



# Institutional or Innovative?

## What the setting of a congregated meal site says to guests

The setting in which guests eat their meals can make or break the overall experience and can ultimately be the reason why a guest participates or not. It is important to evaluate if programs are truly serving guests in a way that makes them feel comfortable and welcome, as well as makes them want to return again and again. Sometimes, a little innovation can take a meal site from “drab” to “fab!”

### ► What is in a name?

How a meal program is referred to can influence if guests want to try it or not. Many traditional meal program names (congregated meal program, senior center meal, home delivered meals) may make people think of dull and depressing environments and are not likely to draw in a crowd. Choosing a fresh name may make a meal site more inviting and exciting for potential guests. Ideas for names include:

- Meet and Eat
- Café Fresh
- [Encore Café](#)
- [Café 60](#)
- [Bistro Sixty](#)
- [My Meal, My Way](#)



### The Best Time to Shine (and Dine!)

Having the flexibility to dine when it is convenient is enticing for guests. Flexible meal hours can help solve generational differences, especially for those who cannot attend during the traditional lunch hour. Some options to consider:

- Offer the meal at new, different, or for extended times. This can help guests who need flexibility due to being in the workforce, active with other activities, or caretakers for loved ones.
- Consider serving a meal other than lunch. Some programs find that offering breakfast and/or an evening meal has increased participation.
- Schedule meal times directly before or directly after popular activities such as exercise classes, art classes, or something else that the community enjoys. If guests plan to attend an activity, they may also find it convenient to grab a meal as well.



### Welcoming Whereabouts

It is best to help ensure guests can both access their environment and also feel comfortable. Only then will they want to take part in the meal and suggest others join. Ensure everyone feels welcome:

- Consider the guest’s perspective. Do current and potential guests ‘see themselves’ reflected in the environment? Does the environment of the meal site and the materials promoting the meal reflect the diversity of the community?
  - » Ensure the images used on the website, in flyers/brochures, and on walls, etc. reflect diverse individuals.
  - » Avoid decorating for only the holidays celebrated by the majority. Become educated on other holidays that are celebrated in the community.
  - » A rainbow sticker at the entrance door can message that the meal site is a safe and welcoming space for individuals of all gender identities and sexual orientations.
- Scan the environment for any physical barriers to participation by adults of all abilities.
  - » Is there enough clearance for easy navigation with a scooter, walker, wheelchair, cane etc.?
  - » Do tables have dining spaces where a wheelchair can pull up, without having to ask for a chair to be moved aside?



## ► Elevate the Experience

A few simple touches can do wonders for making a space feel more inviting. Small, low-cost efforts can bring a space back to life.

- Partner with a local school's art or design department to brainstorm ideas and possibly contribute time and talent to brightening the meal site.
- Just ask! In some areas, a capital campaign to improve a site's appearance has been very successful. Donors respond well to requests for specific needs. Consider asking for donations of or funds to purchase:
  - » wallpaper and paint
  - » tables and chairs
  - » light fixtures
  - » curtains
  - » tablecloths
  - » dishes
  - » kitchen equipment
  - » landscaping materials
  - » transportation vehicles etc.
- Partner with a local school for live music. Whether from a college, junior college, high school, or middle school, share the talents of local youth with guests at your dining location.
- Work with a local florist to see if they would be willing to donate fresh flowers can no longer be sold. Flowers can be placed on each table or near the entrance to the site.
- Utilize a volunteer as a greeter. Having a welcoming face greeting guests can make them feel at ease, especially if they are new.
- Host a "Singles" meal or event as an opportunity for new guests who may not know other participants. It gives the guests a chance to connect and feel socially included at the meal site.
- Work with a chef or local culinary arts program at a high school or university to transform the program's menu. Food that is perceived by guests as higher quality will often bring in higher voluntary contribution amounts.
  - » If you are looking to add a new menu item(s), host a sampling event. Your guests are the ones eating, so their feedback will be the most important in helping you make decisions!



## Think Outside the Box...

...Or even outside the traditional meal site. Innovation can transform a program into something new and fresh.

- Change up traditional serving methods. Most people enjoy eating out at restaurants and cafés. Bring that same feel to meal programs:
  - » Utilize printed menus that are colorful and interesting to look at.
  - » Create an internet café with computers for use by guests, if possible.
  - » Offer chalkboard menus which can easily be updated and reflect what many restaurants, cafés, and coffee shops in the community use.
  - » Create a café feel with coffee always available for purchase. The additional revenue could be utilized to expand programming, promote the center, etc.
  - » Opening a breakfast club may just be the socialization (and meal) that some guests want.
  - » Set tables with lemon slices in water glasses.
  - » When enough volunteer help is available, encourage servers to pour drinks/coffee while chatting with the guests, just like a restaurant server would.
  - » Serving plates like a restaurant or buffet-style instead of calling guests by table can feel less institutional-like.
  - » Allow takeout boxes for left-overs (with appropriate food safety information) if local/state food code permits.
  - » A plate that looks appealing is more enjoyable. Use real plates when possible, and ensure the food looks nice by adding garnishes, wiping away any spills from the edge of plates, etc.





## Think Outside the Box *Continued*

- Consider taking meal service outside the traditional meal site! Instead, try going mobile.
  - » Food trucks are a popular choice not only because they are trendy, but they can move from place to place, serving guests that may otherwise be limited by access to transportation.
  - » Find where potential guests like to gather in the community and go to them! Whether with a food truck or simply serving a more traditional congregate meal in a new space, find the people. Some programs have had success serving at:
    - \* Libraries
    - \* Life-long learning centers
    - \* Garden shelter spaces (in nice weather)
    - \* Nature centers
    - \* If you are not sure, ask the community where older adults like to gather.
  - » Explore opportunities for intergenerational dining. This gives the opportunity for younger diners to join traditional meal guests and is especially beneficial for caregivers 60 and better who care for those younger than 60. Plus, bringing together different groups of people to socialize and learn from each other can really benefit everyone. It is important to remember that meals for participants under 60 years old would need to be funded by a source other than Older Americans Act Title III C.
  - » A restaurant voucher program may be the perfect way to meet guests where they are! The restaurant already has the venue, the food, the staff, and likely the customers. By working closely with a Registered Dietitian to ensure the menu items offered meet nutrition requirements, the local café or restaurant can serve guests who qualify for a congregate meal and be reimbursed for the meal.



## ► Tap the Talents

Meal participants bring a lifetime of skills, talents, ideas and community connections with them. Tap into guests when seeking to implement improvements such as those suggested above. Ask what improvements can be made and how. You are among artists, musicians, teachers, cooks, handy-people, etc. Value their ability to contribute to your efforts. Ask staff and volunteers what they think could elevate the space as well. Those that are most connected likely have great suggestions for improvement.

Knowing which changes guests need or desire is just the beginning to creating the ultimate meal site. Make a plan and follow through on ideas expressed. Taking the steps to make your meal site “fab” will pay off for the program and meal guests alike.