

TESTIMONY
SENATE BILL 2012 - ND DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH AND HUMAN SERVICES
ADULT AND AGING SERVICES BUDGET
HOUSE APPROPRIATIONS – HUMAN RESOURCES SUBCOMMITTEE
MARCH, 2023

Chairman Nelson and members of the committee, my name is Renee Kipp. I am the Executive Director of the Burleigh County Senior Adults Program in Bismarck, ND. We provide senior nutrition services in Burleigh County and also oversee these services in the surrounding counties of Kidder, Emmons, Morton, Oliver, Grant, Mercer and McLean. Together, we provide over 860 meals per day to senior citizens in the West Central Region of North Dakota. Nearly 4,000 senior citizens and 207,000 meals were served by our organizations in 2022, with sixty percent of our clients being over the age of 75, and 25 percent over the age of 85.

We are also a member of the ND Senior Service Providers Association, a group of agencies that provide Title III Older Americans Act Services to the senior population across the state of North Dakota.

Each legislative session, this organization provides you with a booklet entitled, “Feeding Grandma” (copy attached). In this booklet you will find current data on senior hunger and learn how North Dakota’s senior nutrition programs are one of the most cost-effective methods in the prevention of senior hunger and for keeping seniors in their own homes.

The basic premise behind this booklet is that providing a stable source of healthy, nutrient dense meals is a key factor in successful aging. The nutrition programs are very cost effective – the cost of providing senior meals for one year equals two (2) days in a hospital or ten (10) days in a nursing home. The booklet also points out that in federal fiscal year 2021, 200 of the 14,827 home-delivered meal clients were nursing home and Medicaid eligible. If these clients were in a nursing home, it would have cost the state around \$28.75 million. Supporting Title III Older Americans Act Services makes good fiscal sense for our state and for the people we serve.

But, North Dakota's Senior Nutrition Programs are more than just a meal, and there are several options for our participants.

--They may choose to have a congregate meal at senior centers and meal sites across the state. This option provides them an opportunity to have a meal, engage and socialize with others, and to participate in activities.

--Participants may choose to receive drive-thru or take out meals – a wonderful, **NEW** alternative for those seniors still working, or due to other circumstances, don't have time to dine at a meal site.

-- Most Senior Meal programs also have the option for participants to receive frozen meals for weekends and holidays. This ensures they have access to at least one nutritious meal daily, even when the meal site is not open for normal operation. They are also a good option for those living in rural areas, as they may receive seven to 14 frozen meals at one time, providing them with meals for a week or two.

--And, of course, our home-bound senior citizens may receive meals through our home delivered meals program (a.k.a. Meals on Wheels). Home delivered meal drivers, who are primarily volunteers, are a friendly face and provide a daily wellness check while delivering the hot meal to our most vulnerable senior citizens. Many times, this is the only human contact they have throughout the day. It is this connection, combined with a healthy meal, that provide support to allow these senior citizens to continue living independently in their own homes much later in life than they would otherwise be able.

The partnership we have with the state of North Dakota through funding provided by the Adult and Aging Services Division of the ND Department of Health and Human Services is critical for us, and we are in full support of the funding for nutrition services that has been included in the Executive Budget. The funding needs for Senior Service Providers across the state have increased dramatically.

I will use Burleigh County as an example. From 2019 to 2022, the meals served in Burleigh County have increased 48 percent. Due to this increase in meals, along with other factors, such as inflation, over the same time period, our raw food costs increased 87 percent, other kitchen supply costs increased 272 percent, and employee wages increased 44 percent.

Increasing the meal rate to \$7.62 for congregate and \$8.89 for home delivered with the additional \$12.9M in funding for the 2023-25 biennium will ensure that senior nutrition programs across the state will be able to continue providing meals to ALL senior citizens that want them.

It is important to note that the unit rate reimbursement does NOT cover the full cost of the meal, nor is it intended to. In 2021, the statewide average cost of a meal was \$11.38, with an estimated increase to \$12.22 in 2022 (7.7 percent).

Meal costs are covered through a combination of funds, including:

- the unit reimbursement from Aging Services,
- contributions from people receiving the meals,
- required local match,
- NSIP (Nutrition Services Incentive Program) funds,
- and other additional funds that are raised locally.

Not only does the reimbursement rate not cover the full cost of the meal, in the past, we haven't always received reimbursement for every meal we have provided. Using my organization and those we subcontract with as an example, if our meal trends continue, we anticipate that with this contract cycle, we will be short of funding to be reimbursed for approximately 12,000 meals. The funding included in the Executive Budget will help ensure this does not happen in the future.

One question often asked is, "Why are the meals so expensive?" There are three main factors that contribute to the higher cost of our meals.

--The first is that our menus have federal nutritional requirements, so the meals have to meet 1/3 of the DRI's (dietary reference intakes) for a 70-year-old male. Basically, they include at least 3

oz. of meat, 3 half cup servings of fruits and vegetables, 8 oz. milk, one slice of whole wheat bread, and one margarine.

--The second factor is that every client receiving home delivered meals or drive-thru / take-out meals must have an annual in-person assessment. These assessments are conducted by staff and can often take one or more hours to complete. These assessments along with Congregate meal assessments must be entered into WellSky, the state's web based data program. In our region, this is approximately 2,600 annual assessments.

--And finally, due to staffing shortages, wages have had to substantially increase to attract and maintain quality staff.

In closing, please know that good nutrition is closely associated with an older persons ability to function and remain independent. Hospitalized older adults suffer from many adverse effects when malnourished. Nutritious meals, tailored to older adults, reduce the risk of chronic diseases and related disabilities, prevent nutritional deficiency and improve their health over the long term.

Senior Service Providers across the state of North Dakota are dedicated to making our state a place where our senior citizens can gracefully 'age in place,' by providing nutritious meals which allow them to stay in their own homes as long as possible.

We are concerned that if we do not have this increase in funding we will be unable to serve every North Dakota senior citizen that is in need of meals. We may have no other choice but to implement waiting lists and/or limit the number of meals we are able to provide to them. Please support the funding for the Title III Senior Nutrition program that has been included in the Executive Budget. The health of North Dakota's senior citizens depends on it.

Thank you for your time in consideration of this testimony. I would be happy to answer any questions that you may have.