Written Testimony of Meals on Wheels of Pennsylvania

Submitted to: U.S. Senate Special Committee on Aging

Connecting Pennsylvania's Seniors: Addressing Loneliness and Social Isolation

Field hearing convened by U.S. Senator Dave McCormick · October 29, 2026

Submitted by Feleen Nancarvis, Executive Director, Meals on Wheels of Lancaster & Board President, Meals on Wheels of Pennsylvania

Senator McCormick, Chairman Scott, Ranking Member Gillibrand, and Members of the committee, thank you for providing the opportunity to speak to the issue of loneliness and isolation among the senior population in Pennsylvania and across the nation. My name is Feleen Nancarvis, and I serve as President of the Board of Meals on Wheels of Pennsylvania, the statewide association of community-based Meals on Wheels programs. I am also the Executive Director of Meals on Wheels of Lancaster, one of the oldest home-delivered meal programs in the Commonwealth.

Today is about one central point: loneliness and isolation are health risks with measurable costs, and a daily knock on the door is one of the most proven, lowest-cost ways to reduce them. We see the proof every weekday at doors across Lancaster County, and our partner programs see it in communities across Pennsylvania.

Pennsylvania's network of Meals on Wheels programs is as varied as the Commonwealth itself. Our members include Area Agencies on Aging, senior centers, faith communities, medical centers and independent nonprofits. Depending on the community, they provide hot and frozen meals, medically tailored diets, grocery assistance, pet food, home repair, transportation help, friendly visits and wellness checks.

Pennsylvania also holds a special place in this history. The first home-delivered meal program in the United States began in Philadelphia in 1954. It delivered one hot meal and a friendly visit to 30 neighbors each day. Seventy-two years later, that pairing of food and human contact is still the model.

The Scope of Loneliness and Isolation

Roughly one in three older Americans is lonely, and about one in four is socially isolated. In 2024, 33% of adults aged 50 to 80 said they felt lonely some of the time or often, and 29% said they felt isolated (5). The National Academies estimate that nearly one in four adults 65 and older is socially isolated (4).

In Lancaster, we see what those percentages look like at the front door. When Meals on Wheels of Lancaster surveyed its clients, 32% said our volunteers were the only people they saw on an average day.

James, one of our Lancaster clients, describes it simply. “I look forward to my drivers coming. It’s not just the food. It’s knowing someone cares and is looking out for me.” For James, the meal matters. The person carrying it matters just as much.

Pennsylvania's Aging Population

Pennsylvania's demographics make this issue more urgent here than in most states:

- 3.8 million Pennsylvanians will be 60 or older by 2030, about one in three residents (2).
- 27.2% of Pennsylvanians 65 and older live alone, above the national rate of 25.6% (3).
- 31.1% of Pennsylvanians 65 and older live with a disability (3).
- In Lancaster County, the share of residents 60 and older has been rising for more than 15 years and is projected to keep rising through 2060, according to the Lancaster County Office of Aging (18).

Living alone is not the same as being lonely. But it is one of the clearest markers of who may go days without a meaningful conversation. The National Association of Nutrition and Aging Services Programs reports that almost 60% of its participants live alone, which makes these programs one of their few daily social connections (13).

Effects on Health, Finances and Safety

Isolation spreads into physical health, mental health, household finances and safety, and each makes the others worse.

- Physical health: According to the Surgeon General, social isolation is linked to a 29% higher risk of heart disease and a 32% higher risk of stroke. The mortality effect of lacking social connection is comparable to smoking up to 15 cigarettes a day (6).
- Brain health: Social isolation is associated with about a 50% higher risk of dementia (6).
- Mental health: Loneliness is associated with higher rates of depression and anxiety (6). In 2024, 75% of older adults reporting fair or poor mental health also reported loneliness (5).
- Health care costs: Medicare spends about $1,608 more per year on each socially isolated older adult, an estimated $6.7 billion annually (7).

- Household finances: One in two seniors who live alone lacks the income to pay for basic needs (16). Nearly 14 million older Americans worry about having enough food (8).
- Mobility and safety: About 35% of adults 70 and older have mobility limitations, which makes it harder to shop, visit friends or attend services (15, 17).

These effects feed one another. A fall leads to fear of going out. Fear leads to fewer trips to the store, so meals get skipped. Poor nutrition weakens strength and balance, which raises the risk of the next fall. A fixed income forces trade-offs between groceries and prescriptions.

Rural Pennsylvania

In rural communities, the same miles that isolate a senior also make every delivery more expensive. Nearly one in four Pennsylvanians, 23.5%, live in a rural area, compared with 19.3% nationally (3).

Nationally, almost two-thirds of Meals on Wheels providers that keep a waitlist serve rural areas (8). The reasons are practical. Routes are longer, homes are farther apart and volunteers drive their own cars. Meals on Wheels America cites high costs for food, fuel and operations as core pressures, and 68% of programs name food prices as a major challenge (8).

In Lancaster County, we experience both the urban and rural sides of Pennsylvania within our service area. The City of Lancaster is the state's eighth-largest city, with about 59,000 residents. Beyond the city, the county covers 946 square miles and is home to nearly 4,700 farms (18, 19). For a homebound senior in a farm community or small borough, the nearest grocery store, senior center or neighbor can be miles away. Meals on Wheels of Lancaster delivers in the City of Lancaster and across 20 ZIP codes, including the most rural parts of our county. Our drivers cover about 742 road miles every weekday. The rising cost of fuel takes a toll, with volunteers absorbing much of this cost themselves.

Meals on Wheels and Social Connection

Regardless of program size, capacity or location, every delivery from a Meals on Wheels program combines three things: a nutritious meal, a moment of human contact and a safety check by someone who knows what "normal" looks like for that person.

Meals on Wheels of Lancaster

Meals on Wheels of Lancaster began in 1967 with 7 clients and 25 volunteers. Today, both our program and the need have grown.

- More than 219,000 meals were delivered in 2025 to 785 clients.
- About 800 meals delivered each weekday on roughly 40 routes.

- More than 560 yearly volunteers and 9 staff, with 50 to 60 volunteer drivers on a typical day.
- Deliveries Monday through Friday, including holidays.
- Each client receives one hot meal plus a brown-bag cold meal, with therapeutic, diabetic, renal and other diets available.

The meal is where the relationship begins. Because drivers see the same clients each weekday, they notice when something changes. Staff are on hand to take the driver's report and alert a client's emergency contact when there is a concern.

Joe's story shows what that means. Joe lives alone in Lancaster. Five years ago, he fell and fractured his hip, and he lay on the floor for days before he could get help. After the hospital and rehab, the Lancaster County Office of Aging connected him with Meals on Wheels of Lancaster. He began receiving two meals a day, five days a week, with a daily check on his well-being. "It was a real godsend," Joe said.

Then Joe fell again and could not reach his phone. His driver knew his routine and noticed his door was closed and his bag was not outside. When the driver knocked, Joe was able to call out, and help came. "I don't think I would have survived if not for the driver noticing something was different," he said.

Today Joe still receives meals, which he says keep his diet balanced with the fruits and vegetables he would not manage on his own. He also volunteers in our kitchen, packing lunches. "The people I have met are so good and have become so important to me, and it gets me out of my house," he said. In five years, Joe went from lying alone on his floor for days to being part of a community that notices when he is missing.

Joe’s story is not unusual. Across our state network, programs report the same thing again and again. In Erie, a client fell and broke her hip shortly after a Friday delivery and lay on her floor all weekend until her Monday drivers found her. Her son lived across the country and would not otherwise have known. In Montgomery County, a volunteer found a client with a broken hip who had been on the floor since the previous afternoon; her family was not due to visit for several days. In Berks County, a volunteer noticed mail piling up outside a regular client’s door and raised the alarm, and responders found her unconscious. She recovered and returned home. In each case, the person who noticed was the one who came every weekday.

Not every story is an emergency. Sometimes the connection a program builds carries a client through a hard transition and fosters a meaningful friendship that has a life-changing impact.

Family Services, an organization operating a Meals on Wheels program in Montgomery County, supported a client’s bird, Daisy, through its Pet Program. At a March for Meals event, a local

police chief met them both. He shared that he had once owned the same kind of bird, and he offered to give Daisy a home if she ever needed one. When the client later moved into assisted living, she was comforted knowing Daisy would be going to a good home. The chief, who was nearing retirement, kept his promise. Today he and Daisy are retired together.

Throughout Pennsylvania, programs have grown beyond the meal because clients have told us what they were missing:

- Meals on Wheels Erie's Friendship Line provides weekly phone calls from dedicated volunteers who check in, offer friendly conversation, and help to identify potential changes in a recipient's mental or emotional well-being. Due to current capacity limitations, the program is available only to existing meal recipients. However, the response has been overwhelmingly positive. Both volunteers and recipients describe these weekly conversations as a meaningful connection and a bright spot in their week.
- Lancaster's Food for Thought Library began with a book club. Staff and volunteers who formed the Lettuce Taco Bout Books Club started out trading books with one another, then began donating from their own shelves at home so clients could share in their love of reading. Since May 2025, those books, along with puzzles and games, have been exchanged with clients through their meal delivery services. Today, the library holds over 1,000 items. For seniors who rarely leave their home, a new book or puzzle is something to look forward to and a way to stay engaged.
- Family Services operates Project HEARTH (Helping Elderly Adults Remain in Their Homes), a program that offers a helping hand where the meal service stops. Services include in-home counseling, friendly visiting, transportation, errand running, handyman assistance and more.
- In 2025, Berks Encore served more than 5,500 older adults, delivering 136,872 home-delivered meals and 27,600 congregate lunches. Its six Wellness & Activity Centers serve urban, suburban and rural communities and drew 2,351 participants last year, and attendance in July and August 2026 reached the highest levels in the organization's history. Alongside meals, Berks Encore offers evidence-based fall-prevention and chronic disease programs, lifelong learning, a volunteer grocery shopping program and a Friendly Visitor Program that pairs homebound seniors with weekly companionship (22).

Research and Outcomes

Meals on Wheels has been tested against loneliness in a randomized controlled trial, and the daily in-person model performed best. Researchers at Brown University randomly assigned 626 seniors on waitlists at eight Meals on Wheels programs to daily delivery, once-weekly frozen delivery or continued waiting (10).

- Seniors who received meals had lower loneliness scores than those left on the waitlist (10).
- Daily recipients were three times more likely than weekly recipients to say the service helped them feel less lonely (11).
- Daily recipients also showed improvements in anxiety, self-rated health, falls and worry about being able to stay in their homes (14).

National participant data point the same way. Sixty-one percent of home-delivered meal recipients said the meals helped reduce feelings of isolation, and nearly three-quarters said the program helps them live independently and improve their health (13). A review of 38 studies from 1996 to 2023 found that Meals on Wheels programs reduce health care use, falls, nursing home moves, and isolation and loneliness (8).

Cost Savings

Those same outcomes also show up on the balance sheet, which can have an important impact on community-based organizations providing a direct service to neighbors in need.

- A senior can receive a full year of home-delivered meals, friendly visits and safety checks for roughly the cost of one day in the hospital or 12 days in a long-term care facility (8).
- A Brown University analysis in *Health Affairs* found that if each state expanded home-delivered meals to 1% more older adults, 1,722 more Medicaid recipients could avoid nursing home placement nationwide. Pennsylvania would see the largest net savings of any state, $5.7 million a year (12).
- Socially isolated older adults cost Medicare an estimated $6.7 billion more each year (7). The combined annual costs of older adult falls and social isolation exceed $109 billion (8).

Challenges Facing the Network

The model works, but the network is stretched. One in three Meals on Wheels programs nationally keeps a waitlist, and seniors wait an average of nearly four months; some wait as long as two years (8). Nearly half of programs, 48%, have already added or expect to add seniors to a waitlist, most often for lack of funding (8).

- Federal funding has not kept pace. Older Americans Act nutrition programs are funded at $1.059 billion. In 2021, Meals on Wheels America estimated 2.5 million low-income, food-insecure seniors who likely need meals are not being served (8). The need has only grown since then. Even flat funding is a cut once rising demand and costs are counted (9).

- Programs depend on that federal base. Nearly 9 in 10 Meals on Wheels providers receive federal funding, and for 60% of them it is half or more of their budget (9).
- Costs keep climbing. Meals on Wheels of Lancaster has absorbed a sustained 28% increase in expenses. Rising costs and insufficient funding mean we lose $2.30 for every meal delivered, putting our ability to serve our community's most vulnerable neighbors at risk.
- Volunteers are the backbone, and they are harder to find. Nearly all Meals on Wheels programs nationally report at least one major barrier to serving every senior in need, including difficulty recruiting and retaining volunteers and escalating gas prices (1). Rising fuel costs make this harder when most volunteers drive their own vehicles and pay for their own gas. Every increase at the pump is a hidden cost of giving their time and falls hardest on the retirees who volunteer on fixed incomes.

It is important to note that, for Meals on Wheels of Lancaster, capacity is not the bottleneck; funding is. We have capacity to serve more seniors without overextending or restructuring our operation if additional funding is provided. Yet seniors in our community remain on waitlists, many of them unable to pay privately and often ineligible for other assistance. Older Americans Act funding is the foundation that Meals on Wheels programs build upon.

We are a public-private partnership that blends federal, state, local and charitable dollars. When the foundation stays flat, the whole structure stalls. Meals on Wheels programs are then forced to find ways to reinvent themselves, chasing private funding opportunities, new programming or new revenue streams just to sustain the food services they already provide. Not every program has the staff or the donor base to do this. This results in instability that falls hardest on seniors who depend on our services.

Expanding that foundation is not at odds with fiscal responsibility; it is fiscal responsibility, because every senior we serve at home results in fewer hospital stays and nursing home placements.

Recommendations

Congress can build upon a model that already works across Pennsylvania**.** We respectfully ask the Senator and his colleagues to consider the following.

1. **Reauthorize the Older Americans Act this year**. The Act has operated without authorization since 2024. We urge the House to pass S. 2120 before the end of the year, so the network that delivers these meals rests on a stable foundation through 2030 (20). Thank you, Senator McCormick and Chairman Scott, for cosponsoring S. 2120, and thank you to the full Senate for passing it unanimously on July 14.

2. **Fund Older Americans Act nutrition programs at the level of need.** Support Meals on Wheels America's FY27 request of $2.285 billion for Title III-C: $1.403 billion for home-delivered meals, $722.6 million for congregate meals and $160.1 million for the Nutrition Services Incentive Program (8). Predictable, multi-year funding lets programs hire, plan routes and clear waitlists.

3. **Pass the bipartisan SENIOR Act**. This Act, introduced by Chairman Scott and cosponsored by Senator McCormick, would add loneliness to the health promotion and disease prevention services the Older Americans Act supports and require a federal report on loneliness among older Americans (21).

4. **Strengthen transportation for older adults.** We urge Congress to strengthen Older Americans Act support for senior transportation and give local programs the flexibility to use volunteer drivers, ride partnerships and other community solutions that fit rural areas. Transportation matters for two reasons:

    A. First, it connects isolated seniors to their community. Many of the seniors we serve no longer drive, and in rural Lancaster County a regular bus is often not an option. Without a ride, a senior who could join a congregate meal, a senior center or a worship service stays home, and isolation grows. As Berks Encore puts it, what begins as a transportation problem quickly becomes a nutrition, health and isolation problem. In Montgomery County, Family Services reports that some services require access to the internet or a smartphone, which many seniors it serves do not have or cannot use.

    B. Second, it makes service possible. Our volunteers want to make a meaningful contribution, and transportation can be a barrier. Joe, whom I described earlier, takes Red Rose Access, our local shared-ride service, to our kitchen, where he sits and helps prepare meals for other seniors. Other volunteers receive public benefits such as SNAP, and volunteering can help them meet the program's work requirements while staying connected to their community. When seniors can get out the door, they don't just receive help; they give it.

5. **Foster intergenerational volunteerism and programs.** We encourage you to consider incentives that bring intergenerational communities to the forefront of direct service programs, such as tax credits for employers who offer paid volunteer time, recognition for students who complete community service with programs serving older adults, and partnerships with schools, families and faith communities. An intergenerational volunteer pipeline matters for two reasons:

A. Fir**s**t, it builds a more sustainable volunteer force. Across Pennsylvania, Meals on Wheels programs are already going beyond the standard meal service through efforts like Project HEARTH, the Food for Thought Library, and friendly call and visitor programs described earlier in this testimony. These programs, along with volunteering in kitchens and on delivery routes, depend on retirees, many of whom are aging themselves. Bringing younger volunteers alongside them keeps this work going for the next generation of seniors.

B. Second, it eases loneliness across age groups. Ninety-two percent of Americans believe intergenerational programs help reduce loneliness for young and old alike (23). In Berks County, a volunteer and her father began shopping for an older neighbor through Berks Encore's grocery program, a partnership with Redner's Warehouse Markets, and their regular deliveries grew into a friendship. Encouraging and incentivizing intergenerational programming and volunteerism can leave a lasting legacy of community vitality and life-changing relationships.

Closing

Loneliness is a quiet emergency, and it is solvable one doorstep at a time. Science tells us isolation harms the heart, the brain and the budget. Pennsylvania's demographics tell us the need will grow. Our programs tell us what works: a nutritious meal, delivered by a friendly neighbor, every day. As our colleagues at Berks Encore put it, the greatest threat to an older adult's independence is not always a diagnosis or a lack of food. Sometimes it is the gradual loss of connection to the world around them.

In 1967, Lancaster's first volunteers delivered to seven people. Since then, neighbors like Susie, who has volunteered with us for 54 years, have carried that work forward one meal, one route, one person at a time. Next year, Meals on Wheels of Lancaster marks 60 years of service, and we hope to celebrate it by ensuring that no neighbor is left waiting for a meal or a visit.

Thank you, Senator McCormick and the Committee, for the opportunity to testify. Meals on Wheels programs across Pennsylvania stand ready to be your partners.

References

1. Meals on Wheels Pennsylvania. Testimony to the Pennsylvania House Aging and Older Adult Services Committee (F. Nancarvis, Meals on Wheels of Lancaster; E. McGaughey, Meals on Wheels Greater Lehigh Valley), including Meals on Wheels America 2023 National Snapshot. February 26, 2024.
2. Office of the Governor of Pennsylvania and Pennsylvania Department of Aging. Aging Our Way, PA: 10-year strategic plan announcement. 2024.
3. U.S. Census Bureau. 2021 American Community Survey and 2020 Census, as compiled in Family Caregiver Alliance, State of the States in Family Caregiver Support: Pennsylvania profile. August 2023.
4. National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine. Social Isolation and Loneliness in Older Adults: Opportunities for the Health Care System. 2020.
5. Malani P, et al. Loneliness and social isolation among US older adults, 2018-2024. *JAMA*. 2024. doi:10.1001/jama.2024.23213. University of Michigan summary.
6. Office of the U.S. Surgeon General. Our Epidemic of Loneliness and Isolation. 2023.
7. Flowers L, et al. Medicare Spends More on Socially Isolated Older Adults. AARP Public Policy Institute. 2017.
8. Meals on Wheels America (J. Protas). Outside witness testimony to the House Committee on Appropriations, FY2027 Labor-HHS-Education. April 16, 2026 (data from Meals on Wheels America's 2025 Member Benchmarking Survey).
9. Meals on Wheels America. FY27 appropriations request fact sheet: Increase funding for Older Americans Act Nutrition Program. 2026.
10. Thomas KS, Akobundu U, Dosa D. More than a meal? A randomized control trial comparing the effects of home-delivered meals programs on participants' feelings of loneliness. *Journals of Gerontology: Series B*. 2016.
11. Brown University. Home-delivered meals reduce loneliness, study finds. December 2015.
12. Thomas KS, Mor V. Providing more home-delivered meals is one way to keep older adults with low care needs out of nursing homes. *Health Affairs*. 2013. Brown University summary.
13. National Association of Nutrition and Aging Services Programs. Statement for the record. In: U.S. Senate Special Committee on Aging, *Breaking the Cycle of Senior Loneliness*, S. Hrg. 119-58, p. 98. March 12, 2025.

14. Meals on Wheels America. More Than a Meal pilot research study. 2015.

15. U.S. Senate Special Committee on Aging. *Breaking the Cycle of Senior Loneliness: Strengthening Family and Community Support*. S. Hrg. 119-58. March 12, 2025 (transcript; testimony of A. MacPherson and T. Strawter-Tanks).

16. Meals on Wheels America. 2026 National Snapshot: The Escalating Issue of Senior Hunger and Isolation; see also the July 2025 edition.

17. Freiberger E, Sieber CC, Kob R. Mobility in older community-dwelling persons: a narrative review. *Frontiers in Physiology*. 2020;11:881 (cited in testimony of A. MacPherson, S. Hrg. 119-58).

18. City of Lancaster. Age-Friendly City (2020 Census population; Lancaster County Office of Aging Four Year Area Plan).

19. U.S. Department of Agriculture, National Agricultural Statistics Service. *2022 Census of Agriculture, County Profile: Lancaster County, Pennsylvania.*

20. U.S. Congress. S. 2120, Older Americans Act Reauthorization Act of 2025, 119th Congress. Passed Senate July 14, 2026. https://www.congress.gov/bill/119th-congress/senate-bill/2120

21. U.S. Congress. S. 473, SENIOR Act, 119th Congress. https://www.congress.gov/bill/119th-congress/senate-bill/473/all-info

22. Berks Encore. *2025 program and community impact data.* Provided to Meals on Wheels of Pennsylvania by LuAnn Oatman, President & CEO, October 22, 2026.

23. Generations United and The Eisner Foundation. *All In Together: Creating Places Where Young and Old Thrive.* 2018.

Written Testimony of Melanie Kohler

Chief Executive Officer
Meals on Wheels of the Greater Lehigh Valley

United States Senate Special Committee on Aging
Field Hearing: *Connecting Pennsylvania's Seniors: Addressing Loneliness and Social Isolation*
October 29, 2026 | Allison Park, Pennsylvania

Introduction

Senator McCormick and Members of the Committee:

Thank you for bringing attention to loneliness and social isolation among older Pennsylvanians and for the opportunity to share the perspective of Meals on Wheels of the Greater Lehigh Valley.

We often talk about the meals we deliver, the clients we serve, and the volunteers who make it possible. Those numbers matter. They tell us the scale of our responsibility and help us understand the resources required to meet it.

But they don't tell the whole story.

They don't capture the relief of an adult daughter who knows someone will knock on her father's door while she's at work. They don't capture the companionship of a familiar face for someone who has outlived friends or can no longer leave home easily. And they don't capture what happens when a volunteer arrives to deliver lunch and discovers that the person they came to see needs help.

These are not incidental benefits of delivering meals. They are part of the reason our work matters, and why maintaining these connections is so important as our population ages.

Since 1971, Meals on Wheels of the Greater Lehigh Valley has helped older adults and adults with disabilities remain nourished, connected, and independent. Today, we serve approximately 1,500 clients across Lehigh and Northampton counties and portions of Carbon County, operating 85 delivery routes from nine locations throughout our service area.

In fiscal year 2026, we provided nearly 275,000 meals through a combination of hot, chilled, frozen, and shelf-stable options designed to meet different nutritional needs and individual circumstances.

Yet our work cannot be measured by meals alone. For many clients, a delivery brings a familiar face, a conversation, and the reassurance that someone cares about their well-being.

That human connection is not incidental to our mission. It is fundamental to it.

The Changing Landscape of Aging and Family Connections

The way families live and care for one another has changed.

Adult children increasingly live in different communities, sometimes hundreds of miles from their aging parents. Even when families live nearby, work schedules, childcare responsibilities, and the demands of everyday life can make regular visits difficult.

Many adults are part of the *sandwich generation*, raising children while helping aging parents, managing careers, and balancing the needs of their own households.

These are loving families doing their best. But love alone cannot eliminate the practical challenges of being in two places at once.

At the same time, older adults may be navigating the loss of a spouse, the passing of lifelong friends, declining mobility, or the inability to drive. Their worlds can gradually become smaller, sometimes without anyone recognizing just how isolated they have become.

These challenges take different forms throughout our region. In urban neighborhoods, an older adult may live surrounded by people yet have very little meaningful interaction. In suburban communities, distances and limited transportation can make it difficult to participate in social activities. In rural areas, geographic isolation can compound the challenges of aging at home.

Loneliness and social isolation are more than quality-of-life concerns. They are also significant public health and economic challenges. In his 2023 advisory, the U.S. Surgeon General reported that poor social connection is associated with a 29% increased risk of heart disease, a 32% increased risk of stroke, and a 50% increased risk of developing dementia among older adults. Social isolation among older adults has also been associated with an estimated $6.7 billion in additional Medicare spending annually. These findings reinforce an important point: helping older adults remain connected is not simply an act of compassion. It is an investment in their health, independence, and the sustainability of our healthcare system.

Our client data reflect these vulnerabilities. Approximately 54% of the people we serve live alone, and 62% are over age 75.

Living alone does not necessarily mean being lonely, just as having family does not guarantee regular companionship. But these circumstances can increase the importance of dependable, personal connections.

Meals on Wheels helps bridge that gap.

We do not replace family members, friends, or professional caregivers. What we provide is another consistent connection to the community, someone who knows the client, recognizes their routine, and notices when something seems different.

For families who cannot always be there, that relationship offers something equally important: peace of mind.

More Than a Meal: The Value of a Familiar Face

During a routine meal delivery, a volunteer arrived at a client's home and knocked on the door. There was no answer. That was unusual. She knew this client and his routine, and something didn't feel right.

Rather than simply moving on to her next delivery, she walked around to the back of the house to check once more. As she approached the back door, she looked through the window and saw him lying on his kitchen floor.

Understandably alarmed, she rushed into the home and immediately began reassuring him while calling for emergency assistance. She asked whether he was hurt and told him help was on the way.

And then something remarkable happened.

The client looked up at her, completely calm, and said:

"It's okay. I wasn't scared. I knew you were coming."

Think about what those words mean.

Here was an older adult, alone and vulnerable, lying on his kitchen floor. Yet he wasn't afraid because he knew someone would be coming to check on him. He knew his Meals on Wheels volunteer would show up.

That is the kind of trust built through consistent, personal relationships. It cannot be measured simply by counting meals delivered.

We don't just show up with lunch. We show up for people.

And over time, those people come to know that they can count on us.

This is one of the most important distinctions between delivering food and providing a community-based service built around human relationships.

Our volunteers become familiar with the people on their routes. They recognize patterns, notice changes, and offer a friendly greeting that may be one of the few personal interactions a client experiences that day.

When a client does not answer the door or appears to need assistance, established procedures guide appropriate follow-up, including contacting family members, emergency contacts, or first responders when necessary.

These visits are not a substitute for medical care or continuous supervision. But they create opportunities to recognize when someone may need help, opportunities that might otherwise not exist.

Research reinforces the importance of this connection. A randomized study conducted by researchers at Brown University found that older adults receiving daily home-delivered meals experienced improvements in reported loneliness compared with those receiving less frequent deliveries. The findings suggest that how services are delivered, and the human interaction that accompanies them, can be as important as the service itself.

The benefits of these relationships also extend well beyond emergencies.

Gayle, a Meals on Wheels volunteer, developed a meaningful relationship with a veteran on her delivery route who was experiencing vision loss. Through their conversations, she learned about his challenges and took the initiative to help him obtain assistive reading glasses equipped with technology that reads text aloud.

This was not an additional service provided by Meals on Wheels, nor was it something Gayle was asked to do. She chose to help because she cared about the person behind the door.

Her initiative illustrates something important about the relationships formed through meal delivery. A volunteer may arrive with a nutritious lunch, but the trust that develops over time can open the door to assistance, encouragement, and opportunities that help an older adult maintain independence and dignity.

One story reflects the reassurance of knowing someone will come. The other reflects what can happen because someone takes the time to care.

Both remind us that the human connection is part of the service, not simply a pleasant addition to it.

Connection Extends Beyond the Client

The impact of Meals on Wheels does not stop with the person receiving the meal.

Some of our volunteers bring aging parents or relatives along on their delivery routes. For those family members, the experience provides an opportunity to get out of the house, engage with others, and participate in something purposeful.

Other volunteers bring their children, introducing younger generations to older adults and helping them understand the importance of caring for their neighbors. One mother who homeschools her two children has made Meals on Wheels volunteering part of their education. Her son has developed connections with clients that extend beyond the delivery route, returning with his mother to visit and read to them. What began as an opportunity to teach children about service has become something more: a meaningful connection between generations, built through time spent together.

And many of our volunteers are older adults themselves. Volunteering provides a sense of purpose, a meaningful routine, and opportunities for social interaction that benefit their own well-being.

Consider what happens during a single meal delivery.

An older adult receives nutrition and companionship. A volunteer experiences the satisfaction of meaningful service. An aging parent accompanying that volunteer has an opportunity to engage with the community. A child learns that older adults are not simply people who need assistance, but neighbors with stories, experiences, and relationships worth sharing.

These are connections across generations, created through an activity that may appear simple from the outside.

In a society increasingly concerned about loneliness and isolation, we should recognize the value of opportunities that bring people together in meaningful, purposeful ways.

Sustaining the Connections That Matter

The challenge before us is not simply recognizing the value of these relationships. It is ensuring that organizations can continue creating them as the population ages and community needs become more complex.

Providing home-delivered meals requires an extensive network of staff, volunteers, community partners, and financial supporters.

The work is both deeply personal and operationally demanding.

Meals must be planned, prepared, packaged, and delivered safely. Routes must be coordinated across urban, suburban, and rural communities. Volunteers must be recruited, screened, trained, and supported. Client needs must be assessed, services coordinated, and concerns addressed promptly.

Each of those responsibilities requires resources, infrastructure, and sound management.

The economics of delivering meals also vary considerably by geography. A route serving homes close together in an urban neighborhood operates differently from one covering many miles between clients in a rural community. Both are necessary, but the resources required to sustain them are not identical.

Volunteer recruitment presents another challenge. Deliveries generally occur during weekday hours, when many working adults are unavailable. Retirees remain an essential part of the volunteer workforce, but we must also create opportunities for younger generations, families, businesses, and community organizations to participate.

And as clients age, their nutritional, physical, and social needs may become more complex.

These realities make sustainable funding and strong community partnerships essential.

Meals on Wheels organizations have demonstrated an ability to combine public funding, private philanthropy, volunteer engagement, and operational efficiency to serve people in their homes.

That combination is a strength, but it should not obscure the need for reliable investment in the underlying service.

We must also recognize that efficiency is not always measured by how quickly a meal reaches a doorstep.

A brief conversation, a volunteer who notices something unusual, or the time taken to reassure a frightened client may not appear in a traditional productivity measure. Yet those moments are often where some of the greatest value is created.

As we evaluate community-based services, we should be careful not to lose sight of what makes them effective.

Recommendations for Federal Policy

I respectfully offer three recommendations for the Committee's consideration.

1. Recognize social connection as a core outcome of home-delivered nutrition programs.

Federal nutrition programs are rightly focused on addressing hunger, food insecurity, and nutritional needs among older adults. Those objectives remain essential.

But the value of home-delivered meals extends beyond nutrition.

Regular, face-to-face contact can help reduce loneliness, strengthen community ties, and create opportunities to identify emerging concerns before they become more serious.

As Congress evaluates and supports programs under the Older Americans Act, social connection should be recognized as an important outcome of home-delivered nutrition services, alongside nutritional well-being and the ability to remain independent at home.

That recognition should be reflected in program evaluation, research, and funding decisions, without creating unnecessary administrative burdens that divert resources from direct service.

2. Sustain reliable funding for consistent, community-based services.

Older adults should not have to choose between adequate nutrition and meaningful human connection.

Reliable federal investment in Older Americans Act nutrition programs is essential to sustaining services that address both needs.

Funding decisions should recognize the actual costs of delivering meals, including transportation, volunteer coordination, safety procedures, and the additional challenges of reaching geographically isolated communities.

In rural areas especially, the cost of serving one individual may be greater because of travel distances and the limited availability of other community resources.

A sustainable approach must recognize these differences while preserving the flexibility providers need to respond to local circumstances.

Congress should also continue its work to strengthen and reauthorize the Older Americans Act, providing the stability necessary for organizations to plan responsibly and meet growing demand.

3. Support community partnerships and intergenerational volunteer engagement.

Government cannot address loneliness and social isolation alone, nor should it have to.

Some of the most effective connections are created through local relationships among nonprofit organizations, families, schools, employers, faith communities, healthcare providers, and volunteers.

Federal policy can encourage these partnerships by supporting flexible community-based models, reducing unnecessary barriers to collaboration, and recognizing the contributions of volunteers.

We should also look for ways to engage people across generations.

When a young person accompanies a parent on a delivery route, or an older adult finds renewed purpose through volunteering, the benefits extend beyond the person receiving the meal.

These experiences help build communities where older adults remain visible, valued, and connected.

Conclusion

Loneliness and social isolation are complex challenges. They cannot be solved through a single program, funding stream, or intervention.

But we know that relationships matter.

We know that regular contact can help people feel seen, valued, and connected to the communities around them. We know that dependable services offer reassurance not only to older adults, but also to families who love them and cannot always be present.

And we know that behind every meal delivered is a person whose needs, experiences, and circumstances deserve our attention.

At Meals on Wheels of the Greater Lehigh Valley, we take seriously the responsibility of providing nutritious meals. We also recognize the privilege of being welcomed into people's lives, often at moments when they are most vulnerable.

That responsibility requires compassion. It also requires sound operations, sustainable resources, accountable leadership, and a commitment to meeting people where they are.

When that volunteer discovered her client on the kitchen floor, he wasn't afraid.

He knew someone was coming.

That is the kind of confidence every older adult deserves: the reassurance that they have not been forgotten, that they remain connected to their community, and that someone will show up.

Our challenge, and our opportunity, is to ensure that those connections remain possible for the growing number of Pennsylvanians who need them.

Thank you for your attention to this important issue and for the opportunity to share our experience.

Sources and Supporting Documentation

- Meals on Wheels of the Greater Lehigh Valley, FY2026 internal service and client data.
- Brown University researchers, randomized controlled research on home-delivered meals and loneliness among older adults, published in *The Journals of Gerontology: Series B*.
- U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Office of the Surgeon General, *Our Epidemic of Loneliness and Isolation* (2023).
- Lehigh Valley Health Network, 2025 Community Health Needs Assessments for Lehigh, Northampton, and Carbon counties.
- Older Americans Act of 1965, as amended, including Title III nutrition services.