

## Senior Service Agencies Respond as Food Insecurity Among Seniors Grows in the Wake of Covid-19

By Jennifer Davis, July 2020



After closing for months to slow the spread of Covid-19, restaurants are starting to reopen. Who isn't looking forward to dinner out with family and friends? But for many older people, just the thought of going to a restaurant is nothing short of a luxury. Vulnerable older people, who in many cases live with chronic illness, fear that they simply will not have enough good quality food to meet their nutritional needs.

Before Covid-19 hit many seniors in New England were already experiencing food insecurity. The U.S. Department of Agriculture defines food insecurity as a lack of consistent access to enough food to sustain an active, healthy life. The Covid-19 pandemic has only made things worse.

Even older people who are financially secure, and normally have support from family and friends to help shop, prepare meals, and yes go out to eat, found support gone in this era of social distancing. With recommendations in place, and in many cases doctors' orders to stay home, many became housebound, isolated, and anxious.

Fortunately, organizations that provide services to older adults recognized the challenge and responded quickly to identify those at risk. And likewise, funders like [Harvard Pilgrim Health Care Foundation](#) were right there to back them up. At the end of April, agencies that receive funding through Elder Services of the Merrimack Valley and North Shore (ESMV) and Harvard Pilgrim Foundation to offer evidenced-based wellness programs asked to shift those funds to badly-needed meals programs. Harvard Pilgrim Foundation responded with a resounding yes.

The [Southern Maine Agency on Aging \(SMAA\)](#) is one of those organizations. They receive Harvard Pilgrim Foundation funding through ESVN to offer the Matter of Balance and Savvy Caregiver programs and have re-allocated those dollars to support their meal programs, which includes Meals on Wheels.

Meals on Wheels provides in-home delivery of meals, often tailored to meet the specific nutritional needs of the most vulnerable individuals in their service area. To be eligible for the program under normal circumstances, adults must be at least 60 years old, or qualified as

adults with a disability, and are homebound. Practicing social distancing has thrust more seniors into the homebound category, and demand for Meal on Wheels has skyrocketed.

“Prior to COVID-19, on any given day we were probably serving between 750 and 800 clients,” says Renee Longarini, SMAA nutrition program manager. “We were delivering around 900 meals a week throughout York and Cumberland counties, and now we’re serving 1,100 clients and delivering anywhere from 5,000 – 6,000 meals. It’s been a challenge to make sure we can balance the need with the capacity. We are thankful to Harvard Pilgrim for allowing us to pivot with the grant dollars and keep up with demand.”

### **Harvard Pilgrim Foundation Steps Up Funding with New Grants**

Harvard Pilgrim Health Care Foundation recognized early the impact COVID-19 would have on food access for older adults across the region and also provided funding to [Spectrum Generations](#) of Maine which serves seniors in six counties in central Maine.

“Now more than ever, it is incredibly important for older adults and others at risk to stay safely at home,” said Karen Voci, president of Harvard Pilgrim Health Care Foundation. “These initiatives help support social distancing, take care of those most at-risk for complications from COVID-19, and provide nutritious meals for those who need it most.”

Kristin Overton, Chief Operation Officer at Spectrum said the need for meal delivery to seniors has grown exponentially.

“Before COVID-19 we served approximately 800 people daily with Meals on Wheels, and now we’re up to almost 1700 people,” says Overton. “It’s interesting - we have discovered that more than 60 percent of those who recently started receiving meals through Meals on Wheels may have been eligible even before stay-at-home orders. We will continue to keep track of them because they may be eligible for home-delivered meals on a regular basis. We’ve learned there is a much larger need from seniors who, for whatever reason, hadn’t reached out to us in the past. Meals and nutrition are absolutely something we’re seeing a great deal of need for in Maine right now.”

### **No Community is Spared**

ESMV is seeing the same need in Massachusetts’s Merrimack Valley and North Shore communities.

“This hit home for me, when I ventured out to the grocery store, mask firmly in place, with not one, but four, shopping lists in hand,” says Jennifer Raymond, chief strategy officer for ESMV, who recently volunteered to shop for homebound seniors in Dracut and Lowell Massachusetts. “Tomatoes, green bananas, fresh bread, 2 percent milk, and, if you can find it, maple walnut ice cream - these were the items on the shopping lists to meet the weekly needs of Terry, Leo, Kathy and Larry, four seniors I had volunteered to shop for so they could remain safe at home. It made me realize how truly dependent older adults in our communities are for their basic needs.”

She continues, “With more than 60,000 older adults in Massachusetts homebound even prior to COVID-19, and enrollment in Meals on Wheels programs up 30 percent or more, it is more important than ever to find ways to support our homebound older adults to make sure their physical, emotional, and social well-being is met.”