

State-Community Collaboration in Response to the Covid-19 Pandemic: The Florida Restaurant Meals Initiative State and Local Partnership

The Feeding Older Floridians Restaurant Meal Initiative

In March 2020, as public health measures were put in place to slow the spread of the coronavirus (COVID-19), Florida, like many states, closed congregate meal sites to ensure the safety of older adults and people with disabilities throughout the state. However, these sites were a lifeline for approximately 50,000 Floridians¹, meaning the state needed to find a way to continue to provide meals during the public health emergency. The Florida Department of Elder Affairs (DOEA) quickly established a workgroup with the state's eleven Area Agencies on Aging (AAAs), which support senior residents' health and social needs, including nutrition services, through home delivered and congregate meals.

When the Secretary of Elder Affairs, Richard Prudom, learned of a pilot program in Tennessee that brought together local restaurants and older adults with nutritional support needs, he brought the idea of this initiative to the workgroup during their daily meetings. DOEA ensured that AAAs knew they had the Department and the Governor's full commitment and support in navigating the logistical and bureaucratic challenges to make the initiative work and allow partnerships with local restaurants in their area. AAAs were encouraged to leverage the emergency authorizations and funding provided by the Families First Act and the CARES Act to take on the effort. Each AAA designed their own unique approach to the Feeding Older Floridians Restaurant Meal Initiative to achieve two goals: to meet the nutritional needs of isolated older adults and those with limited ability to access meals and to support local businesses devastated by the shelter in place orders².

Collaboration: The Key to Success

Partnership and collaboration at several levels were essential to overcoming barriers encountered as part of the initiative and to the initiatives' overall success.

This brief will focus on two forms of collaboration: collaboration between the state of Florida and its AAAs and collaboration among the AAAs themselves.

Collaboration: Florida State Agencies & AAAs

A key factor in the success of this effort was the workgroup that brought the state and its AAAs together. The frequency of meetings and continuous sharing of information allowed both the state and its community partners to remain nimble and responsive to the evolving needs and challenges at hand. It also provided a forum to trigger support from the state

Feeding Older Floridians Restaurant Meal Initiative Partners:

- [The Florida Department of Elder Affairs \(DOEA\)](#)
- [The Florida Restaurant and Lodging Association \(FRLA\)](#)
- [The Department of Business and Professional Regulation](#)
- The Florida Area Agency on Aging Network
 - [Northwest Florida Area Agency on Aging, Inc.](#)
 - [Advantage Aging Solutions](#)
 - [Elder Options](#)
 - [Elder Source, The Area Agency on Aging in Northwest Florida](#)
 - [Area Agency on Aging of Pasco-Pinellas, Inc.](#)
 - [Senior Connection Center, Inc.](#)
 - [Senior Resource Alliance](#)
 - [Area Agency on Aging for Southwest Florida, Inc.](#)
 - [Area Agency on Aging of Palm Beach/Treasure Coast, Inc.](#)
 - [Aging and Disability Resource Center of Broward County](#)
 - [Alliance for Aging Inc.](#)
- Local restaurants and meal providers throughout Florida

¹ 2020 Summary of Programs and Services Section B: https://elderaffairs.org/wp-content/uploads/2020_SOPS_B.pdf

² Press Release: Florida Department of Elder Affairs Concludes Year with Hallmark Innovations, Ingenuity, and New Programs, December 23,

2020: <https://elderaffairs.org/wp-content/uploads/florida-department-of-elder-affairs-concludes-year-with-hallmark-innovations-ingenuity-and-new-programs.pdf>

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around regulatory and financial hurdles and for DOEA to serve as a champion for the initiative through continuously messaged support and backing.

Older Americans Act (OAA) regulations require that meals meet state and local food safety and sanitation requirements and adhere to current dietary guidelines³. This would have been an hurdle for the initiative due to the time it would take to have all of the meals and menus approved. However, to expedite the process to confirm restaurant partners met OAA requirements, the FLRA connected interested restaurants with AAAs. AAAs worked closely with DOEA to confirm that these restaurants were licensed with the DBPR, and the Director of Home and Community Based Services at DOEA, a registered dietitian, reviewed and approved all Feeding Older Floridians Restaurant Meal Initiative meal menus, providing consistent, standardized, and expedited reviews.

With the launch of the program, the AAAs were tasked with large scale purchasing of restaurant-style meals. Compounding this new expense, many AAAs experienced a surge in demand for meal support during the pandemic. To alleviate potential cash flow problems for the AAAs, DOEA provided billing support and financial flexibility. At the onset of the initiative, DOEA used a cost-reimbursement model for the purchase of meals, which allowed for geographic variation in meal costs and for maximum flexibility as the AAAs worked with restaurants in their local communities. DOEA did not enforce any limits on cost-reimbursement, and AAAs were allowed to bill both the cost of meals and the costs associated with delivering meals (e.g., salaries for drivers, mileage reimbursement up to the state rate of \$.0445, PPE for drivers, and other indirect costs). This flexibility alleviated administrative burden of frequently amending contracted unit rates, and helped accelerate contracting, which allowed AAAs to quickly partner with restaurants that could best meet the needs of both the older adults they support and their community as whole.

For example, one AAA serving Central Florida, Senior Resource Alliance, selected restaurants that reflected their community, with 80% of the restaurants being minority or women-owned. Additionally, through the

AAA of Palm Beach/Treasure Coast's partnership with TooJay's, a local gourmet deli chain, the restaurant was able to rehire most of its staff that had been let go due to the pandemic to prepare meals for the new initiative.



The Area Agency on Aging of Palm Beach/Treasure Coast partnered with TooJay's to provide seven-day meal packs, including breakfast and dinner for a week.

Collaboration Among AAAs

Throughout the planning and implementation of the initiative, Florida AAAs shared best practices, lessons learned and tangible resources with one another to further support success. The frequent workgroup calls allowed AAAs to share ideas around outreach, logistics, staffing, and supplemental funding.

Sharing Resources

Several AAAs experienced outreach challenges related to raising awareness of the Feeding Older Floridians Restaurant Meal Initiative, including limited access to technology among older adults, multi-lingual communities, and a growing need for nutritional support among individuals who may not be familiar with the array of supports and services the AAAs provide. Senior Resource Alliance developed a robust media campaign to reach seniors which included press releases in both English and Spanish, interviews with the Senior Resource Alliance CEO, outreach to local elected officials and community organizations, and an op-ed article about the program in a major local daily paper. To help other AAAs and community-based organizations launch media campaigns of their own, Senior Resource Alliance posted its [media toolkit](#) on its [Meals of Love](#) website. The toolkit includes logos, talking points, menus,

³ Older Americans Act Nutrition Services:
<https://acl.gov/programs/health-wellness/nutrition-services>

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press releases, and other information needed to launch a media campaign.

Sharing Capacity

Due to the stay at home orders, several AAA call centers were overwhelmed by an increase in volume of calls as a result of a roughly three-fold increase in food insecurity and hunger among older adults and people with disabilities and the required changes in practices. Partner AAAs with capacity to field calls stepped in to receive re-routed calls to continue to inform the public and support referral and intake processes. Additionally, some AAAs utilized unemployed case managers and day care workers to work in the call centers to support the increase in volume.

Sharing Practices and Procedures

Partnerships with local restaurants were new business relationships for both the AAAs and the restaurant community. Based on their experiences, Florida AAAs noted the importance of having a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) with their restaurant partners to lay out responsibilities on both sides. AAAs supported one another by sharing restaurant contacts and MOU templates, allowing AAAs to inherit practices from partner AAAs and restaurants codified in their MOU.

Lessons Learned

Below are a few key lessons learned shared by both state and community partners for their peers interested in exploring efforts similar to the Feeding Older Floridians Restaurant Meal Initiative.

Support Local Flexibility

Each AAA took a different approach to partnering with local restaurants and meal providers. While one AAA opted to partner with a commissary kitchen due to their controlled food handling process, others chose to partner with restaurants they already had contacts with, and one AAA partnered with a grocer that was able to provide fresh produce. These variations reflect each AAA's unique circumstances, including previously existing partnerships, local community needs, and demographics. DOEA understood the local differences and promoted this flexibility by including AAAs in the building of the initiative and allowing for variation in the local design of the initiative. By allowing each partnership to take a unique shape,

AAAs were able to respond to the distinct needs of their communities.

Tips for states & community-based organizations interested in implementing a similar model:

- Start small
- Ensure transparency on funding requirements
- Use MOUs to set clear expectations
- Establish mechanisms for frequent communication and collaboration

Leverage Technology

Florida AAAs faced new challenges related to standing up a new business model and adjusting to pandemic-related disruptions to staffing and capacity. To overcome these challenges, several Florida AAAs used technology to improve their capacity. They used multiple modes, such as mobile applications to track enrollment, manage deliveries, and communicate with delivery drivers.

Explore Public-Private Partnerships

Several AAAs leveraged both private and public funding to support the restaurant meal initiatives. The braiding of public and private funds provides an opportunity to sustain parts of the initiative beyond temporary pandemic relief funding. When this brief was developed, several AAAs were exploring what a sustainable version of the restaurant meal initiative could look like. Private funds are likely to be vital to the success of sustainability program.

Provide a Forum for Frequent Communication

The frequent and collaborative calls between DOEA, FLRA, and the Florida AAAs provided a linchpin for collaboration between the state and community. The program succeeded because of state support and because partners in the initiative communicated frequently, sharing challenges, solutions, and best practices.

Conclusion

As a collective initiative, the Feeding Older Floridians Restaurant Meal Initiative has provided over 3.5 million meals to older adults and individuals with disabilities across the state. Besides meeting immediate nutritional needs, the initiative created a lifeline for many small and local businesses, allowing many to keep their doors open and their staff employed

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during the pandemic. The collaborative partnership between the State of Florida and the AAA Network provided essential direct relief to the Florida community and strengthened the State-Community partnership paving the way for future innovation and collaboration.

The State-Community Collaboration Think Tank is funded by the Administration for Community Living. The Think Tank convened from February 2021-August 2021 to explore barriers and opportunities to developing and scaling Community Integrated Health Networks (CIHNs) in their states and communities. For more information, please see the [ACL's Aligning Health Care and Social Services through CBO Networks website](#).