

Cuts to government funding restrict Meals on Wheels

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Meals on Wheels Mesa County, founded in 1970 under the name Gray Gourmet, is a pioneer in the local effort to provide seniors with affordable, nutritious sustenance.

A core of more than 300 volunteers for the program deliver meals directly to the residences of many homebound and elderly people each day. The meal is different for each day, and they are all designed by a registered dietician to ensure they meet one third of the daily nutritional requirements for seniors.

In addition to home-delivered meals, Meals on Wheels Mesa County runs several dining sites throughout the Western Slope to provide more isolated elderly communities the opportunity to connect and socialize while getting the nutrition they need.

The program currently serves around 1,400 seniors and is set to serve about 170,000 meals this year. At its peak, Meals on Wheels Mesa County served almost 800 meals a day, but because of recent reductions in government funding, that number is limited to 544.

Volunteer positions range from delivering meals to facilitating dining sites and assisting with administrative tasks. Anyone interested in volunteering for Meals on Wheels Mesa County is encouraged to complete the volunteer information sheet found on their website under "Services" and email it to amanda.debock@imail.org

St. Mary's Medical Center has been the sponsoring organization for Meals on Wheels Mesa County since 1989. It's estimated that St. Mary's provides around \$300,000 in donations each year.

Increased grocery prices and recent government cuts have left nearly 100 homebound elderly residents on a months-long waitlist for a meal-delivery service.

Meals on Wheels Mesa County was established 54 years ago with a mission to provide sustenance and nutrition to the elderly community, and they currently serve more than 1,400 on the Western Slope. Volunteers for the program deliver one lunchtime meal per a day, Monday through Friday, and clients who need food assistance for the weekends can request a bi-weekly delivery of five frozen meals intended to last two weekends.

All meals are designed by a registered dietitian to ensure they contain at least one third of a person's daily nutritional needs, such as more than 30 mg of vitamin C and more than 9.5 mg of fiber. The program offers a different meal every day — ranging from turkey tetrazzini to clam chowder to chili stuffed potatoes — but the meals always feature a high-calorie count, a protein-based entree, vegetables and fruit. Their monthly menu can be found on the Meals on Wheels Mesa County website.



Photos by Larry Robinson/The Daily Sentinel

Geri, left, and Charlie Mishmash pass off food trays to each other before delivering the lunch meal from Meals on Wheels to elderly homebound individuals in the area on Feb. 1. The program serves individuals lunchtime meals five days a week but recent budget cuts may put more than 100 people on a slow-moving waitlist for meals.

According to Meals on Wheels volunteer Beverly Campbell, the benefits of these deliveries extend beyond simply reducing hunger in a vulnerable demographic.

“(What’s special about this) to me is going out, getting to know people and having that social connection,” Campbell said. “I think that social piece is so important, for us, but so important for them as they get older, sometimes we’re the only contact that they have, and it’s a lonely world living in your dark house all day.”

Campbell said another advantage of this service is the volunteers’ visits can also function as “check-ups,” because they are potentially the only people who see these homebound clients frequently enough to know if something is wrong and offer assistance.



Charlie Mishmash passes off a tray of food to Gordy Williams during a daily meal delivery route as part of Meals on Wheels Mesa County on Feb. 1. Despite budget cuts and a lengthy waitlist, Meals on Wheels continues to provide homebound individuals with meals five days a week. Larry Robinson/The Daily Sentinel

Campbell volunteers alongside her husband, David, who said both his parents and her parents had enrolled in Meals on Wheels within the past two years. As their parents became homebound, the nutrition and socialization Meals on Wheels brings to clients’ doorsteps became increasingly valuable.

The Campbells' parents are two of the thousands of elderly people who enrolled with Meals on Wheels Mesa County in the past four years, as the COVID-19 pandemic led to a sharp upswing in elder isolation and nutrition-related needs. According to Amanda de Bock, the director of Meals on Wheels Mesa County, the average number of meals delivered per year by the end of 2019 was 117,000, which rose to over 236,000 meals by the end of 2022.

“We really, really expanded what we were doing. The need was just so great, especially for seniors,” de Bock said. “We were fortunate that we did get a lot of funding to cover that. If we wouldn't have had the funding to cover that, there's no way we would have been able to make that increase. We went from spending about \$700,000 a year to \$1.2 million.”



Lunches are made fresh each day for the Meals on Wheels program, with each tray sealed with a plastic cover to ensure quality. Larry Robinson/The Daily Sentinel

The rise in enrollment was initially mitigated by federal pandemic relief funding, but although the number of people enrolling has essentially remained the same, government funding has decreased dramatically. According to de Bock, these budget changes exacerbated Meals on Wheels' struggle to continue serving each client — especially as grocery prices soared.

During the fiscal year of 2022-2023, Meals on Wheels received more than \$925,000 in government funding, but for the current fiscal year of 2023-2024, their funding dropped to a little over \$700,000.

Although shifts in pandemic-related federal funds account for much of these changes, another factor is the state of Colorado has not increased its funding of Meals on Wheels since 2018. De Bock said this flat funding from the state is comparable to a decrease in their budget because of how expensive food has become.

Because of these major budget alterations, Meals on Wheels Mesa County implemented a waitlist for new applicants. However, this waitlist quickly grew beyond the scope of what Meals on Wheels is now financially capable of.



Lunches are made fresh each day for the Meals on Wheels program before being packed away to be delivered, with each tray sealed with a plastic cover to ensure quality, on Feb. 1, 2024. Larry Robinson/The Daily Sentinel

“This year we have the waitlist, and at (its) worst, there were 137 people waiting for food, so it’s been really tough,” de Bock said. “If we’re not funded appropriately, we can’t do what we need to do.”

De Bock said the process has been sluggish but steadily improving from when the waitlist was first implemented. During the five months between the waitlist’s start in July of last year and October, Meals on Wheels was unable to serve a single person on the waitlist.

The organization has recently been able to chip away at the long list of people in need, but in some cases, those who registered for the waitlist months before are no longer around or need the service.

“Now that we’re able to add people on the list, we’re calling people from three months ago, four months ago, and we’re finding out that they have passed away, they don’t need the meals anymore, they’re in assisted living, or they’re in escalated care,” de Bock said.



Geri Mishmash smiles with Kathryn “Kay” Wood during a daily meal delivery route as part of Meals on Wheels Mesa County on Feb. 1, 2024. The program serves individuals 5 days a week but recent budget cuts may put more than 100 people on a slow-moving waitlist for meals. Larry Robinson / The Daily Sentinel

While Meals on Wheels focuses on resolving the lengthy waitlist, de Bock and her administrative team are making an increased effort in applying for grants, diversifying the sources of their budgets and working to convince the state and federal governments to increase their funding again.

Regardless of Meals on Wheels’ recent financial challenges, de Bock said her team of 11 paid staffers and more than 300 unpaid volunteers remain committed to their mission of supporting the vulnerable elderly community. De Bock said their organization boasts one of the longest retention rates of volunteers among nonprofits.

“The fact that we can keep our (volunteers) for 10 years on average is really a testament to how much we love and appreciate our volunteers, and we really do,” de Bock said. “We could not do what we do without them, for sure.”

Beverly and David Campbell said their delivery shifts at Meals on Wheels every Wednesday are an enjoyable break from their usual routine.

“(Driving the route) is actually very relaxing,” David Campbell said. “We get here from the gym a little wound up from the traffic coming down (U.S. Highway) 6 and 50, but truly when I pull out of here to start the route, I take a deep breath, and I’m in my mode.”