

Montgomery County's Senior Nutrition Program: The Secret is Out!

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Brief Description:

Montgomery County's Senior Nutrition Program was referred to as the "best kept secret in the County" by a team of program reviewers. This presentation describes some of the strategies that were used to increase program visibility and increase the number of seniors receiving nutrition services.

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.

The Montgomery County Department of Health and Human Services maintains a results-based accountability system that establishes whether departments in the county are making a difference in taxpayer's lives.

In 2005, a Community Review team conducted an evaluation of the County's Senior Nutrition Program. Three reviewers spent three days reviewing all aspects of the program at our County office as well as at congregate and home delivered meals programs, observing and speaking with staff and recipients of program services. On an annual basis, our program serves over 5000 seniors at 40 congregate sites and via home delivered meals. Seventy percent of participants are from diverse multicultural groups.

The results of the Community Review were outstanding and filled with praise. But the reviewers agreed that "This program is the best kept secret in Montgomery County".

What could we do to better inform County residents of our services? Having spent more than 20 years of my career in communications and public relations, it seemed reasonable to utilize these skills to increase the visibility of the Senior Nutrition Program and to increase the number of eligible seniors that would receive our services.

In 2006, the Senior Nutrition Program introduced the Senior Nutrition Hotline to the County. This is a designated County phone number for seniors to call in weekly with

questions about diet, nutrition, and food on Wednesday mornings from 9 am to 11 am. The calls are answered by a registered dietitian. When funds have been available, the Hotline has been advertised in the County "Gazette" newspapers and the very popular Senior Beacon. Records indicate that between 100-125 calls are received each year. There are at least 25 repeat callers who contact the Hotline regularly and have come to depend on this service for answers to questions about Nutrition Facts labels, special dietary restrictions for medical conditions, food safety, and eating for better health. Hotline flyers are distributed at health fairs, special events, and nutrition education programs, and the phone number is advertised on monthly menus for congregate and home delivered meals. During the second year of the program, an article appeared in the Washington Post about this reliable resource for seniors, which also appears to be the only program of its kind...a Nutrition Hotline that is specifically dedicated for seniors.... in the US.

Senior Nutrition Program enhanced visibility is also accomplished via the County's Cable TV station's program Seniors Today, a monthly cable show organized by the Commission on Aging.. Annually, the Senior Nutrition Program's registered dietitian is featured in an interview about nutrition and healthy aging. Following the show, the County's TV crew and producer arrives at the kitchen of the registered dietitian to shoot a cooking show that features recipes that underscore healthy food choices and educational tidbits about nutrition and aging. Recent shows have introduced the concept of one pot meals, incorporating more vegetables into the diet, creative fruit ideas, and cooking with whole grains, most recently the newly popular quinoa. Cable TV staff report that this show format has initiated numerous calls and complements from senior viewers.

Program visibility was also promoted by a recent television interview with JC Heyward on WUSA Channel 9 (the Washington DC CBS affiliate) featuring the SNP registered dietitian on the topic of "Ten Common Nutrition Mistakes That Sabotage Healthy Aging", the topic that was previously presented at the Maryland Dept on Aging's Innovations in Aging Conference at National Harbor, MD in May 2012..

Efforts have been made to extend services to individuals in the County who have not received them in the past. Most recently, the Senior Nutrition Program's emergency shelf meal box program was expanded beyond the locations that typically receive services. Several apartment buildings in various locations in the County that are designated as low income senior residences were identified and offered these boxes, which contain non-perishable foods that can be kept for 6 months or longer without refrigeration. The boxes are composed of items such as individual packets of peanut

butter, crackers, fruit juice, nonfat dry milk, small cans of fruit and other foods. They are to be used in an emergency, such as a power outage, inclement weather when seniors cannot get to the grocery store, or when funds are low and food is not available, often at the end of the month. Approximately 1600 seniors received these boxes of food in both 2011 and 2012. These boxes are also distributed to residents experiencing a crisis that involves hunger through the County's Departments of Adult Protective Services and Public Guardianship.

Another project that took place in 2012 with available funding, the "cold box meal project", involved the provision of cold lunch meals twice per week for several months. These meals, too, were provided to low income buildings who had not previously received Senior Nutrition Program services. A total of 10,500 lunch meals were served during this period of time to 334 individuals. The meals, which were delivered by the Senior Nutrition Program's caterer, consisted of a source of protein in a sandwich on whole grain bread, a container of both Vitamin C fortified fruit juice and a container of fat free milk, a vegetable salad, and fresh or canned fruit, meeting the required Menu Standards. The recipients were delighted, and tenant liaisons indicated that a majority of these residents barely get by on their fixed income and can be considered the "Montgomery County's hungry".

The Senior Nutrition Program continues to seek ways to expand its visibility through creative programming and expansion of services when funding allows and to reach out to those in need in our diverse community. Our network of Meals on Wheels volunteers, ethnic contractors and meal program managers is expanding every year!