

State of Vermont *Agency of Human Services*
Department of Disabilities, Aging and Independent Living
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To: The House Committee on Human Services
From: Angela Smith-Dieng, Director of Adult Services, DAIL
Conor O'Dea, Director of the State Unit on Aging, DAIL
Date: February 16, 2021
Re: Testimony on the Report - [Meals to Older Vermonters and Other Vulnerable Populations](#)

Nutrition plays an essential role in promoting good health and preventing disease for all Americans, and especially for older Americans and other vulnerable populations. With older Americans at higher risk of serious illness and death due to COVID-19, it has been very important to ensure that they are able to isolate while also receiving adequate nutrition.

Act 136, passed by the legislature in Spring 2020, required that the Department of Disabilities, Aging and Independent Living (DAIL) submit a report to the Joint Fiscal Committee by August 18, 2020 on the adequacy of funding for the provision of nutrition services to older Vermonters and other vulnerable populations.

This report, per legislative request, was required to include the following:

- Specific federal COVID-19 funding provided as of August 2020 for the provision of nutrition services to the elderly and vulnerable populations served by the Department; and
- Older Americans Act (OAA) funds distributed to the Area Agencies on Aging (AAA) for the purpose of providing nutrition services to older Vermonters; and
- Any funds made available for nutrition services for older Vermonters and other vulnerable populations from the Coronavirus Relief Fund (CRF) pursuant to the Joint Fiscal Committee's May 11, 2020 approved plan; and
- Any recommendation for additional Coronavirus Relief Fund monies for nutrition services for older Vermonters and other vulnerable populations from a subsequent Joint Fiscal Committee allocation or legislation.

The report provided background, describing the purpose of the OAA nutrition services to both reduce hunger, food insecurity and malnutrition and promotion socialization, health and well-being, the eligibility guidelines, typically those age 60 and above unable to cook for themselves, along with a description of how services and eligibility were altered during the COVID-19 emergency. Essentially, any older Vermonter age 60 or above who was isolating during the pandemic was able to receive a home-delivered meal. Similarly, DAIL relaxed eligibility guidelines under the grant to the Vermont Center for Independent Living for meals for people with disabilities in the same way.

The report also included an overview of how funding for meals is distributed. The Older Americans Act nutrition programs are designed as a public-private partnership. Federal funding is not designed to cover the full cost of the programs. Rather, OAA funding is designed to be supplemented by state and local funding, fundraising, use of volunteers and participant contributions.

When federal funding is appropriated for Older Americans Act services, including home-delivered meals, the Administration for Community Living (ACL) distributes that funding by formula to the States. DAHL then awards and distributes the funding by formula to the five AAAs. AAAs then contract with meal providers to prepare and distribute meals. COVID relief funds for OAA services from the Families First Coronavirus Relief Act and the CARES Act were distributed in the same way.

Per the OAA design, AAAs have the flexibility at their service area level to allocate the funds to their contracted meal providers, generally the senior centers and meal sites, based on varying local needs and demands, with the goal of serving their target population in greatest economic and social need. Because AAAs have this flexibility, the service model may look different in different parts of the state. Each AAA works with their own contractors to maximize available dollars and determine meal reimbursement rates and is responsible for overseeing those sites and ensuring quality service.

Summary of Funding Received:

- \$3.8 million in regular OAA funding for nutrition services in federal fiscal year 2020.
- \$5.1 million in COVID-19 funding from the Families First Coronavirus Relief Act and CARES Act; \$3.6 million designated for OAA nutrition services, but all \$5.1 million available to use for meals if needed. AAAs have until the end of federal fiscal year 2021 (9/30/21) to spend these funds.
- \$972,000 in CARES Act funding was designated for VCIL which was able to be used to support a wide range of activities including the home-delivered meals program for Vermonters with disabilities.
- \$600,000 in CRF for OAA home-delivered meals approved by Joint Fiscal Committee.

With this funding, over 5,500 older Vermonters and Vermonters with disabilities were served in 2020. Approximately 100,000 meals were served each month, including both home-delivered meals and “to-go” meals picked up at senior centers and meal sites. No meal provider reported having a waiting list for meals.

The report breaks down in more detail how many people were served and how many meals were served in each AAA region and by VCIL from April through June of 2020.

Additional Funding Received Since Report:

- \$565,000 in CRF for OAA home-delivered meals approved by the legislature in September 2020, specifically to maintain higher reimbursement rates for meals through December 2020.

- \$840,000 in federal COVID-19 funding for OAA nutrition services appropriated by Congress in December 2020; being distributed to AAAs now and available for use through federal fiscal year 2022 (9/30/22).

Progress on Report Recommendations:

Short-term:

1. Additional CRF: \$565,000 was appropriated by the legislature to maintain higher meal reimbursement rates through December 2020.
2. Meal Cost Analysis: AAAs and meal providers conducted a statewide meal cost analysis in fall 2020, with data submitted to DAIL in January. Preliminary results are limited but show that costs are generally greater than the federal and state funding meal sites receive, meaning that meal providers seek local government funding, donations, and volunteer help to support program costs. This analysis will be refined and conducted on an annual basis going forward with the goal of identifying cost effective approaches for the meal programs.
3. Meal Transition Plan: In January, each AAA submitted to DAIL a meal transition plan documenting the status of their meal funding including Families First Coronavirus Relief Act and CARES Act funds. Additionally, the transition plans laid out how each AAA would respond if faced with the need to establish a waiting list. At this time there are no reported plans to implement a waiting list for the nutrition program.
4. Additional Federal Funding: The additional \$840,000 in OAA meal funding being distributed is designed to support the increased costs of providing meals during COVID-19, and the SUA has provided guidance to the AAAs to distribute the funding in full to meal providers.

Long-term:

1. Minimum Reimbursement Rate: Using the annual meal cost analysis and working with AAAs and meal providers, DAIL will consider setting a minimum meal reimbursement rate in federal fiscal year 2023. Additional or alternative approaches to support cost effectiveness and program efficiency may be considered as well.
2. Support of Senior Centers: DAIL continues to encourage the AAAs and senior centers to strengthen working relationships with the goal of a robust network of community focal points as envisioned in the OAA. This could include supporting senior centers with designated OAA funding or state general funds in the future. Of note, there are proposals in Congress to include additional OAA funds in the next stimulus bill.
3. Accessible Options for Groceries/Food: AHS did work early in the pandemic to ensure that mass feeding sites were accessible to people with disabilities. DAIL has not yet had the capacity to explore the long-term recommendation of ensuring that grocery store options be accessible by collaborating with the State Emergency Operations Center and across the Agency of Human Services, but all parties have indicated interest in this work. This is a recommendation that will be built into future planning efforts.

DAIL is committed to serving older Vermonters and Vermonters with disabilities who need nutritious meals; this is core to our mission to make Vermont a great place to grow old or live with a disability. We are extremely grateful to our community providers for their hard work during the pandemic to quickly shift their programs and serve more people quickly and safely.



We will continue to work with our partners to ensure that meals are served to those in greatest need.

We are happy to provide further information or answer questions. We can also be reached at the following emails:

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