

New York Café Helps Older Adults Stay Well: Takeout Meals with Nutrition Program Vouchers

Through the Older Americans Act Nutrition Program, senior centers across the country have provided nutritious meals to older Americans for decades, mostly at noontime. It's a key service that provides not only a good meal, but also a chance for socialization and connection to programs and supports that address health and well-being. The Nutrition Program also includes voucher options that offer more flexibility and choice. For example, in rural Erie County, NY, the ACL-funded "Go & Dine" Senior Dining Program gives seniors an option to use vouchers at restaurants.

Billygans Café, a restaurant owned by Bill and Nancy Karcher in Erie County, joined the program in February 2020—just before the pandemic hit. The timing turned out to be fortuitous. The Karchers credit the program with helping them maintain a sense of community and keep their business afloat during a difficult time. Through their participation in the program, Billygans was able to continue to offer take-out—giving Go & Dine customers a healthy option for food and a good reason to leave their house and enjoy some community interaction while still social distancing.

Funded by an ACL Innovations in Nutrition grant, "Go & Dine" is a program of the Erie County Department of Senior Services. Innovation grants are a way to test out new ways of meeting the nutrition needs of older adults. Erie County's "Go & Dine" program provides a mechanism by which locally run establishments, like Billygans Café, can increase access to nutritious meals.

Restaurants have been involved in providing meal services through the Older Americans Act Nutrition Program practically since the program's inception. Initially they served as foodservice caterers or as a venue for programs. In the 1990s, some states piloted a program to offer restaurant and in-store grocery dining vouchers to expand choices, part of an overall effort to emphasize consumer choice and participant-directed services. For example, through the voucher program, a group of older veterans—some of whom might still be working and unavailable for a noon meal at the senior center—could gather once a week for breakfast. A grandmother whose budget might not allow eating out could go out for a meal with her grandchildren using a restaurant voucher. And in rural communities where there may be no nutrition sites, a local restaurant like Billygans Café can fill that gap by offering meals that fit the nutrition program requirements.

The recent public health crisis has disrupted nutrition programs, changing the way they have traditionally operated while also opening new avenues for community-based organizations to establish new opportunities through partnerships with restaurants and grocery stores. Faced with increased demand, nutrition programs have been collaborating with food retailers such as restaurants and grocery stores to offer expanded options, such as breakfast and dinner and take-out. Seeing the benefits of these partnerships, California, Florida, and West Virginia have added restaurant voucher programs as part of their response to the health crisis.

While the Karchers originally envisioned welcoming Go & Dine participants for in-restaurant eating, they quickly pivoted to taking orders for carry out. Participants call in their order, then stop by the restaurant to pick up the food. Though these interactions are brief, the Karchers can see that they benefit their participants and create a sense of community. "We are getting to know many new people by their names, and it has really brought a feeling of community especially during this pandemic," they said. "We are very thankful and appreciative to be a part of the Go & Dine program."