

My name is Deanna Jones. I am the Director of the Thompson Senior Center in Woodstock and President of the Vermont Association of Senior Centers and Meal Providers. I am here to represent our collective voice—and the thousands of older Vermonters we serve every day through meals, transportation, exercise, social engagement, and aging-at-home referrals -- these are essential community supports.

Senior centers and Meal on Wheels programs are the local, trusted place in the community that connects older Vermonters with nutrition, programs, services, and opportunities they need to age well. We are helping older Vermonters remain healthy, safe, and connected. Our programs are reducing isolation, hunger, hospitalizations, and no doubt reducing long-term care costs.

We are facing a growing crisis: demand is rapidly increasing while reimbursement is level funded and capped which means we continue to fall further behind with larger gaps to fill for the greater need. This compromises the services we are able to provide to the older Vermonters that rely on us.

We all know Vermont is one of the oldest states in the nation. Our population age 65 and older has nearly doubled over the past two decades and is projected to be one third of the state's population by 2030.

Current data shows:

- There are well over 150,000 Vermonters age 60+, representing more than a quarter of our population.
- Nearly 10,000 older Vermonters face food insecurity, and more than 12,000 live in poverty
- More than 25% of older Vermonters live alone, increasing the risk of isolation and unmet needs.

Senior nutrition programs deliver both congregate and home-delivered meals. In 2024, 41 Meals on Wheels providers delivered nearly one million nutritious home-delivered meals to older Vermonters across the state.

Meals on Wheels is a core service within AgeStrong Vermont, strengthening home- and community-based supports that allow older Vermonters to age safely in their own homes. By providing nutritious meals and regular wellness checks, Meals on Wheels plays a vital role in supporting health, independence, and housing stability.

DAIL's FY2024 Meal Cost Analysis clearly shows that current funding levels fall well short of the true cost of delivering home-delivered meals. Without increased state investment, local programs will continue to face unsustainable financial pressure—placing essential services at risk - - just as demand for our most cost effective home- and community-based supports continues to grow.

Local Impacts: Growing Demand & Cost Pressures

At the Thompson Senior Center alone, we are seeing 20 new older adults come through our doors each month—vibrant individuals who rely on our meals to provide daily nutrition and on

our programs to stay connected and well. Even in my community that is often seen as less in need, demand is rising. Just this week, we delivered 25 Veggie Van Go produce bags to Vermonters who count on them each month.

Across our state, similar needs are unfolding. In Lamoille County last week, volunteers delivered grocery bags from the local food shelf—a recurring monthly effort to support homebound residents.

While we are grateful the Legislature added state and Medicaid funding to support home-delivered Meals on Wheels in 2025, that investment netted only about \$0.60 per meal. Though appreciated, this increase barely keeps pace with rising food and staffing costs—much less the growing demand our communities are experiencing.

Let me give you some numbers - according to the DAIL FY2024 Rate Study:

- **Total annual cost of home-delivered meals:** \$11.1Million
- **Across Vermont the average cost per meal work out to about \$13.43,** this include not only the food but overhead
- **Collectively we delivered:** 986,622 meals in 2024

Now the Current Funding Structure

Remember this current funding covers only a portion of the true cost:

- There is \$1,000,000 in State General Funds
- This is used to draw down \$1,300,000 in Medicaid
- And there is \$1,862,594 — Older Americans Act funding

This brings our total current funding to Meals on Wheels to: \$4,162,594 – That’s \$4.10 for a balanced nutritious meal. **With a \$13.43 meal cost our funding shortfall is:** \$7,000,194.70

Fresh fruits and healthy ingredients essential to meeting dietary needs and Older Americans Act requirements now cost \$5–\$6 more per pound than they did a year ago, while staffing costs also continue to climb. Because of caps on reimbursable meals by our Area Agencies on Aging, some providers are on track to reach funding limits months before the fiscal year ends—after which they receive no additional reimbursement.

Senior centers and meal providers receive no direct state or federal funding beyond per-meal reimbursements. The remaining gap must be filled through fundraising, local support, or service cuts. We are at our capacity for what we can raise.

What This Funding Means to Vermonters

The people we serve tell the story best:

“Meals on wheels saved my dad’s life. The daily check-in is just as important as the meal. Drivers are angels on earth.”

“I waited longer than I should’ve to ask for Meals on Wheels thinking that someone else needed it more, but I was getting some bad burns trying to cook for myself while using my walker so I decided to give it a try. It’s given me much more variety than I was getting and the hidden benefit is that my blood pressure has gone down and I’m able to take less medication.”

“We are so fortunate to have a Senior Center in our community that gives us access to any kind of help we need. Thank you from a grateful, soon-to-be 95-year-old!”

“Thank you for the flowers that came with the meal. It brightens each day at my dinner table. It’s people like you that make life worth living.”

“We plan our day around meals at the senior center. It helps stretch our grocery budget because we can eat lunch at the center and have an apple for dinner.”

Requested Investment

Madam Chair and members of the Committee, we respectfully ask the Legislature to invest **\$1,000,000 in the FY2027 budget, that’s \$1.00 per meal** to support meal on wheels providers statewide. These funds will:

- Increase per-meal reimbursements to better reflect the true cost of food and labor.
- Remove or raise meal caps so providers do not run out of funding.
- Strengthen infrastructure and capacity to meet growing demand.

This investment is not just about meals—it is about **health, dignity, and independence** for older Vermonters. It is a preventive strategy that keeps older Vermonters healthier at home, I think we can all agree that it is on our best interest to reduce hospitalizations and nursing homes placements. Vermonts Meals on Wheels programs strengthens our communities.

But how much have costs actually risen since that ’24 meal cost report. Basic modeling using the Consumer Price Index from the Bureau of Labor Statistics for Northeast urban consumers. A conservative shows inflation has increased our costs \$1,435,859

- **It costs us \$1.4 Million more to provide the 1 million meals than it did in 2024**

If we were to break down inflationary factors on food, labor, operating, and transportation costs it would likely reveal an even greater pressure, particularly in labor and food expenses.

Funding Rationale

Additional state funding is necessary to:

- Align reimbursement rates with the FY24 rate study
- Stabilize providers facing rising food, labor, and transportation costs
- Prevent waiting lists

- Protect a cost-effective intervention that supports health, reduces isolation, and helps older Vermonters avoid higher-cost nursing home care

We know that Meals on Wheels is a proven investment that reduces healthcare utilization and supports aging in place. Failing to close the funding gap simply shifts costs elsewhere in the system and undermines Vermont's broader goals around healthy aging and most importantly cost containment. This is a core pillar in our Age Strong VT plan.

In Closing

Together we can strengthen the senior centers and Meal on Wheels programs that are the local, trusted place in the community that connects older Vermonters with the programs, services, and opportunities they need to age well. These are your essential partners in Vermont's effort to support healthy aging, combat hunger, reduce isolation, and preserve independence—but we cannot do it alone.

Thank you for your time, your leadership, and your commitment to older Vermont's.

Do you have any question?

Respectfully submitted,

Deanna Jones

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