



# **Testimony of Meals on Wheels of Lancaster**

to the

## **PA Senate Democratic Policy Committee**

Addressing Rising Costs for Seniors

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Presented by:

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[www.lancasermow.org](http://www.lancasermow.org)

# **An Overview: Meals on Wheels of Lancaster**

## **Addressing Rising Costs for Seniors**

Provided by: Feleen Nancarvis, Executive Director

Good Morning, Chairman Miller and members of the committee. Thank you for the opportunity to speak to you today on a subject that has become more than a job or a title. Serving Lancaster County's seniors is truly a passion of mine. My name is Feleen Nancarvis and I serve as the Executive Director of Meals on Wheels Lancaster. I also serve as the President of Meals on Wheels Pennsylvania—a state association of independent Meals on Wheels programs. Today, for the purpose of this hearing, I am here to represent the over 500 clients that we have served through Meals on Wheels of Lancaster specifically, for a more local perspective.

We are a local home-delivered meals provider serving essential nutritious foods to members of our community who are unable to prepare meals for themselves.

Our service to the community extends beyond meal delivery, however. We cultivate relationships. We prioritize wellness. We ensure that our clients can live meaningful lives, aging in place safely within the comfort of their own homes. Many of those that we serve are socially isolated without loved ones, friends, or neighbors to care for them. It is oftentimes that we find our volunteers and staff are the primary social connection that they have. So, when we arrive at the door, we are familiar faces, a welcome greeting and oftentimes a necessary responder in emergency situations.

For those fortunate enough to receive care from caregiver(s)—whether those caregivers are paid employees through a social service organization or unpaid family members who lovingly stretch themselves too thin—we can confidently say that the caregiving network is overwhelmed. Caseloads are substantial in size due to demand. Unpaid family members are burdened with the cost and the administrative and emotional logistics of caring for their aging parents at home.

I want to begin my testimony with this context because it is important to understand that rising costs of goods and services has an impact not only on the individual receiving them but also on the systems, agencies, and working families that support them. This leaves our seniors in a concerning and vulnerable position. Naturally, our community as well.

I'd like to go back to provide a brief history about Meals on Wheels programs more globally to help illuminate the situation. During WWII, Meals on Wheels, as a concept, originated in London, England when the Women's Voluntary Service (later becoming the British Red Cross) began serving meals to the elderly who had been bombed out of their homes. This grassroots movement spread across the world and the first program in the United States founded in Philadelphia in 1954. Eleven years later, in 1965, the Older American's Act is established as the first federal initiative to provide comprehensive community services for Older Americans aged 60+. As legislation evolved over the years, it was in 1972 that the expanded program first included nutrition services. For the first time, OAA provided funding for and remains the primary funding for many M.O.W. programs today. Including the program that I operate.

At the time in which we were founded, in 1967, we charged \$1.80 per meal. Unfortunately, since then, our prices have gradually risen to \$9.50 for a regular diet and \$11.50 for medically tailored meals. These are our prices today. If we were reimbursed for the true cost of the meal, it would be upwards of \$13 without considering cost of delivery or any profit margins. Since 2020, we have absorbed a 27% increase in overall expenses. Unlike a for-profit organization, we do everything we can to ensure that we are not pushing those expenses onto our clients or our partners. We remain grateful to our volunteers and our donors who provide us with the resources to bridge our ever-growing operating deficit.

Our neighboring program, Millersville Area Meals on Wheels, gave me permission to share that they are looking at their pricing models and reimbursement rates this year to ensure the sustainability of their program. These tough decisions that nonprofit organizations are forced to make drive us further away from our mission of service to the community.

So, let's talk about that. I'll circle back to our reason for being here today—our seniors. I'd like to emphasize that our seniors are absorbing a similar devastating increase in expenses year-over-year in their lives at home. Their caregivers, too. For a senior living on a fixed income, absorbing these rising costs is prohibitive and mathematically impossible.

Our Lancaster County clients represent highly vulnerable population of our community. Their average age is 75, and they survive on an average annual income of \$22,000. The majority of our clients, approximately 38%, are supported by the

Lancaster County Office of Aging (LCOA), 15% by Community Health Choices (CHC) Managed Care, and 32% are Private Pay. The remaining 15% are supported by our partners in Ephrata and Chester County for whom we do not have demographic data. A small portion of our clients are SNAP recipients.

Our recent internal survey (75 anonymous respondents) highlights some of the demands that our clients face. While 8% of respondents report having had to choose between paying for food instead of bills, rent, medications, or clothes in the prior month. Over one third of respondents, 31%, state that they would be forced to skip meals if they were not a Meals on Wheels recipient. Having spoken with our clients myself, I can further attest that the support that Meals on Wheels provides in this current environment is vital to their well-being. Many of them have shared with me that “I don’t know what I would do without Meals on Wheels” or “I am blessed because I receive the food I need from Meals on Wheels” or “my parents wouldn’t be able to live independently in their homes without home-delivered meals.”

With that context in mind, senior services have been flat-funded repeatedly for years. This stagnant funding environment, during a period of historic inflation, effectively blocks vulnerable seniors from accessing the life-stabilizing and life-extending services that we offer. We, unfortunately, are grappling with waitlists that our partners at Lancaster County Office of Aging are beholden to due to limited resources and limited funding. These waitlists only ensure that our seniors are left hungry and alone. These waitlists only ensure that our seniors’ caregivers are left to fend for themselves against an environment of higher inflation and exhausting administrative headaches. With the information available to me today, I cannot say that I see an end in sight.

I’ll say that our seniors are facing impossible challenges. So, too, are the individuals and the systems that support them. Meals on Wheels is a service that provides relief to individual community members, their families, and their caregivers alike. We also provide a vital public-private partnership. As Josh Protas of Meals on Wheels America states, investing in senior nutrition services is simply "smart fiscal policy." Meals on Wheels keeps vulnerable community members out of emergency rooms and alleviates the financial burden on the state’s healthcare system.

Ensuring that home-delivered meals are adequately funded to combat these rising costs can take place in a variety of systemic ways. This includes diversifying funding streams for medically tailored meals, protecting SNAP benefits as a vital lifeline,

providing caregiver tax credits to support families, or exploring new revenue mechanisms—such as the regulation and taxation of skill games—to bolster the state’s lottery funds, which are restricted to supporting senior services throughout Pennsylvania.

I’ll close with this, Flat-funding senior nutrition during a period of historic inflation does not save money—it simply shifts the burden onto far more expensive state-funded medical systems and onto the very individuals we strive to support. They do not have the means to shoulder that burden. That said, we remain committed to ensuring our seniors are nourished—body and soul—with freshly prepared meals delivered to their homes, empowering them to live independent, meaningful lives. And with that, I’ll close. I am grateful for the opportunity to speak with you today.

Thank you.