

Teaching Our Children to Care for Future Generations

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Brief Description:

Every summer, Meals On Wheels, Inc. of Tarrant County hosts a college-level internship program in order to help train future dietitians. Students get to work with five registered dietitians, and also learn the various issues and consequences facing the senior population and what nutritional interventions we can take.

This submission was selected as part of a national challenge issued to leaders in all communities seeking new "best practices" and "best possibilities" for the future of nutrition and aging.

President John F. Kennedy famously said, "Children are the world's most valuable resource and hope for the future." At Meals On Wheels, Inc. of Tarrant County (MOWI), we have taken the former president's famous words and turned them into a program designed to care for the nutritional health of our growing senior population. For the past five years, the dietitians at MOWI have implemented and executed a summer nutrition internship for upper-class nutrition students and recent graduates. Our hope with this program is to train our future nutrition professionals to be well-versed in the nutritional challenges facing our seniors, and to be competent, creative, and compassionate in designing solutions to meet these challenges.

Every summer, the following announcement is sent out to students at colleges and universities all across the nation: "The selected student(s)/graduate(s) will work one on one with five tenured, experienced, MOWI employed, Registered/Licensed Dietitians in the area of community dietetics and geriatric nutrition. The student(s) may gain experience in one or all of the following areas of dietetics: nutrition and business management, menu development, research design and reporting, client counseling, foodservice management, development of written nutrition education publications, client satisfaction survey design and reporting, food time and temperature studies, report writing, geriatric nutrition practices, in-home nutritional assessments, nutrition education presentation, personal portfolio development, and nutrition committee work. This opportunity has been very beneficial to past summer interns by giving them the much needed nutrition/dietetic experience prerequisite required/requested by most internship, coordinated, or graduate school programs. Personal references and essays from

previous MOWI summer work interns about their MOWI experiences and what they gained from this unique and rewarding opportunity are available upon request. “

The need for Registered Dietitians and other health professionals to provide care to our aging population is exponentially increasing. By 2045, our senior population will outnumber the youth of our world. In the United States alone, our population 65 years or older is expected to reach 71 million in 2030, and for persons aged 80 years or older, it will be an estimated 19.5 million by this same year. Along with this increase in lifespan comes an increase in chronic disease, with conditions like diabetes mellitus, congestive heart failure, hypertension, and heart disease leading this list. Many chronic conditions, along with a regimen of medications, need to also be managed through diet. At MOWI, we recognize that the individuals who will be providing care to our future seniors are those who are in college now. The future of senior nutrition is in the hands of our young people, and it is our duty and responsibility to train a generation of new nutrition professionals in what it takes to work with senior nutrition.

This is where our internship program at MOWI comes into play. Each summer, six to eight students are selected from applicants across the country to work with our five on-staff Registered Dietitians. Students are given a variety of tasks, including: devising a six-week menu cycle, creating nutrition education pieces that easy for our clients to understand and read, attending and assisting with home nutrition assessments, delivering meals to our clients, and understanding the challenges that our clients face when it comes to daily living and meals. For these students, it is a busy summer filled with hands-on experience that they simply don't get in the classroom or university setting. Many of our past participants have expressed how much they've gained from this experience, and how truly appreciative they are of the opportunity. One of our past interns, Wendy, stated that she learned “so much from the clients and the projects she worked on” and that she “was so thankful to be able to work with the geriatric population.” Another intern, Angeline, said, “I knew I was going to be learning a lot from the internship, but I vastly underestimated how much.” Our interns gradually transform from nutrition students into budding nutrition professionals, with the knowledge and self-confidence that they need to make an impact in the area of senior nutrition. Our students directly benefit from the “real-world” work experience we provide but, in the end, it will be our future senior population that will be the true recipients of this much-needed and often lacking training that our young dietetics students receive.

As a program, our internship is inevitably self-sustaining and beneficial for both the students that go through it and the clients we serve. It is a program we designed within our agency itself and our Director of Nutrition Services and Nutrition Services

Coordinator are the individuals responsible for its execution; as long as we have their participation and cooperation amongst our other departments at MOWI, we have an internship program. As our students go through the program, we train them on the issues facing our seniors. Many of our clients have financial hardships, and often have to choose between buying food, medications, or paying electric bills; as you might imagine, the food usually falls lowest on the priority list. Clients may also have problems with vision, manual dexterity, or simply getting up out of bed, all of which pose their own challenges and difficulties. Many of our interns don't realize or understand the impact of these challenges, and come to fully realize the implications of these challenges as they meet and talk with our clients during the internship. After our internship, many of our students who had not considered geriatric nutrition as an opportunity begin to search for opportunities in this field. Our clients become like family to our interns, and feeling we hope they will keep as they begin to branch out into the dietetics field.

As our world ages, we will become dependent on our youth to help us maintain a quality lifestyle and care for our health. It would be negligent on our part to forget this, and to forget to provide this essential training and knowledge to them. We would be wise to remember John F. Kennedy's words, and to remember what our most valuable resource for our future is.