

Nutrition Services Stakeholder Meeting

August 22, 2023

Attendance: Erin Harkrader (SUA), Shana Brierley (SUA), Alison Dvorak (ECAAA), Deb Monahan (TVCCA), Denise Andreas (SWCAA), Kathy Chase (ECAAA), Jaime Smith (CT Department of Agriculture), Stan Mingione (Estuary), Michael Werner (CWCSEO), Mallory Daley (Hughes + Cronin), Natasha Tetrault (Congregate Living), Rick Liegl (City of Meriden), Tyler Anderson (Robinson + Cole), Spring Raymond (WCAAA), David Morgan (TEAM, Inc.), Nancy Isa (CRT)

Public Comment

None.

Update and Recap

S. Brierley recapped previous meeting minutes and offered to send minutes to anyone who requested them.

Nutrition Task Force

E. Harkrader advised that first Nutrition Task Force meeting is next week, 8/30/23. E. Harkrader is Commissioner Porter's designee from ADS for the Task Force. Advised that there will be representatives from state agencies (ADS, DSS), AAAs, ENPs, recipient of meals, legislature. After the first meeting, there should be more information about how the task force will run, what the meeting schedule will look like, and what structure will be, however, per the legislation that created the task force, it is intended to study the Elderly Nutrition Program, make recommendations and produce a report in January 2024, after which it will disband.

R. Liegl asked who on the call is participating. On the call, E. Harkrader, A. Dvorak – other people volunteered that there will be representation from City of Torrington, Community Renewal Team, New Opportunities, SWCAA, NCAAA.

A. Dvorak asked if someone from OPM would be participating in the task force. E. Harkrader responded that OPM is not included in the list of designees in the bill, however, it may be that OPM is brought into the conversation once the task force figures out where they want to go.

D. Andreas asked if there would be any output from the task force that would be shared. E. Harkrader advised that one of the mandates of the bill is that the task force must produce a report on the Elderly Nutrition Program and reports that come out of task forces are typically publicly available.

Congregate Attendance

S. Brierley raised that as she has been doing congregated site visits, she has seen that some sites have very strong numbers while some have dwindled considerably. She asked if anybody has any insight as to why this might be, or any observations based on their experience that might inform things that can be done to improve numbers.

Per R. Liegl, Meriden Senior Center is seeing very strong numbers post COVID (around 60 participants per day). With that said, life circumstances are much more complicated post-COVID (rent, medicine, transportation, access). There have been impacts to senior center staff because participants and

attendees have more social challenges, and mental health challenges which makes things more difficult for staff. Another observation is that donations are gone post-COVID and that for people who were in need before COVID, COVID has accelerated their situations. There are a lot more homeless individuals and people with mental health challenges and they need a meal but don't have resources to contribute.

S. Brierley asked if anybody has talked to people who attend the senior center but do not participate in the congregate lunch program to find out why they're not participating? D. Andreas stated that this is a great idea to understand why participation may be lower and said COVID has changed things – some people are okay doing limited activities and getting out while others are still very fearful.

S. Mingione stated that while COVID has something to do with attendance, but part of it is that the model needs to change. Many seniors are more active and don't want the same type of experience or meal. He also said that as a state, we need to change the narrative around what the meal is and how we talk about the program.

K. Chase mentioned that there had been an effort to transition to calling congregate programs community cafes however it never really took off. E. Harkrader remarked that perhaps we can work on “rebranding” as a statewide effort and make sure there is alignment in messaging.

Grab and Go

E. Harkrader advised that COVID grab-and-go meal types will be discontinued at the end of the FFY (9/30/23). This is due to the end of the Public Health Emergency and the flexibilities that came along with it. Advised that ENPs should discuss grab-and-go meals with their AAA, since the AAAs are the funders and see what the thinking is about continuing grab-and-go meals. E. Harkrader reminded all attendees that grab-and-go meals are considered a C2 (HDM) service and pull from that funding. Advised that SUA will look at creating a new grab-and-go meal type in the event that it needs to be used in situations where there is a COVID resurgence or temporary need. Advised that as part of the proposed new Older Americans Act regulations, ACL has proposed making grab-and-go meals a permissible part of C1 congregate expenditures, however, there will likely be limits (proposed is 20%) and any changes like that will not go into effect right away.

Staff and Volunteer Recruitment and Retention

S. Brierley inquired of the group about volunteer recruitment and retention and what works and what is a challenge.

S. Mingione advised that Estuary has opportunities special needs volunteers. Volunteering gives those individuals training and opportunities for interaction and education, and the volunteers help the program to be more successful. Estuary partners with area schools that have these programs, and it has been a great experience for everyone involved.

Per R. Liegl, his senior center has a training program for volunteers which helps to formalize the relationship, provide training and education, and promote buy-in from volunteers, which contributes to keeping people as volunteers for a longer time. Many of their volunteers have been with the program for many years and enjoy being part of the program.

Per D. Andreas, in her region, each site has their own “thing” – some require background checks or intensive processes, and potential volunteers do not want to jump through hoops to volunteer. S.

Brierley remarked that it must make it more difficult when volunteers feel like they can't just volunteer without there being many steps. D. Andreas agreed and said that these types of processes can be a barrier to recruiting people as volunteers.

ENP requests for trainings

S. Brierley discussed ENP bi-annual trainings and said that these will resume, and asked if there were specific trainings or types of speakers that ENPs and AAAs would like to see as part of the trainings.

A. Dvorak remarked that on the RD side, they tend to benefit the most from trainings and participation at conferences (virtual or otherwise) and there might be an opportunity to fund those types of things. There is also the need for ongoing food service and food safety trainings. Additionally, nutrition providers and staff get a lot of value out of other types of events and trainings and some type of training around social service needs would be helpful. Programs are working with many different types of people with a variety of social service needs and knowing how to recognize those needs, refer as necessary and identify resources would be helpful. E. Harkrader remarked that S. Brierley would be working with CANASP on the yearly statewide site manager training and one idea that had come up was de-escalation training for ENP (congregate site manager and MOW drivers).

Invitations and Attendance

As always, please send names and contact information of anyone that you think should be invited to E. Harkrader. Forwarding the invitation is fine, however, if you want the person added to the regular invite list, please let E. Harkrader know.

Other Business

J. Smith gave an update on the Senior Farmers Market Nutrition program and thanked everyone that has participated. This year, the program moved from paper checks to a card-based system. Participants received a card with a QR code that simply needed to be scanned by a certified farmer and eliminates many of the administrative burdens associated with the paper checks. Farmers love the ease-of-use and there has been five times the redemption rate this year as last year between WIC and Farmers Market. J. Smith advised that the backend portal is much more user-friendly and it's great to see the redemption amounts and said that if anybody has any challenges with the program, please reach out and let her know.

J. Smith also advised that this is a Farm Bill year and there will likely be sections about the FMNP and other Agriculture-related programs.

In the chat, Y. Perez asked if there is a cohesive list of markets that are broken down by town? J. Smith advised will provide to the group and also mentioned that with the new QR code system, participants are not limited to a certified Farmers Market – any certified farmer can take the benefits in any setting which creates better useability.

A. Dvorak remarked that there is high use of the SFMNP vouchers in ECAAA's service area and asked about potentially having farmers markets at senior center locations since many older adults cannot make it to farmers markets. She asked if there are farmers who would be able to fit senior centers into their schedules and said it would be helpful to have farmers markets at senior centers where older adults can more easily access them and do not have the usual transportation issues. J. Smith advised

that it's something that can be looked at, and perhaps if there are available farmers, they can rotate through some senior centers. There is the caveat that the farmer would need to be able to accommodate the number of consumers at the senior center.

J. Sekorski raised that with CT adopting a new food code, many local health departments are not aware of the specific legislative carve-out for ENPs operating under OAA Title III C wherein each individual site manager at a congregate meal site is not required to be individually certified as a Certified Food Protection Manager and is covered by the ENPs CFPM. Though the food code has changed, the legislation is not. J. Sekorski advised that he can provide the statutory language to any ENP that needs it, and E. Harkrader remarked that when working at an ENP, always kept a copy of the statute ready and available for any health department questions, and attached it to the training document at each congregate site in case of questions. Many health departments and sanitarians are not aware of the exemption.

Upcoming Meeting Dates

E. Harkrader advised that the current intention is for next year's meeting dates to mirror this year's, provided that there are no objections to Tuesday meetings from 1:00pm – 2:30pm. No objections were voiced, however, J. Smith said that the Department of Agriculture does often not schedule meetings in August due to the busy season, and K. Chase did remark that the December meeting can be difficult because of MIS reporting requirements and the State Performance Report workbook submission guidelines. E. Harkrader advised will look at both of those things.

Next meeting December 5, 2023.