



TOGETHER, WE CAN DELIVER:

Unlocking the Power of Collaboration Between Meals on Wheels Programs



Powerful things happen when organizations work together. Meals on Wheels America supports the network of more than 5,000 community-based programs that collectively deliver life-saving meals and services to over 2 million seniors each year.

It's in this spirit of working as one Meals on Wheels movement that Meals on Wheels America launched a collaboration grant program. In September 2022, we awarded four Meals on Wheels programs grant funding to leverage collaboration to reach new older adults and better serve those whose needs were not being wholly met by existing services.

The collaborations connected programs large and small to reach new populations of seniors in new ways. Together, they managed to identify program gaps, develop creative solutions and pave the way for future partnerships sustainable beyond grant funding.

“These strategic partnerships have expanded program capacities, effectively addressing the diverse and evolving needs of clients and organizations alike,” said Carter Florence, Vice President of Programs for Meals on Wheels America. **“Through their collaborative endeavors, these programs not only extended their reach but also filled critical gaps within their communities, ensuring that no individual is left underserved. The teams discovered that establishing these partnerships was not only easier than they expected but resulted in a greater impact than they were able to achieve as single programs working alone.”**

Here are two stories from collaboration grant awardees in North Carolina and New Mexico. Their narratives serve as a model for how organizations like yours can strike up similar partnerships to better meet the needs of seniors in your area.



COLLABORATING PROGRAMS OVERVIEW DECIDING

Meals on Wheels New Mexico	City of Las Cruces	The Council on Aging for Henderson County	Meals on Wheels of Asheville & Buncombe County
Albuquerque, N.M.	Las Cruces, N.M.	Hendersonville, N.C.	Asheville, N.C.
Collaboration focus: To deliver medically tailored meals provided by Meals on Wheels New Mexico to clients in Las Cruces.		Collaboration focus: To use Meals on Wheels of Asheville & Buncombe County's kitchen capacity to reduce The Council on Aging for Henderson County's client waitlist and serve meals with in-person visits to rural clients within Henderson County.	

DECIDING HOW TO COLLABORATE

The programs from North Carolina and New Mexico said the grant opportunity from Meals on Wheels America served as the catalyst to explore collaborations with other Meals on Wheels programs within their states. It only took a phone call to see how beneficial working together could be.

In North Carolina, The Council on Aging for Henderson County found itself with a long client waitlist and a segment of clients who could only receive frozen meals via courier because of their rural locations and volunteers' inability to access them. The collaboration with Meals on Wheels of Asheville & Buncombe County changed that, opening the door for some rural Henderson County clients to transition from frozen shipments to in-person deliveries once a week with meals supplied by Asheville's kitchen. The programs used grant funds to reduce Henderson County's client waitlist and reach the county's most rural areas.

In Albuquerque, the team at Meals on Wheels New Mexico knew it had the capacity to serve medically tailored meals to a partnering program within the state. Meals on Wheels New Mexico Chief Strategy Officer Dennis Plummer reached out to Roger Bishop, Nutrition and Meal Services Program Manager for the City of Las Cruces, to propose a collaboration.

"It was really just a cold call to Roger to see if they might be interested in supplementing their existing offering with medically tailored meals," said Plummer. **"He was immediately in and said, 'Let's do it.'"**

The teams decided Meals on Wheels New Mexico would provide medically tailored meals for 50 additional clients to the City of Las Cruces. Bishop said diabetes is a "huge issue" in the Las Cruces community, and the program in Albuquerque offers meals that address diabetes, cardiac conditions, renal conditions and difficulty swallowing.



GETTING STARTED

A fundamental first step in program collaboration is taking the time to understand the facilities and operations of your partnering program.

For both collaboration grantees, site visits were instrumental in helping the programs understand specifics around kitchen capacity, meal production, menus, delivery schedules, available staff, meal storage capacity and more.

“We used the up-front site visits to think about everything,” said Debbie Sprouse, Executive Director for Meals on Wheels of Asheville & Buncombe County. **“How do we pack and store meals for your team? What is useful in terms of side items? Packing trays in a cooler is one thing, but if there are snack bars or bananas or juice or bread, how do we need to package that for you so that it’s simple for your volunteers?”**

THE ADVICE: As best as you can, try to go through step by step what the processes of working together will look like. Consider factors like the lead time needed to place or receive client orders, meal transportation and storage, package labeling and staff or volunteer communication.

“If there’s one thing I would go back and do over, it would be to do even more of that up-front work,” said Kevin Laffond, Director of Nutrition Services for The Council on Aging for Henderson County. **“It’s really important. Planning everything out, spotting obstacles before you hit them can prevent issues like food waste or missed deliveries. Every meal counts for our programs.”**

OVERCOMING LOGISTICAL HURDLES

For some organizations, the differences between programs in menus, geographies and delivery schedules can appear vast and make collaboration seem out of the question. However, the collaborating programs in New Mexico and North Carolina quickly found that, despite some obstacles at the start, working together proved more straightforward and rewarding than initially imagined.

CLOSING GEOGRAPHICAL GAPS

For the team in Henderson County, the collaboration meant finding a low-cost or zero-cost satellite location where its volunteers could prepare the meals made by Meals on Wheels of Asheville & Buncombe County for delivery. Community connections led the team to a Methodist church in a town that would allow volunteers to reach rural areas without upending Henderson County’s existing delivery route. Henderson County used grant funding to purchase a freezer to store a week’s worth of meals provided by Meals on Wheels Asheville at the satellite location.

“We envisioned a much rockier road to getting this off the ground,” said Laffond. **“After a couple of weeks, everything was in place and pretty much ran itself.”**

In New Mexico, the 200-mile distance between the programs meant finding a way to get the meals safely from Albuquerque to Las Cruces, 3.5 hours away. Fortunately, Meals on Wheels New Mexico found a partner in Roadrunner Food Bank, which recently received a three-year grant from another national agency.

“We had already wanted to partner with Roadrunner; they’re 10 minutes down the road from us,” said Plummer. **“What our collaboration with Las Cruces allowed us to do is use that partnership to establish a concrete way of working with them and with Roadrunner so that we can do this kind of thing even more in the future.”**

Roadrunner’s grant allowed it to store a month’s worth of Las Cruces meals — approximately 1,000 in total — prepared in Albuquerque. Roadrunner then delivered the pallet of meals to Las Cruces via a refrigerated truck. Once there, the Las Cruces team stored the meals in a dedicated on-site freezer.



COORDINATING SCHEDULES

Lead time to receive and prepare orders became a logistical sticking point in both North Carolina and New Mexico.

In North Carolina, the team in Asheville needed to receive client orders more than a week in advance. That timeline would allow the Asheville kitchen to produce Henderson County client meals alongside its own and freeze them for delivery the following Monday to Henderson County's satellite location.

In New Mexico, a lead time of more than a month was needed to allow the Albuquerque kitchen to produce a full pallet of food for delivery by Roadrunner to Las Cruces. Specifically, that meant Las Cruces had to have client orders for April finalized by the end of February.

In both cases, the teams worked together to come up with systems that would enable them to meet the required lead times but also avoid waste if a client had to cancel after a portion of the next week's meals had already been prepared.

"We eventually found a system that prevented excess meals being made when a client cancelled between when we placed the client orders and the deliveries were made," said Laffond. **"It still happens every once in a while, but when it does, we're able to store those excess meals in the freezer at our offices or the satellite location and distribute them the following week."**

GETTING MEALS FROM A TO B

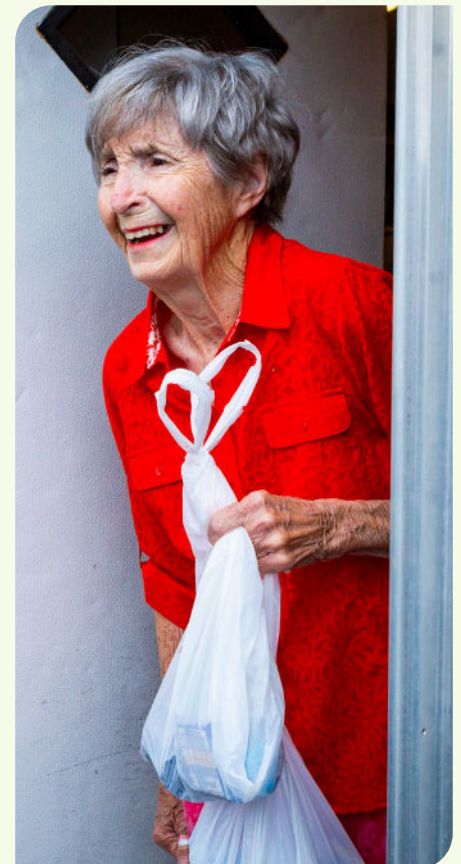
The collaborations in both North Carolina and New Mexico found there were at least two stages of delivery to coordinate: The delivery of meals in bulk prepared by one program's kitchen or food vendor for the other program's clients, and the delivery of individual meals to each client by the receiving program's volunteers.

The addition of a satellite location didn't significantly change client delivery processes for teams in North Carolina. Packaging up food for the Henderson County team wasn't much different than how Meals on Wheels of Asheville & Buncombe County already prepared its meals.

"The things we were doing, like packaging up hamburger patties separate from the buns, were things we already do," said Sprouse. **"So, it was actually really simple for our side. It's been such a smooth collaboration."**

Longtime volunteers from Henderson County led the effort to set up the satellite location and organize deliveries for rural clients. **"Our volunteers just took it and ran; they got everything figured out,"** said Laffond. **"I feel like I should be talking about all these obstacles we encountered, but it was actually really straightforward to get started."**

In New Mexico, the introduction of medically tailored meals delivered in bulk meant instituting new processes to ensure the right meals went to clients during the correct week. Meals on Wheels New Mexico applied colored labels to its packages to mark the designated delivery week and added colored ties to bags to differentiate between diet types.



“We were going to number the packages by week,” said Plummer. **“But Roger and I were thinking about the volunteers on his end pulling meals from the freezer and realized going by color would just make it faster and easier for them.”**

Las Cruces, in turn, added additional staff training to make sure the team properly rotated the stock within their kitchen’s large freezer to avoid spoilage.

EXPERIENCING THE IMPACT FIRSTHAND

The collaboration grantees used their partnerships to expand capacities and reach new and existing clients in new ways. The work they each put in to adapt and align their program with another has created lasting impacts within their communities and within their respective organizations.

“Every time we take on a new endeavor, we’re learning,” said Sprouse. “We all do things differently. We all have different expectations. This partnership has allowed us to really look internally to understand where we have opportunities to grow and change for the better.”

Laffond said his team in Henderson County is stronger and more knowledgeable, post-collaboration. “The best part, hands down, has been being able to take clients off the waiting list because that breaks your heart,” he said. “But working with Debbie and being able to benefit from her experience and ideas has been an incredible learning experience that’s come from all of this.”

At Meals on Wheels New Mexico, the partnership with Las Cruces has given the organization a chance to bolster its mission in a new way. **“We’re always working toward a future where every neighbor and every community in New Mexico is nourished,”** said Plummer. **“It’s really satisfying to be able to reach people who haven’t been able to participate in their local program because of their nutritional or medical needs.”**

In Las Cruces, Bishop expressed a similar sentiment: “You know you’re having an impact when you can provide supplemental meals to customers who need that additional support of a medically tailored meal. Being able to do that and make the connection we’ve made with the team in Albuquerque has made us better.”



“We’re stronger together... and we can build a better feeding program for seniors.”

– Roger Bishop, Nutrition and Meal Services Program Manager



LAYING FOUNDATIONS FOR THE FUTURE

The collaborating programs in this inaugural grant period served new communities, often in remote areas, and expanded organizational capacity through enhanced production, transportation and delivery of medically tailored meals.

Though the grant period for the programs in New Mexico and North Carolina has come to an end, the legwork and resources put into setting up the collaborations looks likely to fuel their partnerships for years to come.

After hearing of its collaboration with Las Cruces, a city in southeastern New Mexico reached out to Meals on Wheels New Mexico to explore a similar partnership for medically tailored meals. The program has also received grant money from the city of Albuquerque to supply medically tailored meal options to the city's senior population.

The close ties formed between Henderson County and Meals on Wheels Asheville & Buncombe County have the teams looking to do more together than supplement meal deliveries.

Meals on Wheels America envisions an America in which all seniors live nourished lives with independence and dignity. To meet that vision takes a village. That's why we are committed to fostering sustainable collaboration and partnerships at all levels to create greater impact than any one organization could alone. Meals on Wheels America continues to learn alongside our Members and incorporate these learnings into additional opportunities aimed at supporting collaborations.



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