



TESTIMONY OF CITYMEALS ON WHEELS
JOINT LEGISLATIVE BUDGET HEARING ON
HUMAN SERVICES

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Overview

Citymeals on Wheels was established in New York City in 1981 as a unique public private model to fill a critical gap in the City's home-delivered meal program, which provides only one meal per day, five days a week, excluding weekends and holidays to homebound older adults. More recently, Citymeals has emerged as *the* emergency responder for homebound older adults across the City, beginning with 9/11 and continuing throughout the pandemic.

For the first time since Citymeals was founded, we are coming to the State to **respectfully request \$2 million in funding to support the dramatic increase in need for home-delivered meals for homebound older adults in New York City**. Since the Covid-19 pandemic, the number of meal recipients has increased from about 18,000 to nearly 20,000. Citymeals rose to meet the need, buoyed by one-time pandemic relief funding. While the funding has dried out, the number of older adults in need of meals remains at the 20,000 mark and NYC Aging has estimated that we could see an additional 10% increase in the number of meal recipients this fiscal year. Moreover, as the number of older adults grows and climate related emergencies

keep increasing, we must ensure that our emergency response infrastructure is adequately funded.

The Citymeals on Wheels Model

Citymeals on Wheels was founded 40 years ago to fill a significant gap in city services, securing private funding to provide weekend and holiday meals to those homebound older adults unable to shop and cook for themselves. While NYC Aging funds the one daily meal that homebound older adults receive Mondays through Fridays (excluding holidays), Citymeals funds the same network of providers to deliver weekend, holiday, and emergency meals. ***Without Citymeals, the most vulnerable older adults would not receive a meal 115 days each year.*** On a 3-day holiday weekend, the most isolated older adults could go 3 straight days without a meal; and, in times of emergencies, they could go even longer without food or contact with another person.

Citymeals has become the emergency responder for older adults, beginning with 9/11. In 2018, the opening of our Bronx warehouse solidified this role by giving us the capacity to keep over 50,000 ready to eat meals on hand, with the ability to quickly package more food to assist the older adults we normally serve and those in temporary need. With this level of inventory, we can pre-supply existing clients and senior center members with shelf stable food in the event of an emergency closure or a suspension of meal delivery service. We can turn on a dime to reach large numbers of older adults in senior housing facilities, NYCHA housing, or Naturally Occurring Retirement Communities (NORCs), and other individuals living across the five boroughs. We have stepped up during citywide emergencies like Superstorm Sandy, the Covid-19 pandemic, and Hurricane Ida, as well as more localized emergencies such as power or gas outages. Time and again, we have illustrated the value of our agile and resourceful model.

Nowhere was this more clearly demonstrated than the Covid-19 pandemic, which rendered thousands of older adults effectively homebound when it very suddenly became unsafe for them to be in most public spaces. They were no longer able to access their usual food programs, such as having lunch at an older adult center, using their EBT cards at a local grocery

store, or stocking up at a food pantry. We delivered our first emergency meals on March 5, 2020, at least a week before the City shut down, because we anticipated that something could happen which would leave older New Yorkers without enough food on hand. Throughout the pandemic, Citymeals has delivered 6 million meals. This is what we do, and what we hope to keep doing. Citymeals has the infrastructure and stands ready for the next emergency, provided we can access the additional funding that makes our nimble and efficient model possible.

More than a Meal

Community-based meals on wheels providers ensure that older New Yorkers have nutritious meals that support their health and that they are checked-in on most days. The check-in can be as important as the meals. The pandemic exacerbated social isolation for this population who could not participate in many of the alternative ways we all stayed connected, like picnicking in parks or zoom parties. Unable to socialize or see family, or even risk a trip to the doctor, for more than two years has been devastating and added another layer of stress for these older adults who were already coping with health issues, income insecurity, and hunger.

Meals are brought to homebound older adults by volunteers and paid staff—some of whom have been on the same route for many years. They come to know the older adults on their route, they know their routines, and often they can tell if something isn't right. This is a strength of the Citymeals model: by funding the same community organizations who deliver meals during the week, we maintain a continuity of service that allows connections and trust to develop. These relationships are a critical component of our city's care infrastructure.

For the most isolated older adults, their meal deliverer is a lifeline. If a person does not come to the door, deliverers will call them and/or notify program directors, who in turn ensure that the person's case manager follows up with them. The sense of security that this check-in can bring to someone who otherwise feels alone and invisible cannot be overstated. That knock on the door and the ensuing chitchat provides a sense of connection to the outside world, and the comfort of knowing that someone is looking out for them.

The Need

There are over 1.7 million New York City residents over the age of 60—that's one in five city residents. Increased life expectancy is a testimony to the achievements of modern science, technology, and the social safety net. Still, living longer and on a fixed income presents a wide-ranging set of challenges from chronic health conditions to mobility restrictions to food insecurity. For our clients this could look like not being able to see well enough to cook their own meals, being unable to safely walk to the store or carry groceries home, or not having someone who can come by regularly to help with these tasks.

Being unable to shop for groceries or prepare your own meals does not warrant institutionalization; these needs can be effectively managed through a robust network of community services and supports. Remaining at home is not only the overwhelming preference of older adults, it's also better for their overall wellbeing, and of course, much more cost effective—for the person, the City, and the State—than moving into a nursing home.

It is clear that the need for an expanded home-delivered meals program is not waning, for two reasons. First, the pandemic highlighted the insidious depth of food insecurity and the impact of increased financial assistance and expanded food programs which were implemented through federal relief bills. Secondly, older adults are among the fastest growing populations in this country; thankfully, we are all living longer than ever before. It's a common sense prediction, then, that more and more people will be coming onto the HDM rolls in the years to come—indeed, we have already been seeing increases for years.

Moreover, the pandemic also made evident the need for emergency, supplemental food for homebound older adults. This has not changed as the pandemic has abated. For example, the number of climate events that create enough damage that people become unable to leave their homes to get food, whether due to power and gas outages or unsafe streets, has grown. *The homebound older adult population is not broadly served by other emergency feeding groups.* Therefore, it is critical that Citymeals can provide supplemental food that can be stored in a cabinet for both minor emergencies or bigger emergencies that may last a couple of days.

While there have been recent investments in the City's home-delivered meals program, weekend, holiday, and emergency meals are not provided through City contracts and therefore Citymeals has not received that funding. Despite funding about 35% of the home-delivered meals in the City, we typically receive about \$2 million in administrative funding through NYC Aging and City Council discretionary funds. We were able to meet the increased demand of the past couple of years through one-time federal funding, which has ended even as historic levels of inflation push the boundaries of human service providers across the state. Citymeals is no exception. Without continued funding for these thousands of new meal recipients, Citymeals will not be able to continue to meet the increased demand, and older adults with little or no other recourse will go hungry.

Therefore, Citymeals respectfully requests \$2 million to continue to provide weekend, holiday, and emergency meals, and increase our services to meet the anticipated growth of the program.

Citymeals will continue to raise private dollars in order to meet the needs of homebound older adults in the years to come. However, the current state of need and insufficient funding from the City means we need the support of our partners in state government to help us reach all of those in need consistently and without a disruption in service. The exponential growth of the older adult population, especially in the face of staggering inflation, means there are more people needing meals—and needing them for many years—than ever before. This growth is happening at a scale that private fundraising simply cannot match. We look forward to working with new partners at the state level to continue to close the gaps in the City's home-delivered and emergency food programs and ensure that homebound older New Yorkers have food to eat 365 days a year and are not forgotten during emergencies.

Sector-wide Needs

Citymeals joins our partners across the network of older adult service providers in advocating for a state where we can all safely remain in our communities and continue to contribute to its

diverse social and economic fabric as we age. To achieve this vision, we must build a robust infrastructure of community-based services.

The 2023-24 Executive Budget proposal does not provide sufficient funding for programs and services provided through the State Office for the Aging for older adults. We join with our colleagues in the aging services network in support of the following funding requests:

\$38.6 Million for Community Services for the Elderly

This funding is required meet a broad range of services that support older adults in aging in place. \$29.1 million is needed to continue to provide for those currently receiving aging services, and \$9.5 million would address the unmet needs of older adults currently waiting to receive services such as home delivered meals (on weekdays in NYC), transportation, legal services, case management, home modifications, and respite.

An 8.5% Cost of Living Adjustment for Human Services Workers

The 2.5% COLA in the executive budget is an important investment in a workforce that has been overlooked for well over a decade, yet it falls short of the 8.5% sought by the sector. Even as the cost of living has dramatically risen over the years—not to mention the astounding inflation of the last year alone—human service workers have relentlessly ensured that New Yorkers are fed, housed, and cared for. An 8.5% COLA is necessary in order to bring wages more in line with the reality of today’s brutally high cost of living.

Fair Pay for Homecare

We must end the state’s dangerous home care shortage to keep older adults and people with disabilities safe by passing Fair Pay for Home Care (S.3189/A.xxxx). New York took first steps to address this crisis by passing a \$3 wage increase in last year’s budget. However, this falls far short of what is needed to end the worker shortage, and millions of dollars are remaining with managed care organizations instead going into wages. Fully enacting Fair Pay for Homecare would address this problem by raising wages to 150% of the minimum wage, while ensuring that the dollars go directly to workers.