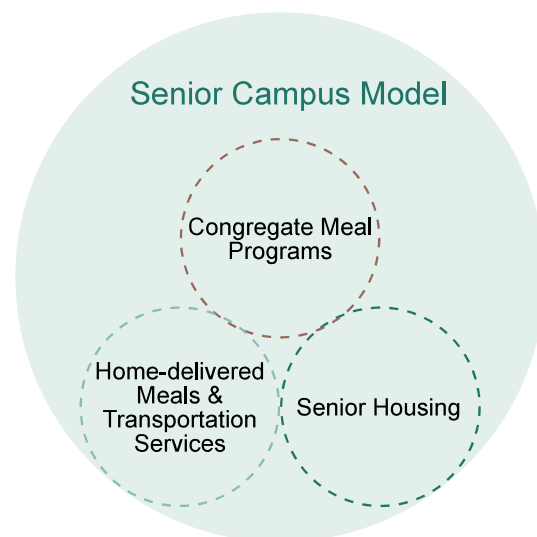
May-September 2019

- Key informant interviews
- Focus Groups
- Senior nutrition site visits
- Surveys

Secondary Research

Identification of:

- Food landscape
- Demographic trends
- Funding sources
- Best practice information



The Need

It is estimated that 7.7% of all individuals age 60 and older are food insecure. This translates to more than 1,260 older adults in Mat-Su who don't have consistent access to enough food for a healthy life.

▲ 20.5%

2030 estimated
Mat-Su residents
over age 60

Mat-Su has the fastest growing older adult population in the state and that growth is not expected to abate. By 2030, the Mat-Su Borough is estimated to have 27,493 adults over the age of 60.

This growth is expected to be accompanied by an increased number of low income older adults who are food insecure and may require a home-delivered or congregate meal.

Assuming the percentage of low-income older adults remains stable at 15.3 percent, an estimated 988 low income older adults (below 150 percent of the poverty level) will need home-delivered or congregate meals by 2030.



69%

2030 estimated
increase in need

Yet barriers such as lack of transportation, lack of financial resources, and lack of volunteers often prevent organizations from being able to fully serve older adults. In addition, an often fiercely independent older adult population may not be willing to access services even when they may need them.

A coordinated approach to addressing systemic issues related to senior nutrition, including shared data, goals, and strategies, is necessary for full region coverage, service coordination, and garnering additional volunteers and financial support.

Coordinated Approach to Addressing Systemic Issues

Home-Delivered Meals

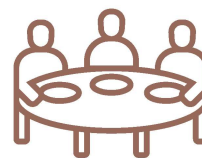


Four home-delivered meal providers serve just under 400 older adults every day in Mat-Su. Some are able to provide hot meals 5 days a week while others deliver 3 times per week or less.

While these providers are spread throughout the Mat-Su Borough and their delivery areas are large, there are still some communities in the borough for which home-delivered meals are infrequent or non-existent.

This is generally related to terrain and lack of appropriate vehicles. In addition, challenges related to service area and meal choice may impact the efficiency and effectiveness of current services. Ultimately all these challenges could be addressed with adequate financial resources.

Congregate Meals



Congregate meals are meals served in group settings to people who are at least 60 years of age and provide the dual purpose of senior nutrition and connection with others.

Six organizations provide congregate meals in Mat-Su with 3 offering lunch five days per week. Together they serve an average of 214 individuals per day.

The primary barrier to participation is transportation which is faced in all parts of Mat-Su with a lack of fixed routes for public transit, relatively expensive on-demand services, and extremely limited options in more rural areas.

Food Boxes



Food box programs are designed to supplement the diets of low-income older adults with nutritious food. For the most part, older adults must pick up their boxes from a participating food pantry or community organization. However, two organizations will deliver boxes to a limited number of clients.

While older adults are appreciative of the assistance, they do not have a choice about what is included in the boxes, so there is sometimes waste as they either do not like or do not know how to prepare the food that is provided. The Food Bank of Alaska reports that there is additional capacity to provide food boxes to more older adults.

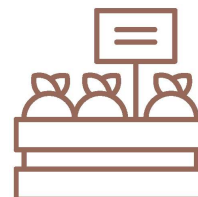
Food Pantries & Food Banks



Food pantries serve a critical need by providing food for individuals who do not have the resources to meet their nutritional needs in other ways. Almost all pantries are open for a limited number of hours and for only a few days a week with only two offering evening hours.

The main barrier to this resource is access. Transportation and predominantly limited daytime opening hours are the primary barriers to access, especially for older adults who rely on family members who work for transportation.

Grocery Stores & Farmers' Markets



The ability for older adults to access grocery stores and farmers' markets depends on their location and transportation availability and is very limited outside of the Wasilla/Palmer area.

In addition to other public assistance, coupons to access locally-grown fruits and vegetables at farmers' markets are available to older adults who meet income guidelines. However, United Way of Mat-Su reports that this program is underutilized and each year they send back funds.

Funding for Senior Nutrition

A variety of funding sources exist and are available to Mat-Su programs to provide older adults with access to senior nutrition services. Many government funds focus solely on adults age 60, or 65 and older. These funding sources either provide access to prepared meals, food sources, or cash benefits that can be used to purchase food and/or meals. In addition to nutrition, many of these programs fund other services for older adults.

The main government funding source, the Nutrition, Transportation and Support Services (NTS) Grant provides the greatest opportunity for government funding. Although NTS funding for Mat-Su has grown slightly since 2017, it is the lowest per capita funding rate for any region in the state at \$33.33 per person age 60 and older. Designation of the Mat-Su Borough as rural area by the State Plan Advisory Committee to the Alaska Commission on Aging would increase state investment in the area by more than \$100,000. Opportunities also exist to fund senior nutrition through Title XX of the Social Security Act, also known as the Social Services Block Grant.

However, state funding alone, even with potential increases, is not enough to fully fund senior nutrition services in Mat-Su. Outside of the Mat-Su Health Foundation, there are no significant local funding sources for senior nutrition. Senior nutrition providers must make a concerted effort to develop relationships with private foundations and individual donors to educate them about the need and services in hopes of increasing private funding. The Mat-Su Health Foundation can support this effort by cultivating a culture of philanthropy through participation and/or matching support for community giving events.

Conclusions & Recommendations

Based on the results of our work, we found that:

- The Mat-Su Borough has the right types of senior nutrition services available to the older adult population.
- There are not enough services to fully cover the need.
- Senior nutrition services generally offer good quality, however, there needs to be improvement in food choice that better meets cultural and therapeutic needs.
- Access to services is one of the biggest hurdles faced by providers in the senior nutrition system.
- Government funding will not be enough to sustain senior nutrition services to meet the current or future need; additional private investment will be a necessity.
- While current senior nutrition providers appear open to collaboration and regional service provision, a process of trust building and determination of shared goals and vision will need to take place.

As a result of these conclusions, recommendations fall into six categories:



Overall, Mat-Su is fortunate to have senior nutrition providers who can provide services to meet the range of nutrition needs of older adults. Its current service gap is of manageable size and can be addressed with better coordination and increased private funding.

However, with the impending growth of the older adult population, there will need to be better coordination and less competition in the provision of senior nutrition services and the fundraising needed to make that possible. We believe Mat-Su has the people and programs in place to make this happen.