



Testimony of Josh Protas
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for the hearing:
“Caught in the Middle: Supporting Families in the Sandwich Generation”

United States Senate Special Committee on Aging

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Good afternoon, Chairman Scott, Ranking Member Gillibrand, and esteemed Members of the Committee. Thank you for the opportunity to testify before you at this hearing on the important topic of caregiving and the support needs of families in the sandwich generation. My name is Josh Protas, and I am proud to present before you as the Chief Advocacy and Policy Officer for Meals on Wheels America. Meals on Wheels America is the national leadership organization that works on behalf of the nationwide network of approximately 5,000 community-based senior nutrition providers committed to addressing senior hunger and isolation. Local Meals on Wheels providers operate in nearly every community across the country, working toward a vision in which all seniors live nourished, healthy and connected lives with independence and dignity.

With the support of hundreds of thousands of committed volunteers and staff members, these local programs provide nutritious meals in rural, suburban and urban communities through community meals, grab-and-go service, or home-delivered meals, where they also provide friendly visits and social interaction, safety checks and connections to other health and wellness services to support older Americans in greatest need. And the underpinning of all this work and impact is a direct result of the support, policies and funding provided through the Older Americans Act (OAA).

For more than 60 years, the OAA has supported millions of our nation's seniors and caregivers through a network of state, regional and local community-based entities. The local providers that we represent at Meals on Wheels America serve as a direct lifeline to those struggling with food insecurity, malnutrition, limited mobility, isolation, loneliness and other challenges to healthy aging. The Meals on Wheels model sets the gold standard for a successful public-private partnership, delivering on the original intent of the OAA and showing great resiliency and adaptability in response to trying circumstances. We frequently say the service starts with the meal and opens the door to so much more. It's the purposeful and unique combination of nutritious meals and social connection that fosters a relationship with the individual senior, and often their caregiver, enabling Meals on Wheels providers to identify and deliver valuable services that promote independence and well-being. This impact not only reduces senior nutritional risk and social isolation but also saves taxpayer dollars by ensuring that our nation's seniors live safer, longer and more nourished in their own homes and out of more costly health care or long-term care settings.¹ In fact, we can provide Meals on Wheels services to a vulnerable senior for an entire year for roughly the same cost as one day in the hospital or twelve days in a nursing home.²

Unfortunately, the failure of federal funding to keep pace with increasing need among our nation's rapidly growing senior population and high costs for food, fuel and program operations has left millions of vulnerable older Americans to struggle on their own, without

¹ Meals on Wheels America (September 2023), *The Case for Meals on Wheels: An Evidence-Based Solution to Senior Hunger and Isolation*. <https://www.mealsonwheelsamerica.org/learn-more/research/the-case-for-meals-on-wheels-sept23>

² Meals on Wheels America (2024), analysis of ACL and Mathematica's estimated meal cost (*OAA Nutrition Programs Evaluation: Meal Cost Analysis*), Kaiser Family Foundation's daily hospital expense data (*State Health Facts: Hospital Adjusted Expenses per Inpatient Day*), and Genworth's cost of semi-private nursing home room (*2021 Cost of Care Survey*) adjusted for inflation. Sources and methods available at: https://www.mealsonwheelsamerica.org/docs/default-source/fact-sheets/2023/what_we_deliver_2023_national_snapshot_sources_methods.pdf

the Meals on Wheels services they need and deserve. Right now, serious challenges of affordability impact both low-income older adults as well as the community-based programs that work hard to meet their basic needs. MAG Aging and Family Services, which serves aging adults and their families in Summit, Utah and Wasatch counties in Utah, shared this powerful reflection about how funding challenges cause harm to vulnerable seniors, caregivers and the ability of the agency to serve the community: “Due to lack of funding, we have had to resort to removing clients who have in home support from live-in, able bodied family members. This has resulted in a lot of panicked seniors and caregivers who are heavily reliant on our program. Our waiting list continues to grow day by day. Because of this, we are unable to care for seniors with immediate needs such as post-surgery, when good, nutritious food is most important. While we are still doing a lot of good and helping a lot of seniors, many seniors are still going without.”

The crises of senior hunger and isolation have been hiding in plain sight, growing more acute and costly³ as they continue to be overlooked and ignored by policymakers. Our seniors and their family caregivers deserve better. **As you explore ways to support sandwich generation families, it is critical that you prioritize strengthening and expanding access to Meals on Wheels and other community-based aging services that provide vital support for vulnerable seniors and for family caregivers.**

The Sandwich Generation: A Growing and Strained Population

For families in the sandwich generation — those simultaneously caring for aging parents and dependent children — rising costs of living, workplace demands, school and community involvements for children and families, chronic health conditions for elderly relatives, and gaps in long-term services and supports have placed caregivers squarely in the middle of competing responsibilities. **For many of these families and for family caregivers generally, Meals on Wheels is not simply a meal program — it is a foundational support that helps older adults remain independent, safe, connected and nourished at home while easing the emotional, time and financial burdens on family caregivers.**⁴

Today, 16 million Americans provide unpaid caregiving in some way for aging loved ones while also raising children or supporting younger family members.⁵ Trying to balance full- or part-time work, unpaid assistance with daily activities for family members and coordination of health care and long-term care in a fragmented system can be often stressful. Many family caregivers report missing work, reducing hours or leaving the workforce entirely to meet caregiving demands. Caregiving responsibilities often result in lost wages, reduced retirement savings and adverse

³ Bernadette Wright, Victoria Owens, *The Growing Unmet Need for Older Adult Nutrition Programs: Evidence from National Datasets*, *Innovation in Aging*, Volume 9, Issue Supplement 2, December 2025, igaf122.391, <https://doi.org/10.1093/geroni/igaf122.391>

⁴ Emily Gadbois, Nichole Stetten, Laura Samuel, Kimberly Bernard, Em Balkan, Yiqing Qian, Kali Thomas, *Meals on Wheels and Family Caregiving: Benefits Received and Unmet Needs*, *Innovation in Aging*, Volume 9, Issue Supplement 2, December 2025, igaf122.479, <https://doi.org/10.1093/geroni/igaf122.479>

⁵ AARP and National Alliance for Caregiving, *Caregiving in the U.S. 2025*. Washington, DC: AARP Public Policy Institute, 2025. <https://www.aarp.org/content/dam/aarp/ppi/topics/ltss/family-caregiving/caregiving-in-us-2025.doi.10.26419-2fppi.00373.001.pdf>.

physical and mental health outcomes such as physical strain, emotional stress and feelings of isolation.⁶

A common daily concern for many sandwich generation caregivers is ensuring that an older loved one has access to regular, nutritious meals, particularly when chronic illness, mobility limitations, economic limitations or cognitive decline interfere with meal preparation and access. **For more than 50 years, Meals on Wheels providers have been here to help.** A recent study of recipients of home-delivered meals found that in addition to meeting the goals of the Older Americans Act to reduce hunger, food insecurity and malnutrition and promote the health and well-being of the older adults, the services improved the health, well-being and finances of their caregivers. Many recipients expressed relief at not needing to rely on others for support getting groceries. And recipients who were themselves caregivers to spouses, children, grandchildren and other individuals indicated that, “receiving meals allowed them more time to relax and spend quality time with family.”⁷ In another study featuring qualitative interviews, both clients and caregivers reported that Meals on Wheels services eased some caregiving burdens, but there continued to be unmet needs. “Caregivers reported substantial burden and suggested that they would benefit from assistance with financial and care planning, identifying formal supports, and a desire for respite care.”⁸

The Role of Meals on Wheels in Supporting Vulnerable Older Adults

The majority of Meals on Wheels recipients live with multiple chronic conditions, physical limitations or disabilities. Many are unable to shop for groceries or prepare meals safely. Without Meals on Wheels, these older adults are at increased risk of malnutrition, exacerbated health challenges, hospitalization and premature institutionalization. The challenges associated with these risks are faced not only by the impacted individuals but also by family caregivers who balance their own demands of daily life with concern about the health and well-being of aging loved ones.

Meals on Wheels services provide support for both seniors and their caregivers in numerous ways, including by:

- Offering home-delivered and community **meals tailored to meet the nutritional and dietary needs of older adults;**
- Providing **regular wellness and safety checks** that family caregivers cannot always provide due to work or family obligations, often serving as the first line of defense against falls, medical emergencies or untreated health conditions;
- Supporting social connection and **reducing isolation and loneliness;**

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Emily Balkan, Emily A. Gadbois, Emma L. Tucher, et al., Home-Delivered Nutrition Services for Older Adults Under the Older Americans Act, *JAMA Network Open*, Vol. 8 No. 9, September 30, 2025, [Home-Delivered Nutrition Services for Older Adults Under the Older Americans Act | Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion | JAMA Network Open | JAMA Network](#)

⁸ Emily Gadbois, Nichole Stetten, Laura Samuel, Kimberly Bernard, Em Balkan, Yiqing Qian, Kali Thomas, Meals on Wheels and Family Caregiving: Benefits Received and Unmet Needs, *Innovation in Aging*, Volume 9, Issue Supplement_2, December 2025, igaf122.479, <https://doi.org/10.1093/geroni/igaf122.479>

- Making helpful **referrals to other services**, such as transportation, home repairs and health care resources;
- Assisting with locating loved ones and **ensuring safety during natural disasters and emergency situations**;
- **Helping older adults remain independent in their homes** longer by delaying or preventing costly nursing home placements;
- **Providing peace of mind and reducing caregiver stress and burnout** by ensuring that nutrition and safety needs are met on a regular basis; and
- **Generating substantial cost savings for families and taxpayers** by providing low-cost, community-based services that help to prevent emergency room visits, hospitalizations and institutional care.

Aging in place is overwhelmingly preferred by older adults,⁹ yet it requires access to basic supports. **Meals on Wheels provides the reassurance to families that their loved one regularly gets nutritious meals, social connection, and safety and wellness checks that enhance their ability to remain living independently at home.** The services offered by Meals on Wheels can often bridge the gap for families who may not have the ability to provide assistance to their aging loved ones directly or on a regular basis, and they help to prevent or delay the need for institutional care, a costly burden for both families and taxpayers.

The lifesaving assistance provided by Matt Shade, a volunteer with Meals on Wheels San Diego, exemplifies the difference that Meals on Wheels services can make for vulnerable seniors and the reassurance this offers to caregivers who live apart and are not always able to be present. Last October, while delivering meals to Patricia, a senior with cognitive disabilities, Matt noticed smoke rolling out of her kitchen. Without hesitation, he called 911, smothered the flames and moved Patricia and her animals to safety. Had Matt not been there that morning, the fire could have engulfed the entire home. “Some might think my actions were heroic,” Matt said. “But the truth is that I was there because I am a volunteer for Meals on Wheels. That’s what allowed me to save the day.”

Relief and Reassurance: Supporting Family Caregivers

Family caregiving can often feel like a 24/7 job, with little to no opportunity for a break. The stress of constantly attending to an aging relative’s safety, health and nutrition can be overwhelming.

Meals on Wheels services support caregivers by:

- **Reducing time spent** on grocery shopping, meal preparation, transportation and daily check-ins;
- **Allowing caregivers a needed break** from some of the constant daily responsibilities;

⁹ *ARP. 2024 Home and Community Preferences Survey: A National Survey of Adults Age 18-Plus.* Washington, DC: AARP Research, 2024. <https://www.aarp.org/content/dam/aarp/research/topics/livable-communities/housing/2024-home-community-preferences-report.doi.10.26419-2fres.00831.001.pdf>.

- Providing **predictability and reliability** for meeting the daily needs of elderly loved ones, allowing caregivers to focus more on work and their children and quality time with their older relatives;
- Offering **emotional relief and peace of mind**, knowing that someone else is checking in regularly; and
- Serving as an **early warning system** when health or safety concerns arise.

For sandwich generation caregivers, Meals on Wheels can be the difference between being able to maintain employment and being forced to reduce hours or exit the workforce – decisions with long-term economic consequences for families and the broader economy. And for families who are simultaneously saving for college and retirement, avoiding institutional care for an elderly family member is beneficial both financially and emotionally.

For family caregivers who do not live in close proximity to their aging loved one, these services can furnish an invaluable complement to the support the family is able to provide, reduce regular and stressful travel and offer reassurance that their relative’s basic needs are being met.

A recent poll conducted by the National Opinion Research Center (NORC) at the University of Chicago for the University of Michigan Institute for Healthcare Policy and Innovation offers some helpful insights into common challenges that sandwich generation caregivers experience. The poll found that nearly a third of Americans over the age of 50 provide regular care to an adult relative or friend with a health issue or disability, but that many of them are unaware of local resources that can help them with caregiving. Among caregivers who also reported that they did not have close friends or family to depend on for help with their own needs, 41% say that they do not have the support they need to manage their caregiving responsibilities.

The findings also reflect financial challenges as a widespread problem faced by sandwich generation caregivers. 40% of those surveyed between the ages of 50 to 64 said that caregiving resulted in financial challenges for them. Among all caregivers who feel they don’t have enough support to manage their caregiving responsibilities, 69% (the top answer by far) identified financial assistance or subsidies for caregiving responsibilities as what would help them the most.¹⁰

The support provided by one volunteer with Senior Concerns in Thousand Oaks, California highlights what a difference Meals on Wheels services can make for older adults who live far away from family caregivers. Losing a spouse is never easy. But it was especially heartbreaking for Claire, a homebound senior who lives hundreds of miles away from family. Luckily, she didn’t have to endure her grief alone. After Claire’s husband passed in 2018, Meals on Wheels volunteer Harlene Roan was there to help her mourn. In addition to delivering warm, nutritious meals, Harlene began grocery shopping for Claire and inviting her over for dinner, deepening their friendship during this difficult time. Harlene even made Claire a special stuffed animal to

¹⁰ University of Michigan Institute for Healthcare Policy and Innovation. (2026, March 19). *Caregiving without a net: Poll shows who needs help most* [News]. <https://ihpi.umich.edu/news-events/news/caregiving-without-net-poll-shows-who-needs-help-most>

remind her of Harry, the man who shared over 60 years of her life. Though Claire has started to develop memory loss, she still keeps the bear on her bed and tucks him in every morning.

Combatting Social Isolation and Loneliness

Social isolation and loneliness among older adults are serious public health concerns linked to increased risks of depression, cognitive decline, heart disease and mortality.¹¹ **Meals on Wheels volunteers are often the only regular human contact a home-delivered meal client receives.** These regular interactions are critical to the health and well-being of the seniors served by:

- Providing emotional connection and uplifting dignity;
- Documenting changes in mood, cognition or physical condition;
- Identifying safety risks and concerns about health and wellbeing; and
- Complementing, rather than replacing, family caregiver interactions.

For families juggling multiple responsibilities, the social connection that is an integral part of the Meals on Wheels model offers invaluable support that caregivers cannot always provide on their own.

Growing Demand, Rising Costs and Widening Funding Shortfalls Limit Access to Important Support for Vulnerable Seniors and Family Caregivers

Without adequate investment in senior nutrition services by the federal government, more families will face impossible choices between caregiving responsibilities, work and financial stability. The inability of Meals on Wheels providers to reach all seniors in need exacerbates stress on family caregivers and increases the likelihood of crisis-driven care decisions.

This situation has grown more dire due to the soaring population of older adults, increasing demand for Meals on Wheels services, rising costs and funding levels that have not kept pace. With roughly 12,000 people in America turning 60 years old every day, our nation's senior population is projected to grow from 79 million in 2022 to 91 million by 2030, with 112 million expected by 2060 – increasing the number of seniors today by nearly half.¹² And older Americans are living longer with less money. 1 in 2 seniors living alone lacks the income to pay for basic needs and 12 million older adults face financial challenges that impact their ability to age at home.¹³ The number of older adults with low or very low food security quadrupled between 1999

¹¹ From: Nakou A, Dragioti E, Bastas NS, Zagorianakou N, Kakaidi V, Tsartsalis D, Mantzoukas S, Tatsis F, Veronese N, Solmi M, Gouva M. Loneliness, social isolation, and living alone: a comprehensive systematic review, meta-analysis, and meta-regression of mortality risks in older adults. *Aging Clin Exp Res.* 2025 Jan 21;37(1):29. doi: 10.1007/s40520-024-02925-1. PMID: 39836319; PMCID: PMC11750934 <https://www.cdc.gov/social-connectedness/risk-factors/index.html>

¹² Meals on Wheels America analysis of US Census Bureau population projections data. Details available at [The-Issue-2026-National-Snapshot_Sources-and-Methods_Jan2026.pdf](#)

¹³ Mutchler, Jan E., and Yang Li. *Living on the Edge: Economic Insecurity Among Older Americans* Boston, MA: Center for Social and Demographic Research on Aging, University of Massachusetts Boston, 2023. <https://scholarworks.umb.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1108&context=demographyofaging>

and 2023,¹⁴ contributing to much higher demand for Meals on Wheels services and other food assistance. But over this same time period, the buying power of federal funding for OAA Nutrition Program services *decreased*, and the program was serving meals to roughly the same number of seniors in 2024 (the latest data available) as it did in 1999, falling starkly behind the need.¹⁵

Addressing the chronic and worsening funding shortfalls in light of the growing need and rising costs will help solve for the numerous challenges that many sandwich generation families face – ensuring that older loved ones are nourished, safe and connected while caregivers continue to work, raise families and contribute to their communities.

During his historic site visit and ride-along with Meals on Wheels of Central Maryland in June 2025, Secretary Robert F. Kennedy, Jr. made a powerful statement about the impact of Meals on Wheels and the importance of strong support so the program can reach all in need: “History will judge the humanity of our civilization by how we care for our elderly. Meals on Wheels does not just provide nutrition for the malnourished; it combats the epidemic of loneliness through daily acts of care and compassion. President Trump has asked us at HHS to continue supporting Meals on Wheels so that no American in their twilight years feels forgotten.”¹⁶ Vulnerable seniors across the country and the Meals on Wheels providers that serve them are still waiting to be prioritized. It’s time to End the Wait!^{®17}

As Congress examines how best to support sandwich generation families, strengthening and expanding access to Meals on Wheels and other community-based aging services must be a central part of the solution. I urge you to view Meals on Wheels not as a discretionary benefit, but as an essential, cost-effective solution that supports the health and well-being of older Americans, strengthens families, protects taxpayers and honors the dignity of aging at home. As such, **adequate federal funding for the OAA Nutrition Program must be prioritized.**¹⁸

The Pervasive and Growing Problem of Senior Hunger

Since its addition to the Older Americans Act in 1972, the OAA Nutrition Program has provided billions of meals to seniors in need, improved countless lives and saved considerable taxpayer dollars through well-established trust built at both the community and national levels. While this program has worked as it was designed for decades, it is not close to reaching all those in need. Eight out of ten (80.3%) low-income, food insecure older adults are not receiving the congregate

¹⁴ Bernadette Wright, Victoria Owens, The Growing Unmet Need for Older Adult Nutrition Programs: Evidence from National Datasets, *Innovation in Aging*, Volume 9, Issue Supplement 2, December 2025, igaf122.391, <https://doi.org/10.1093/geroni/igaf122.391>

¹⁵ [Growing Unmet Need for Older Adult Nutrition Programs: Evidence from National Datasets | Innovation in Aging | Oxford Academic](#)

¹⁶ [Secretary Kennedy Instagram post](#) following visit to Meals on Wheels of Central Maryland, June 10, 2025.

¹⁷ [End the Wait®: Seniors are On Hold for Meals and Connection](#)

¹⁸ [The Time is Now: Meals on Wheels Funding Crisis Explained](#)

or home-delivered meals that they are eligible for and likely need.¹⁹ **From a national survey, we found that one in three local Meals on Wheels providers maintains a waitlist, with seniors waiting on average four months for vital meals and moments of human connection, and in some cases for two or more years.**²⁰ Of note, nearly two-thirds of providers with waitlists serve rural areas.²¹ The same survey found an overwhelming majority of providers indicated they face severe challenges in serving all of the seniors in their communities. 78%, have already or would need to add seniors to waitlists due to funding cuts, and 97% indicated they believe that there is unmet need in the area they serve.²²

Additional research has found that older adults who seek Meals on Wheels services are already more vulnerable than the average American seniors, with poorer self-reported health, higher levels of depression and anxiety, greater fears of falling and more.²³ **In a recent study, older adults enrolling in Meals on Wheels from waitlists had a five-fold higher risk of food insecurity than typical U.S. older adults** (47% vs. 9% based on 2023 national data). Simply put, while older adults are on waitlists and struggling to have their nutritional and social needs met, their health is continuing to decline and they are more likely to end up in a hospital or nursing home prematurely, at significantly higher cost to the individuals, their families and taxpayers.

The OAA Nutrition Program is an essential linchpin in supporting healthy aging for millions of Americans. But its effectiveness as a solution to the dual crises of senior hunger and social isolation depends on adequate funding. The reality of senior hunger and isolation in our country is sobering. Nearly 14 million older adults aged 60+ worry about having enough food (i.e., are marginally food insecure)²⁵. This was an increase of 3.7 million from 2021.²⁶

¹⁹ Meals on Wheels America analysis of data from U.S. Census Bureau (2021), *2021 Current Population Survey (CPS) Food Security Supplement*. Dataset available at: https://www.census.gov/data/datasets/time-series/demo/cps/cps-supp_cps-repwgt/cps-food-security.html

²⁰ Meals on Wheels America, *2025 Member Benchmarking Survey*. Report forthcoming.

²¹ Meals on Wheels America. *The Crisis of Waitlists for Meals on Wheels: Fact Sheet*. Arlington, VA: Meals on Wheels America, 2024.

²² Meals on Wheels America 2021 Comprehensive Network Survey conducted by Trailblazer Research. Report summary available at: [Member Perspectives and Practices Survey](#)

²³ [Characteristics of Older Adults on Waiting Lists for Meals on Wheels: Identifying Areas for Intervention - Kali S. Thomas, Raul Smego, Ucheoma Akobundu, David Dosa, 2017](#)

²⁴ [Laura Samuel, Emily Gadbois, Kimberly Bernard, Claire Wang, Nichole Stetten, Tiffany Riser, Christopher Liu, Kali Thomas, The Role of Food Insecurity in Relation to Meals on Wheels Participation, *Innovation in Aging*, Volume 9, Issue Supplement 2, December 2025, igaf122.477, <https://doi.org/10.1093/geroni/igaf122.477>](#)

²⁵ Meals on Wheels America analysis of data from the 2024 Current Population Survey. More information on sources and methods available at [STATES-and-US-Fact-Sheets_Sources-and-Methods-3_2026-update.pdf](#)

²⁶ 10.0M in 2021, 13.7M in 2024=3.7M increase. Source MOWA calculations of 2021 Current Population Survey Food Security Supplement data.

Further, 1 in 4 adults age 60 and older live alone, and 56% of adults age 60 and older were lonely at least sometimes, with 23% reporting being severely lonely.^{27 28}

While the national scope of these issues is daunting, **even one individual struggling with hunger and isolation is too many.** With additional challenges fast approaching as America's senior population grows significantly, there is no time to wait for action. The number of OAA-funded meals and seniors the Meals on Wheels network has been equipped to serve has failed to keep pace with demographic shifts, growing need and the rising costs of food, fuel and other expenses. While the OAA Nutrition Program currently serves 244 million nutritious home-delivered and congregate meals annually to 2.6 million older adults²⁹ facing hunger and isolation, there are an estimated 2.5 million low-income, food insecure older adults who are not receiving the home-delivered or congregate meals and social connection they need.³⁰ We have the infrastructure and know-how to reach millions more, but increased appropriations and a strong and timely OAA reauthorization are desperately needed.³¹

The Costs and Consequences of Senior Hunger and Social Isolation

Today, millions of seniors are experiencing some degree of food insecurity and/or social isolation, leaving them at risk for a multitude of adverse health issues and adding stress and strain for family caregivers. Food-insecure older adults experience worse health outcomes than food-secure seniors, with greater risk for heart disease, high blood pressure, diabetes and depression. In addition, seniors with food insecurity reported 3 or more days a month of being in poor physical or mental health compared to food secure seniors.³²

Some of the most vulnerable seniors that the OAA serves – those who are frail, homebound and isolated – rely on the home-delivered meal program for nutritious meals and social connection. The infrastructure and cost-effective interventions to address these consequences already exist through the OAA network. Local, community-based organizations serve a critical role in addressing the nutritional and social needs of our nation's older adults. The impact of these services on seniors' lives is powerful.

Most seniors receiving OAA nutrition services consistently report that participating in the program helps them feel more secure, helps them eat healthier foods, prevents falls or fear of

²⁷ Meals on Wheels America calculations of 2024 American Community Survey data. Figure calculated by aggregating counts of persons 60+ (men + women) living alone, and dividing by the total population age 60+ with data, then multiplying by 100. Retrieved 3/5/2026. (Filters: Row: statefip (for states); age (for national) column: hhtype; weight: person weight, filter: age(60-140)). Available through the IPUMS USA website at <https://usa.ipums.org/usa/sda/> IPUMS USA, University of Minnesota, www.ipums.org.

²⁸ Meals on Wheels America analysis of data from the 2022 Health and Retirement Study survey.

²⁹ Administration for Community Living Aging, Independence, and Disability (AGID) Data Portal Data Explorer. 2024 data for OAA Title III services

³⁰ Meals on Wheels America analysis of data from the 2021 Current Population Survey Food Security Supplement

³¹ Administration for Community Living/Administration on Aging (2023), *State Program Report (SPR) 2021*, available on ACL's Aging, Independence, and Disability Program Data Portal (AGID) at: <https://agid.acl.gov/>

³² Ziliak and Gunderson (2021), *The Health Consequences of Senior Hunger in the United States: Evidence from the 1999-2016 NHANES*, report prepared for Feeding America. www.feedingamerica.org/research/senior-hunger-research/senior

falling and allows them to stay in their own homes.³³ In turn, this helps avoid preventable emergency room visits, hospital admissions and readmissions, and extended rehab stays, preventing premature institutionalization, and ultimately reducing our nation’s health care costs. Yet despite the well-founded, inextricable link between healthy aging and access to nutritious food and regular socialization, millions of seniors struggle to meet these basic human needs. The cost of not providing these vital services due to funding shortfalls is sobering.

Satish’s story offers a powerful example of the difference Meals on Wheels services make for older adults in need. When he reached out for help to Meals on Wheels Etc. in Sanford, Florida, Satish could barely stand long enough to make a sandwich. Diabetes, memory loss and repeated falls made cooking dangerous. “I would take a glass of carrot juice and call that lunch,” he said. “Some days, I’d just go to bed hungry.” Even so, **Satish had to be placed on a waitlist with more than 400 other seniors due to funding constraints – the biggest reason for waitlists nationwide. He waited three long years for support.** The lack of sustainable funds is leaving seniors hungry, and that hunger isn’t just physical – it’s emotional and social, too. While Satish waited, his energy dwindled and his world shrank. “I couldn’t go outside much. I didn’t have the strength,” he said. “I would just sit.” When a meal slot finally opened, **his life changed overnight.** Satish now receives home-delivered meals five days a week and checks the menu each morning. “It gives me something to look forward to,” he said. He regained strength, independence and a sense of connection. **“Meals on Wheels is lifesaving. For people like me it means everything.”**

In 2018, 95% of older adults age 60 and older had at least one chronic condition, while nearly 80% had two or more.³⁴ Increasingly, older adults need access to nutritious meals and comprehensive services that can help them manage their chronic conditions.

Malnutrition, senior falls and social isolation tell a similar story. Adjusted for inflation to August 2025 dollars, older adult falls cost the U.S. healthcare system \$100 billion a year in 2020, with most of the cost paid by Medicare.^{35 36} Studies show the highest rates of social isolation are found among older adults, putting seniors at risk for high blood pressure, heart disease, obesity, a weakened immune system, anxiety, depression, cognitive decline, Alzheimer’s disease and even death.³⁷ Adjusted for inflation to August 2025 dollars, social isolation among older adults leads

³³ Meals on Wheels America analysis of data from the 2023 Administration for Community Living (ACL) National Survey of Older Americans Act Participants. Details on sources and methods here: [What-We-Deliver-2026-National-Snapshot_Sources-and-Methods_Jan2026.pdf](#)

³⁴National Council on Aging. Chronic Inequities: Measuring Disease Cost Burden Among Older Adults in the U.S. A Health and Retirement Study Analysis. Page 5, Figure 2. April 2022. Data are for adults age 60 and older in 2018. <https://ncoa.org/article/the-inequities-in-the-cost-of-chronic-disease-why-it-matters-for-older-adults>

³⁵ Haddad YK, Miller GF, Kakara R, et al. Healthcare spending for non-fatal falls among older adults, USA Injury Prevention 2024;30:272-276. <https://injuryprevention.bmj.com/content/30/4/272>

³⁶ Thomas, et al. (2018), Home-Delivered Meals and Risk of Self-Reported Falls: Results from a Randomized Trial. *Journal of Applied Gerontology*, 37(1), 41–57. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0733464816675421> Adjusted for inflation was calculated using the U.S Bureau of Labor Statistics CPI inflation calculator. Costs adjusted from \$80 billion in December 2020 dollars to August 2025 dollars.

³⁷ Holt-Lunstad, J., Smith, T. B., Layton, J. B. (2010), Social Relationships and Mortality Risk: A Meta-analytic Review. *PLoS Med* 7(7): e1000316. <https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pmed.1002981>

to an extra \$9 billion in Medicare spending a year, similar expenditures to that of having high blood pressure or arthritis.³⁸

The Case for Meals on Wheels

As noted throughout this testimony, Meals on Wheels is a proven solution that addresses the escalating issues of senior hunger and isolation. We know this not only through the daily anecdotes we hear of how Meals on Wheels has impacted people's lives, but through decades of research. Our 2023 report, *The Case for Meals on Wheels: An Evidence-Based Solution to Senior Hunger and Isolation*, showcases consistent findings that Meals on Wheels improves senior health, safety, social connection and more while saving taxpayer dollars.³⁹

The Case for Meals on Wheels analyzed a total of 38 studies, spanning 1996 to 2023, and found they consistently reported that Meals on Wheels programs reduce healthcare utilization and costs, falls, nursing home use, social isolation and loneliness while improving food security, diet quality, nutritional status and seniors' ability to age in place. These remarkable outcomes, highlighted below, underscore the life-changing impact that Meals on Wheels services have on the lives of the older adults we serve:

- 1. Reduced use of costly health care services:** Several studies found Meals on Wheels program participants needed fewer visits to the emergency room or experienced fewer hospital stays or readmissions. This reduces stress, time and expense for both seniors as well as caregivers.
- 2. Reduced nursing home use and increased ability to age in place:** Access to medically tailored and home-delivered meals allowed individuals to stay in their homes rather than transfer to a nursing facility for nutritional support. Nearly all (92%) home-delivered meal participants said the meals help them continue to live independently, according to the 2022 national survey of Older Americans Act Title III home-delivered meal participants.
- 3. Reduced health care costs attributed to reduced hospital and nursing home spending:** In line with outcomes noted above, reduced health care and nursing home use also meant Meals on Wheels participants spent less on health care. One study found that among individuals receiving medically tailored meals, average medical expenditures were 40%

And for coronary heart disease and stroke. **Source:** Valtorta, N. K., Kanaan, M., Gilbody, S., Ronzi, S., Hanratty, B. (2016). Loneliness and social isolation as risk factors for coronary heart disease and stroke: systematic review and meta-analysis of longitudinal observational studies. *Heart* 2016; 102:987-989.

<http://dx.doi.org/10.1136/heartjnl-2015-309242>

³⁸ Flowers, L., Houser, A., Noel-Miller, C., Shaw, J., Bhattacharya, J., Schoemaker, L., & Farid, M. (2017).

Medicare Spends More on Socially Isolated Older Adults. AARP Public Policy Institute. <https://www.aarp.org/ppi/info-2017/medicare-spends-more-on-socially-isolated-older-adults.html> and Shaw, J., Farid, M.m Noel-Miller, C., Joseph, N., Souser, A., Asch, S., Bhattacharya, J., Flowers, L. (2017). Social Isolation and Medicare Spending: Among Older Adults, Objective Social Isolation Increases Expenditures while Loneliness Does Not. *J Aging Health*. 2017 October; 29(7): 1119–1143. doi:10.1177/0898264317703559. Adjusted for inflation was calculated using the U.S Bureau of Labor Statistics CPI inflation calculator. Costs adjusted from \$6.7 billion in December 2012 dollars to August 2025 dollars.

³⁹ Meals on Wheels America (September 2023), *The Case for Meals on Wheels: An Evidence-Based Solution to Senior Hunger and Isolation*. <https://www.mealsonwheelsamerica.org/learn-more/research/the-case-for-meals-on-wheels-sept23>

lower per month for those receiving meals than for a matched group not receiving meals (\$843 vs. \$1,413).

4. **Reduced social isolation and loneliness:** Several studies found a link between home-delivered meals and reduced social isolation or loneliness, particularly among participants who lived alone. These benefits resulted from contact with drivers during meal deliveries and opportunities for social connection via other Meals on Wheels programs.
5. **Reduced falls and increased home safety:** Several studies found Meals on Wheels participants experienced fewer falls and minimized exposure to hazards in the home, outcomes attributable to safety checks provided at meal delivery, and a reduced need to cook in the kitchen.
6. **Increased food security:** Several studies concluded that home-delivered meal participants worried less about having enough to eat. Those individuals who received breakfast and lunch deliveries, rather than just lunch, benefited even more.
7. **Improved diet quality:** Home-delivered meals led to higher-quality diets among participants, as measured by nutrient intake, calories, vitamins, and other indicators. Participant feedback reinforced that meal delivery helped them eat healthier, more nourishing foods.
8. **Reduced or slow decline in nutritional risk:** Program participants threatened by malnutrition saw improvement in their nutritional risk scores. Individuals benefited from both improved dietary intake and improved food security.

Robin's experience in Norman, Oklahoma, makes a personal case for how Meals on Wheels services can truly be lifesaving. It was 11:40 a.m. on a Monday, and Robin was in chronic heart failure. Her breathing was labored, and she had developed cellulitis in her right arm, which was about eight times its normal size. Fortunately, Meals on Wheels volunteers Gena and Jeff Freeman arrived in the nick of time. Desperate to keep Robin alive, they called 911 and gave her four aspirins at the instruction of the 911 operator. When first responders arrived, Robin was rushed to the hospital, where she had 24 pounds of fluid removed from her arm. Today, she is safe at home. But had Gena and Jeff not knocked on her door, she would have surely died.

Unfortunately, the evidence-based, life-bettering services offered by Meals on Wheels don't reach millions of older adults who desperately need them and, by extension, don't provide the critical support, reassurance and respite that could benefit sandwich generation and other family caregivers. **Seniors' and caregivers' access to these critical services is only possible with the support of Congress and sufficient federal funding.** *The Case for Meals on Wheels* report and the personal examples of seniors like Claire, Satish and Robin illuminate the profound impact of Meals on Wheels services and the necessity to increase federal funding to meet the needs of our growing senior population.

Conclusion

Thank you for holding this timely hearing and inviting me to testify before you. I appreciate the chance to share how Meals on Wheels services provided by trusted, community-based organizations improve the lives of senior citizens, caregivers, communities and our nation. I would like to extend a special thanks to Ranking Member Gillibrand for her leadership in prioritizing increased funding for the OAA Nutrition Program. And I want to thank all members

of the Committee for sharing the belief that no senior in America should be left hungry or isolated. I hope the information I provided today is helpful as you consider opportunities to address the challenges that older adults and their caregivers face and support their ability to lead nourished, connected and healthy lives. Thank you again for your time, and I am pleased to answer any questions you might have.