

The Congregate Nutrition Program

Iowa Department of Elder Affairs (3/08)

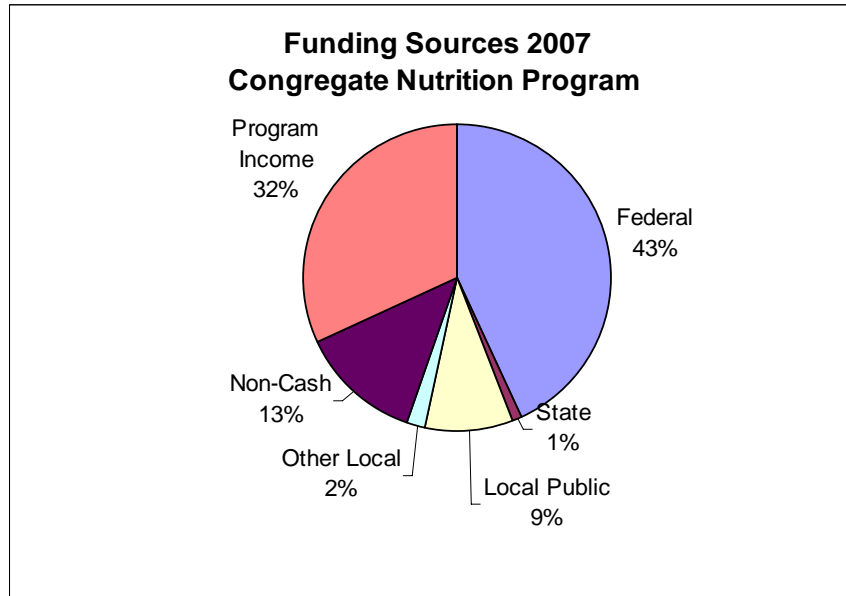
Introduction

The Older American Act (OAA) Nutrition Program, authorized in 1972, is a foundation service of home and community based care (HCBC). Its purpose is to promote health, provide nutritious meals, decrease social isolation, and link older adults to other social and health programs, thus helping them to remain at home in the community. The OAA Nutrition Program provides congregate and home delivered meals, nutrition education, nutrition counseling, and linkages to health promotion and disease prevention programs such as physical activity to individuals aged 60 and older.

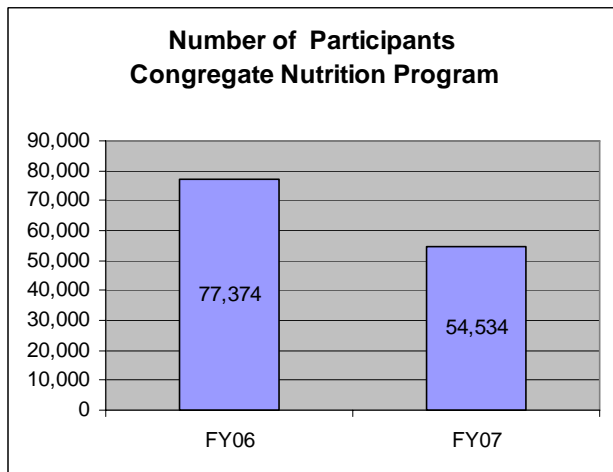
Most programs provide one meal a day, 5 days a week. These nutritious meals help older adults maintain cognitive and physical functioning, avoid and/or manage chronic disease and disability, delay institutional care, and sustain good quality of life. The OAA Nutrition Program is the largest community based nutrition program for older adults in the country and is targeted to those who are in greatest social and economic need with particular attention to low-income minorities and individuals who reside in rural areas. The OAA Nutrition Program is being challenged to meet the increasing need for service, changes in service implementation to meet the demands of the “baby boomers”, changes in HCBC structure, and static public program funding. This report identifies current facts about the Iowa congregate nutrition program.

History and Funding

The Iowa congregate meal program is a nutrition program under the Older Americans Act (OAA) Title III C-1. The program is administered by the US Department of Health and Human Services, Administration on Aging (AoA) and is coordinated at the state level by the Iowa Department of Elder Affairs (DEA) and administered locally by the area agencies on aging (AAA).



A mixture of federal and non-federal funds provide congregate and home delivered meals, nutrition screening, education and counseling. Total nutrition program resources for SFY 2007 were \$21,976,901 (congregate 11,360,016). The main source of federal funds is the OAA Title IIIC-1 and Nutrition Services Incentive Program (NSIP) providing funding based on the number of meal participants. The federal funding has remained fairly flat over the past ten years. The next most significant source of funding comes from Program Income which is mainly participant contributions. Funding from the State of Iowa, which can be used for other non-nutrition related services as well, represents approximately one percent of the total nutrition program funding.



Program Trends

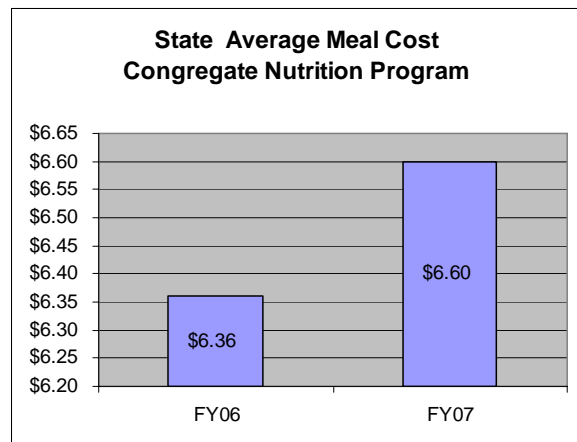
This report provides an overview of the Iowa congregate nutrition program. Iowa ranks fifth in the nation for those 65 years and older and second for 85 years and older. The congregate nutrition program serves individuals significantly poorer than the general population with 58 percent of those completing program registration identified to be below the poverty level. The congregate meal program in Iowa served a total of 54,534 individuals in FY 2007. This represents a 30 percent decline from the FY 2006. Current meal participants have been with the program for a number of years, they are aging with the largest age group served being 75-84 years. The aging congregate meal participants are gradually moving into the home delivered meal program. This coupled with the many dining options that are available is contributing to decline congregate meal participation.

Congregate Meal Requirements:

- **OAA and IAC require meals to be planned according to Dietary Reference Intake (DRIs) and Dietary Guidelines**
- **Each meal must provide 1/3 DRIs**
- **2000 & 2005 DRIs increased nutrients for older adults**
- **2005 Dietary Guidelines recommend less sodium**

Scientific evidence confirms that good nutrition helps older adults combat many of physiological changes that occur with aging and helps individuals remain healthy and independent in their communities. A recent report ¹ on senior hunger identified the older adults who were without adequate food intakes were roughly equivalent to being 14 years older. One benefit of good nutrition is that it bolsters the immune system resulting in the individual having less illness. With good nutrition status, the State also benefits from reduced costs associated with better health and unnecessary or premature institutionalization. Since the Iowa nutrition program generally provides one meal a day five days a week, there are approximately 28% of congregate meal participants who eat fewer than two meals a day which puts them at risk for declining nutritional health. In rural areas, congregate meals may only be available two or three days per week. The opportunity exists to increase the number of older adults participating in the OAA nutrition program and for the program to provide more meals to participants.

Congregate meals help increase the nutrient intake of participants. Congregate meals are planned to provide 1/3 of the current Dietary Reference Intake (DRIs). The 2005 DRIs identified that the older adult need additional nutrients such as calcium and vitamin D for bone health, folate for heart and mental health, and fiber for bowel health. National program evaluation demonstrates that for many participants, the meal as the main source of their daily nutrition. For 54 percent of participants, the congregate meal provides the only fruit they eat for the day and for 24 percent the meal provides the only vegetable they eat for the day. The benefits of the nutrition program are illustrated with an assessment of a representative sample of meal participants showing 80% maintain or improve their nutrition risk score using a ten question nutrition screen tool.

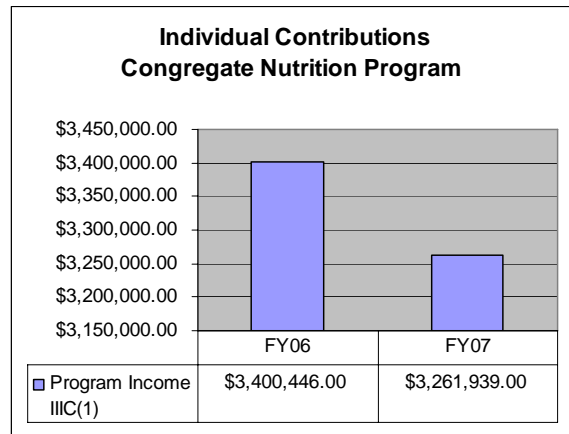


Nutrient changes for the congregate nutrition program translate into increased meal costs. The average meal costs \$6.60 using State Fiscal Year 2007 statewide calculation of all resources divided by number of meals served. The cost of a meal has increased over the past several years. In 2008, the Consumer Price Index (CPI) for all food is projected to increase 3.5 to 4.5 percent, as retailers continue to pass on higher commodity and energy costs to consumers in the form of higher retail prices². Local expenses including food cost, rent, utilities, equipment and personnel account for the variation in meal costs.

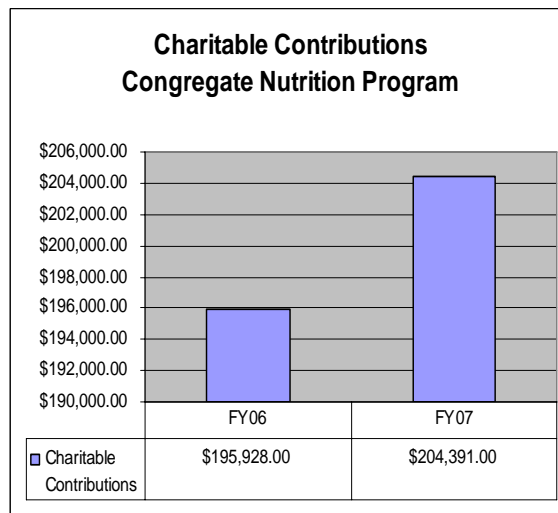
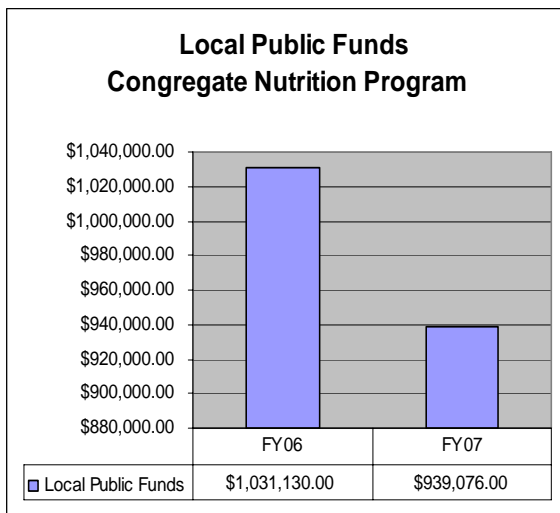
Variations reflect use of volunteers at the meal site and local cost sharing with community partners for expenses related to the meal sites.

The OAA and Iowa Code do not allow the AAAs to provide meals directly without a waiver. Most meals are provided on contractual basis. The AAAs have explored options and implemented efficiencies to ensure continuation of congregate meal sites. For example, some AAA's are able to contract with a food service provider for a lower price per meal than they could staff and run their own kitchen. Many AAAs have developed central kitchens to service several meal sites to improve efficiencies. This has resulted in closing individual kitchens and transporting meals to the serving sites.

Several funding sources for the nutrition program have declined. A closer look at Program Income which is mainly individual contributions (see chart) shows a decline that may reflect decline in program participation and in contributions. Since the OAA nutrition program is targeted to low income older adults it is anticipated contributions will reflect the status of the economy and continue to decline. Participants have the opportunity to make a voluntary contribution but are not denied a meal for inability to make the contribution. Along with a decline in contributions there has been a decline of 30 percent in participation between FY06 & FY07^{3,4}.



There has also been a decline in local public funds (see chart). This includes funding from counties and cities. Fortunately there has been an increase in charitable contributions (see chart) this includes local cash that come from organizations such as United Way, private foundations, gifts, bequests and donations from individuals. However, locally leveraged dollars are not enough to address increasing food costs and the need to address an aging infrastructure (i.e. dining areas, equipment) statewide.



The social engagement at the congregate meal site also plays an important role in improved nutrient intake. The senior center or buildings where the meals are provided generally provide a variety of activities to encourage socialization. The congregate meal sites and the buildings where they are housed are frequently operated separately with the meal program paying rent to the senior center. The senior centers, councils on aging and congregate nutrition programs do have fund raising events to pay for things at the center not directly related to the meal such as decorating the center, birthday celebrations and party supplies, greeting cards, and extra activities such as group admissions to the local recreation center and bowling alley. Unfortunately, many of the meal sites are in older buildings with aging food service equipment and older dining room furnishings. Additional funding is needed to replace the food service equipment to keep the program operational. If significant funds were to be made available, meal sites could be renovated to attract a wider group of seniors.

The AAAs are exploring opportunities to reach out and attract new meal participants and continue services in the rural areas of Iowa. One approach includes focusing on customer relations and providing a caring environment that attracts older adults to the socialization and supportive services they need. Another innovation is with the use of restaurant vouchers. Generally the vouchers are provided for the noon meals at a local restaurant. A contract between the restaurant and the nutrition program address the cost of the meal and ensure meals provide 1/3 of the DRIs. Other service delivery ideas include providing breakfast, evening and weekend meals, a soup and/or salad bar and providing multiple menu options for participants to select from. Additionally, there needs to be a focus on the physical environment and the look of the meal site as well as the look of the food itself.

The congregate nutrition program in Iowa is changing. With adequate funding, the opportunity is great for the nutrition program to support older adults in achieving their goals for a healthier and independent life.

Reference:

1. Ziliak, J and Gunderson, C. The Causes, Consequences, and Future of Senior Hunger in America. March 2008. <http://www.mowaa.org/SeniorHungerStudy.pdf> accessed 4-15-08.
2. U.S. Department of Labor, Bureau of Labor Statistics; Consumer Price Indexes (CPI). <http://www.bls.gov/CPI/> accessed 4-11-08.
3. Final Expenditure report IDEA SFY2006 & SFY2007.
4. Iowa Department of Elder Affairs INAPIS Activity Report. SFY 2007.