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The Title III-C Nutrition Services Program: **Understanding Participants' Monetary Contributions**

INTRODUCTION

Each year, hundreds of millions of meals are provided to older adults in America as part of the Title III-C Nutrition Services Program (NSP). Authorized under the Older Americans Act (OAA), the NSP promotes access to nutritious meals, facilitates social contact, and helps older adults maintain their independence in their homes and communities. Participants who are able to attend congregate meal sites typically receive lunch on one or more weekdays and, at some sites, also receive breakfast, dinner, or weekend meals. Participants who are homebound receive nutritious home-delivered meals, typically five days a week. Congregate meal sites and home-delivered meals are opportunities for participants to socialize with peers and program staff and receive other services such as nutrition education, screening, and counseling.

The NSP is overseen by the Administration for Community Living (ACL) of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS). ACL provides overall federal coordination, and the State Units on Aging (SUAs) and the Area Agencies on Aging (AAAs) both support key aspects of program operations. In turn, local service providers (LSPs) typically are responsible for direct nutrition services. Congregate meals and supportive services take place at LSPs' meal sites such as senior centers, religious facilities, and public or low-income housing facilities. Home-delivered meals are provided to homebound individuals through the congregate meal sites, affiliated central kitchens, or nonaffiliated food service organizations.

There is no financial means test for the NSP, but the program specifically targets older adults with the greatest economic or social need, with special attention given to those with low incomes, minorities, residents of rural areas, those with limited English proficiency, and those at risk of institutional care. Paying for meals is not mandatory, but at some meal sites, participants are encouraged to make a voluntary contribution toward the total cost of the meal. Participants are not denied meals or other services based on an inability or unwillingness to contribute.

LSPs offering meals and services often have limited resources and prioritize their services based on policies set by the SUA, AAA, or LSP (Mabli et al. 2015). LSPs may request contributions from participants to help meet the needs of current clients or to expand their reach to more older adults or to those with different needs. With demand for meals expected to rise as older adults make up an increasingly large share of the U.S. population, it is important to understand how LSPs find the resources to keep offering meals and services.

This brief examines how widespread the practice of encouraging participants to make contributions is, and, for those LSPs who do encourage it, the amount of the suggested donation. It also describes the types of LSPs that are more likely to encourage participant contributions, the characteristics of participants served by those LSPs, and the characteristics of participants who make monetary contributions.

The data used in the analysis were collected as part of the Title III-C NSP Evaluation, which Mathematica conducted for ACL. This encompassed a process evaluation of program administration and service delivery (Mabli et al. 2015); an analysis of the cost of providing a meal (Ziegler et al. 2015); and an evaluation of the program's effect on participants' outcomes, including food security, socialization, and diet quality (Mabli et al. 2017). The process evaluation collected survey data from SUAs, AAAs, and LSPs on many topics, including policies on how participant contributions were collected, managed, and spent (Mabli et al. 2015). The outcomes survey collected information from older adults on many topics as well, including their monetary contributions for program meals (Mabli et al. 2017). This brief uses data from both the process evaluation's LSP survey and the evaluation's outcome survey.

METHODS

Descriptive analysis was used for all sets of analyses. The analysis of the types of LSPs with recommended amounts was based solely on LSP data from the process evaluation. The process evaluation consisted of data from a census of 56 State Units on Aging, a sample of 333 AAAs making up over half of the AAAs in the country, and a sample of 199 LSPs from the sampled and participating AAAs. Limiting the sample to LSPs with nonmissing responses to the recommended contributions questions resulted in a sample of 180 LSPs serving congregate meals and 171 LSPs serving home-delivered meals. Data from the LSP survey and the

outcomes survey were combined for the analysis of the populations served by agencies with recommended amounts. The original evaluation sample consisted of 596 congregate meal participants and 504 participants who received home-delivered meals. Limiting the sample to participants with matched LSP information resulted in 569 congregate meal participants and 468 who received home-delivered meals. The analysis of participant characteristics was based solely on the outcomes survey. Limiting the sample to participants with nonmissing responses to the question on monetary contributions resulted in 511 congregate meal participants and 389 who received home-delivered meals.

FINDINGS

How many LSPs have a recommended contribution amount, and how much is it?

In 2015–2016, most LSPs (87 percent) recommended that participants contribute a certain amount of money to congregate meals (Table 1). Among those that did, the average recommended amount per meal was \$2.68. Thirty percent of LSPs recommended \$1.50 or less, and 20 percent recommended more than \$3.50. A slightly lower percentage of LSPs (80 percent) encouraged their home-delivered meal participants to contribute, though the average recommended amount was higher, at \$2.95 per meal. For home-delivered meals, 22 percent of LSPs recommended \$1.50 or less, and 28 percent recommended more than \$3.50.

TABLE 1: Participant contributions recommended by LSPs

	Congregate meals	Home-delivered meals
LSPs with a recommended contribution amount (%)	87	80
Amount of recommended contributions (%)		
\$0.01 to \$1.50	30	22
\$1.51 to \$2.50	21	19
\$2.51 to \$3.50	29	31
\$3.51 or more	20	28
Average (\$)	\$2.68	\$2.95
Sample size	180	171

Source: ACL LSP survey, 2014, weighted data.

TABLE 2: Recommended contributions and amounts for congregate meals, by LSP characteristic

LSP characteristic	Percentage of LSPs that had a recommended contribution (%)			Average recommended amount (\$)		
	Yes	No	Difference	Yes	No	Difference
All LSPs serving congregate meals	87			2.68		
Is a private organization	86	84	2	2.84	2.74	0.10
Is a faith-based organization	100	87	13***	2.84	2.68	0.16
Is a stand-alone organization	83	92	-9	3.02	2.64	0.38
Offers breakfast	68	89	-21	2.66	2.87	-0.21
Offers dinner	88	87	2	3.54	2.77	0.77**
Offers weekend meals	84	88	-5	3.75	2.56	1.20***
Offers social activities	86	88	-1	3.00	2.08	0.91*
Offers nutrition screening	86	87	-1	2.38	3.01	-0.64
Offers nutrition education	87	87	0	2.74	2.38	0.36
Offers nutrition counseling	82	89	-6	3.13	2.48	0.65
Offers transportation	87	99	-13**	2.48	2.85	-0.37
Offers case management	90	88	2	2.14	3.11	-0.97
Offers health promotion activities	85	91	-6	2.71	2.58	0.13
Midwest	96	84	12**	3.19	2.51	0.67**
Northeast	92	86	6	2.31	2.77	-0.46
South	78	94	-16*	2.20	2.99	-0.79
West	93	86	7	3.45	2.53	0.93***
Sample size	180			158		

Source: ACL LSP survey, 2014, weighted data.

***/**/* Significantly different from zero at the 0.01/0.05/0.10 level, two-tailed test.

Which types of LSPs are likely to have a recommended contribution, and how do contribution amounts vary?

Some types of LSPs were more likely to have a recommended contribution amount for congregate meals (Table 2). Every faith-based LSP, for example, recommended a certain amount, whereas 87 percent of non-faith-based LSPs did. Almost all LSPs in the Midwest had a recommended amount (96 percent), and fewer LSPs in other regions did, although more than four in five (84 percent) recommended an amount. LSPs offering transportation services were less likely to have a recommended amount than LSPs that did not offer them (87 versus 99 percent).

Among LSPs with a recommended contribution amount, the average amount per meal varied depending on certain characteristics of the LSP. LSPs offering dinner or weekend meals, and those located in the Midwest or West, had higher average recommended amounts (\$3.00 or more) than LSPs

that were in other regions or that did not offer these meals. LSPs offering social activities also had a higher recommended amount compared with LSPs that did not offer them.

Some types of LSPs were also more likely to have a recommended contribution for home-delivered meals (Table 3). All LSPs that offered dinner had a recommended amount, and three-quarters (74 percent) of those that did not offer dinner recommended a contribution. Regionally, those in the South were less likely (62 percent) to have a recommended amount than those in other regions (93 percent).

The average recommended amount per home-delivered meal also varied depending on certain characteristics of the LSP. LSPs had higher recommended amounts if they were faith-based or offered weekend meals and had lower amounts if they offered nutrition screening or case management (Table 3).

What types of participants receive meals from the LSPs that recommend meal contributions?

Compared with the LSPs that did not have recommended monetary contributions for congregate meals, LSPs that did have them served participants who were more likely to be female, be older than 74, be non-Hispanic White, have higher income, live with others, have limited geographic access to food (measured by not having access to a supermarket close to home), live in the Midwest or Northeast, be food secure, and be satisfied with their opportunities to socialize (Supplemental Table 1). Among those LSPs that recommended contributions, those with higher amounts were more likely to serve participants who were older, non-Hispanic Whites, and living in the Midwest or West.¹

A similar comparison of the characteristics of home-delivered meal participants revealed that LSPs with recommended meal contributions served participants who were more likely to not have completed high school, be non-Hispanic White or Hispanic, have higher income, live alone, have limited access to food, live in the Midwest, be food insecure, and be unsatisfied with their opportunities to socialize (Supplemental Table 2). LSPs with higher recommended amounts for home-delivered meals were more likely to serve participants who were female, older, had higher levels of education, non-Hispanic Black or non-Hispanic White, have higher income, live alone, live in the Midwest but not the South, be food secure, and be satisfied with their opportunities to socialize.

¹ Supplemental Tables 1 and 2 illuminate the characteristics of congregate and home-delivered meal participants overall and according to whether the LSP had any recommended contribution amount, or a high or low recommended amount.

TABLE 3: Recommended contribution amounts for home-delivered meals, by LSP characteristic

LSP characteristic	Percentage of LSPs that had a recommended amount (%)			Average recommended amount (\$)		
	Yes	No	Difference	Yes	No	Difference
All LSPs serving home-delivered meals	80			2.95		
Is a private organization	87	66	21	3.23	3.07	0.15
Is a faith-based organization	92	79	13	3.77	2.89	0.88**
Is a stand-alone organization	83	80	4	3.16	3.21	-0.05
Offers breakfast	73	77	-4	2.69	3.06	-0.37
Offers dinner	100	74	26***	3.52	2.97	0.55
Offers weekend meals	93	77	16*	3.58	2.71	0.87**
Offers social activities	81	82	-1	3.11	2.78	0.34
Offers nutrition screening	80	83	-3	2.52	3.51	-1.00**
Offers nutrition education	84	76	7	2.88	3.24	-0.36
Offers nutrition counseling	74	85	-11	2.98	2.97	0.01
Offers transportation	79	76	3	2.72	2.92	-0.20
Offers case management	81	76	5	2.16	3.40	-1.24**
Offers health promotion activities	81	83	-2	2.80	3.25	-0.45
Midwest	96	75	21***	3.37	2.78	0.59
Northeast	92	78	14*	3.05	2.94	0.11
South	62	93	-31***	2.31	3.28	-0.98*
West	91	77	14*	3.31	2.84	0.47
Sample size	171			140		

Source: ACL LSP survey, 2014, weighted data.

***/**/* Significantly different from zero at the 0.01/0.05/0.10 level, two-tailed test.

Which types of participants are likely to contribute to program meals?

Eighty percent of congregate meal participants said they contributed to the NSP for meals they consumed (Table 4). Participants were more likely to contribute if they lived in a rural area (93 percent, in contrast with 76 percent of urban participants), lived in the Northeast (92 percent, versus 67 percent of participants in the West), were non-Hispanic Whites (89 percent, versus 56 percent of Hispanic participants of any race), had at least a high school education (84 percent versus 68 percent of participants who did not complete high school), or were food secure (84 versus 62 percent of food-insecure participants). Participants with higher incomes were also more

likely to contribute than those with lower incomes (86 percent versus 75 percent) and those who lived alone were more likely to contribute than those who lived with others (84 versus 76 percent).

More than half (58 percent) of the participants who received home-delivered meals said they contributed to the NSP for meals they consumed. Contributions were more likely among participants who had completed high school (67 percent, compared with 47 percent of participants who had not completed high school) or were food secure (65 percent versus 32 percent of food-insecure participants). Participants age 74 or younger were less likely to contribute (47 percent, versus 69 percent of participants age 85 and older).

TABLE 4: Percentage of meal program participants who reported making a contribution, by participant characteristics

Characteristic	Congregate meal participants	Home-delivered meal participants
Total	80	58
Age		
74 and younger	74	47**
75 to 84	85	53
85 and older	88	69
Gender		
Male	73	57
Female	84	59
Military service		
Veteran	85	53
Non-veteran	80	59
Highest grade level completed		
Did not complete high school	68***	47**
High school graduate, GED, or equivalent	84	67
Presence of other people living in household		
Lives alone	84*	61
Lives with others	76	54
Race/ethnicity		
Non-Hispanic Black	72	41
Non-Hispanic White	89*	66
Non-Hispanic other ^a	66	31
Hispanic	56	43
Income		
Monthly income-to-poverty lower than median ^b	75*	52
Monthly income-to-poverty higher than median	86	64

Characteristic	Congregate meal participants	Home-delivered meal participants
Geographic access to food		
Has access to supermarket	80	56
Does not have access to supermarket	82	67
Food security		
Food insecure	62**	32***
Food secure	84	65
Satisfaction with socialization opportunities		
Satisfied	82	58
Not satisfied	56	56
Census region		
Midwest	88*	61
Northeast	92**	57
South	77	54
West	67	60
Urbanicity		
Urban	76**	56
Rural	93	64
Sample size	511	389

Source: ACL NSP outcomes survey, 2015–2016, weighted data.

***/**/* Difference significantly different from zero at the 0.01/0.05/0.10 level, two-tailed test. Categorical variables were tested against only one referent group (85 and older, Hispanic, and West).

Other includes Asian, American Indian, or Alaska Native; Native Hawaiian or other Pacific Islander, and races not identified by respondents in the survey.

^bIncome-to-poverty based on HHS poverty guidelines (<https://aspe.hhs.gov/2015-poverty-guidelines>). Median income as a percentage of poverty was equal to 128 percent for congregate meal participants and 122 percent for those who received home-delivered meals.

DISCUSSION

This brief describes the prevalence of recommended monetary contributions for NSP meals, the types of clients served by LSPs that do recommend certain amounts, and the characteristics of participants who make contributions. Main findings are the following.

Most (at least 80 percent of) LSPs had a recommended meal contribution amount in 2015–2016. Some LSPs recommended less than \$2.00, but a nontrivial percentage recommended more than \$3.50 per meal. Although allowing participants to make voluntary contributions to NSP meals is a known characteristic of the program, the finding that most LSPs had recommended amounts suggests a need for ACL to assess whether LSPs request contributions to help cover basic expenses of providing meals and services or to offer an expanded set of meal options and services. It would be useful to review the

adequacy of program funding if LSPs are asking for contributions simply to provide a minimal level of services to participants.

There was generally little variation in the types of LSPs that recommended contributions and in the amounts they recommend. Notable exceptions include the regions LSPs operate in and whether they offer dinner or offer meals on the weekend. Midwestern LSPs were more likely to recommend a contribution and have a higher recommended amount, whereas those in the South were less likely to recommend one.

In an analysis of the component costs of producing a meal, the NSP evaluation's cost study revealed that, in comparison with other regions, the Midwest had the lowest paid labor costs per congregate meal and the highest value of donated nonlabor resources per meal (such as food, facilities, and gasoline for deliveries). In contrast, the South had the highest paid labor costs and the

lowest value of donated nonlabor resources (Ziegler et al. 2015). Similarly, the value of volunteer labor and donated nonlabor resources as a component of the cost of producing a home-delivered meal was highest in the Midwest and lowest in the South. Based on these per meal component costs, it is not clear why there is a greater prevalence and higher amounts of participant contributions in the Midwest, and lower prevalence in the South, except if LSPs with greater amounts of donated nonlabor resources have less of a need for participant contributions. More research is needed to understand the relationship between participant contributions, LSP budgets, and per-meal costs.

Offering meals on the weekend and offering dinner were also associated with LSPs being more likely to recommend higher contribution amounts for congregate meals and more likely to recommend contributions for home-delivered meals. It is unclear whether larger participant contributions are needed for LSPs to offer these expanded meal options, because they could potentially be expensive components of LSPs' program models. Reassessing the extent to which program funding adequately covers expanded meal options for older adults could play an important role in ensuring that older adults with insufficient access to food can still have this essential service available to them.

NSP participants with more resources—including more education, food security, and income—were more likely to make contributions, but sizable percentages of older adults with less education, less food security, and lower income also contributed. The high contribution rate among resource-constrained participants highlights the need to learn more about why participants contribute to NSP meals and whether they can afford to. Because the outcomes survey did not examine the amount that participants contributed, future research should determine how often and how much participants with lower incomes contribute to meal programs. In addition, although Mabli et al. (2017) found that few NSP participants sensed pressure to make monetary contributions to meals (just 3 percent of congregate meal participants and 1 percent of home-delivered meal participants), 15 percent of congregate meal participants and 23 percent of home-delivered meal participants reported broader challenges making ends meet (Mabli and Shenk 2018). Having a nontrivial share of food-insecure

participants make monetary contributions to program meals—63 percent of congregate meal participants and 32 percent of home-delivered meal participants—underscores the need to understand the role participant contributions play in the provision of meals and services. Allocating federal funds to help cover that amount could allow resource-constrained older adults to pay for their medical expenses, utility bills, rent, and other necessities instead, and still have access to nutritious meals through the NSP. In particular, having food-insecure participants reallocate those limited resources to support personal food spending outside of the NSP would complement the NSP's mission to reduce food insecurity in older adults.

REFERENCES

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SUPPLEMENTAL TABLE 1: Characteristics of congregate meal participants, by presence and amount of recommended meal contributions

Characteristic	All congregate meal participants	Participants served by LSPs with a recommended amount	Participants served by LSPs without a recommended amount	Participants served by LSPs with high recommended amount^a	Participants served by LSPs with low recommended amount
Age					
74 and younger	41	36	70	30	43
75 to 84	41	44	26	49	37
85 and older	18	21	4	21	20
Male	33	28	57	30	25
Veteran	17	15	19	21	7
Did not complete high school	24	24	23	24	25
Lives alone	60	60	66	61	58
Race/ethnicity					
Non-Hispanic Black	13	13	17	4	25
Non-Hispanic White	65	67	44	76	55
Non-Hispanic other ^b	8	9	9	8	9
Hispanic	14	12	29	12	11
Monthly income-to-poverty lower than median^c	50	47	69	45	49
Has access to supermarket	81	77	94	76	79
Food insecure	16	12	41	11	13
Satisfied with socialization opportunities	93	95	85	95	96
Census region					
Midwest	22	27	9	33	18
Northeast	26	31	14	12	55
South	18	14	20	10	20
West	34	29	57	45	7
Urban	72	74	78	67	84
Sample size	596	494	75	284	210

Source: ACL NSP outcomes survey, 2015–2016, and LSP survey, 2014, weighted data.

^aLSPs with recommended amounts above the median were considered high, and those at or below the median were considered low. The median was \$2.50 for congregate meal sites.

^bOther^c includes Asian, American Indian, or Alaska Native; Native Hawaiian or other Pacific Islander, and races not identified by survey respondents.

^cIncome-to-poverty based on HHS poverty guidelines (<https://aspe.hhs.gov/2015-poverty-guidelines>). Median income as a percentage of poverty was equal to 128 percent for congregate meal participants.

SUPPLEMENTAL TABLE 2: Characteristics of participants in home-delivered meals, by presence and amount of recommended meal contributions

Characteristic	All home-delivered meal participants	Participants served by LSPs with a recommended amount	Participants served by LSPs without a recommended amount	Participants served by LSPs with high recommended amount^a	Participants served by LSPs with low recommended amount
Age					
74 and younger	21	20	23	12	24
75 to 84	36	38	28	38	39
85 and older	43	42	49	50	38
Male	32	32	32	23	35
Veteran	15	16	13	16	17
Did not complete high school	40	42	34	29	49
Lives alone	58	60	46	68	57
Race/ethnicity					
Non-Hispanic Black	17	10	38	19	6
Non-Hispanic White	69	72	60	76	70
Non-Hispanic other ^b	5	6	2	3	8
Hispanic	9	12	0	3	15
Monthly income-to-poverty lower than median^c	50	47	58	38	52
Has access to supermarket	82	80	88	74	81
Food insecure	22	24	17	20	26
Satisfied with socialization opportunities	81	78	95	82	77
Census region					
Midwest	29	33	0	43	30
Northeast	22	23	28	26	19
South	22	14	49	4	19
West	27	30	23	27	32
Urban	75	77	71	77	76
Sample size	504	383	85	107	270

Source: ACL NSP outcomes survey, 2015–2016, and LSP survey, 2014, weighted data..

^aLSPs with recommended amounts above the median were considered high, and at or below the median considered low. The median was \$3.00 for home-delivered meal sites.

^b“Other” includes Asian, American Indian, or Alaska Native; Native Hawaiian or other Pacific Islander, and races not identified by respondents in the survey.

^cIncome-to-poverty based on HHS poverty guidelines (<https://aspe.hhs.gov/2015-poverty-guidelines>). Median income as a percentage of poverty was equal to 122 percent for home-delivered meal participants.