

## **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 Floridians<sup>1</sup>, so 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) that 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. As they moved forward with the idea, the DOEA ensured that AAAs knew they had the Department and the Governor's full commitment and support when navigating the logistical and bureaucratic challenges to allow partnerships with local restaurants in their area and to make the initiative work. AAAs were encouraged to leverage the emergency authorizations and funding provided by the Families First Act and the CARES Act. 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 orders.<sup>2</sup>

### **Collaboration: The Key to Success**

Partnerships and collaboration at several levels were essential to overcoming barriers encountered and to the initiatives' overall success.

This brief focuses on two forms of collaboration: One between the state of Florida and its AAAs and the other among the AAAs themselves.

### **Collaboration Between 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

#### **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 \(DBPR\)](#)
- The Florida Area Agency on Aging Network
  - [Northwest Florida Area Agency on Aging, Inc.](#)
  - [Advantage Aging Solutions](#)
  - [Elder Options](#)
  - [ElderSource, The Area Agency on Aging in Northeast 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

<sup>1</sup> 2020 Summary of Programs and Services Section B: [https://elderaffairs.org/wp-content/uploads/2020\\_SOPS\\_B.pdf](https://elderaffairs.org/wp-content/uploads/2020_SOPS_B.pdf)

<sup>2</sup> 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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provided a forum to trigger support from the state 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 guidelines.<sup>3</sup> Due to the time it would take to have all of the meals and menus approved, this would have been a hurdle for the initiative. However, the Florida Restaurant and Lodging Association (FRLA) partnered in the effort to expedite the process to confirm that restaurant partners would be able to meet OAA requirements. The FRLA communicated the opportunity and requirements with their membership and then connected interested restaurants with AAAs. AAAs worked closely with the DOEA to confirm that these restaurants were licensed with the Department of Business and Professional Regulation (DBPR). Also, the Director of Home and Community Based Services at DOEA, a registered dietitian, provided consistent, standardized, and expedited reviews and approved all Feeding Older Floridians Restaurant Meal Initiative meal menus.

The launch of the initiative and a stark rise in demand increased expenses for the AAAs. The AAAs were tasked with large scale purchasing of restaurant-style meals while also experiencing 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, allowing for geographic variation in meal costs and for maximum flexibility as the AAAs worked with local restaurants in their communities. In the midst of the crisis, 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, personal protective equipment for drivers, and other indirect costs). This flexibility alleviated the administrative burden of frequently amending contracted unit rates, and helped accelerate contracting, allowing AAAs to quickly partner with the restaurants that could best

meet the needs of the older adults they support and their community.

For example, to reflect the demographics of their community, Senior Resource Alliance, an AAA serving Central Florida, chose to prioritize minority and women-owned restaurants. As a result, 80 percent of the restaurants in the program met these criteria. 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. So, this not only helped the AAA serve its clients, but also helped the restaurant and the



*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.*

community economically.

### **Collaboration Among AAAs**

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

### **Sharing Resources**

Several AAAs experienced challenges raising awareness about the Feeding Older Floridians Restaurant Meal Initiative. These challenges included limited access to technology among some older adults, and multi-lingual communities, and a growing need for nutritional support among individuals who were not familiar with the supports and services that the AAAs provide. Senior Resource Alliance developed a

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

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robust media campaign to reach older adults 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, 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 call volume. Florida experienced an approximate three-fold increase in food insecurity and hunger among older adults and people with disabilities. This required adaptation in service delivery and operations to meet these needs. Partner AAAs, with the capacity to field calls, stepped in to receive re-routed calls. This helped continue to inform the public, and to support referral and intake processes. Additionally, some AAAs utilized unemployed case managers and day care workers to staff call centers and to support this increased volume.

### *Sharing Practices and Procedures*

Partnerships between AAAs and local restaurants were new for both groups. Based on their experiences, Florida AAAs noted the importance of having a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) with their restaurant partners to clearly outline responsibilities on both sides. AAAs supported one another by sharing restaurant contacts and MOU templates. This allows other AAAs to inherit practices from partner AAAs and restaurants codified in their MOU and learn from their experiences.

### *Lessons Learned*

For other AAAs interested in exploring efforts similar to the Feeding Older Floridians Restaurant Meal Initiative, below are a few key lessons learned from the state and community partners.

#### *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, another AAA partnered with a grocer that was able to provide

#### **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

fresh produce. Some chose to partner with restaurants with which they already had contacts. 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.

#### *Leveraging Technology*

Florida AAAs faced new challenges implementing 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 modalities, such as mobile applications to track enrollment, manage deliveries, and communicate with delivery drivers.

#### *Exploring 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 the elements of a sustainable version of the restaurant meal initiative. Private funds are likely to be vital to the success of maintaining and growing these programs.

#### *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

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frequently, sharing challenges, solutions, and best practices.

### Conclusion

The Feeding Older Floridians Restaurant Meal Initiative collectively has provided over 5.5 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 during the pandemic. The collaborative partnership between the State of Florida and the AAA Network provided essential direct relief to the Florida community. This program 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](#).*