

Tailored Meals and Volunteers: A New Jersey Meals on Wheels Shares Its Secrets

An Interview with [Meals on Wheels of Mercer County](#)

Located in central New Jersey, some 55+ miles outside New York City, Mercer County is home to the state capital, Trenton. The county has a population of more than 387,000, and roughly 24% of its residents are 60 and older.

As it does in many communities throughout the U.S., the need for healthy, nutritious meals for older adults continues to increase in Mercer County. One organization helping to meet that growing demand is [Meals on Wheels of Mercer County](#) (MOWMC).

Here's a look at what CEO Amy Flynn, Chief Operations Officer Beth Englezos, and the rest of the MOWMC team are doing to help feed their community's older adults.

BY THE NUMBERS

7 full-time staff

245 volunteers, ranging in age from 18 to 80

Est. **105,000 meals** served per year

Celebrated **50 years** in 2023

Meals on Wheels is well-known to many, but can you give us an overview of your program?

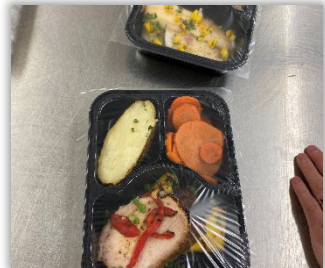
We have a total roster of around 245 volunteers who deliver meals along 24 routes to between 300 and 375 people. All participants receive at least one fresh, hot, nutritious, medically tailored meal Monday through Friday. Many participants are on the two-meal program, which also includes a sandwich, salad, fruit, and a drink. On Fridays, those most in need get two additional meals for the weekend. We also deliver fresh produce to all participants once a week, and we deliver shelf-stable groceries to those most in need once a month in partnership with a local food bank.

Could you talk a little bit more about who you serve?

Almost 50% of our participants live in Trenton, but we also go to areas where you wouldn't think there is a need, like Princeton. In addition to urban communities, some of our participants live in relatively rural areas. There is also a lot of agriculture in Mercer County, and we've been tapping into that community for our weekly fresh produce delivery, with a focus on food that is easy to prepare and easy to consume.

Who qualifies to receive a meal?

We deliver meals to adults who are confined to their homes and unable to shop or prepare meals. Note that we no longer ask people if they are "homebound" because that is such a subjective word. Instead, we ask them if they are able to shop and prepare meals on their own. Many of our participants are 60 or older, but we also serve younger participants with disabilities. Because we have diverse funding streams, we are not held to one set of requirements for our funds. For example, we get referrals from hospitals for people, regardless of their age, who have just been released and need short-term assistance in the form of meals.



Who prepares your meals?

We've had a partnership with Rider University Gourmet Dining Services since 2018. They have a registered dietitian who oversees all the menus and ensures that meals adhere to the [New Jersey Standards For the Nutrition Program for Older Americans](#). Students enrolled in the dietitian program also help plan the meals, working directly with the dietitian to come up with monthly themed menus.

Volunteers are a core part of your program. Talk about the role they play.

We couldn't do what we do without our volunteers. At a time when the majority of our network is not seeing an increase in volunteerism, we have volunteers who are extremely dedicated to the mission — some have been with us for more than two decades, and many others have been with us for 10 or 15 years. As a result, those volunteers have become well-versed in our organization's policies and procedures. That knowledge has been invaluable during times of transition and staff turnover; it has played an important role in helping us with continuity of operations. We also have volunteers who sit on our Board of Trustees. They advocate for our participants and bring a lot of insight to the board and the decisions we make.

Do you have tips for recruiting and retaining volunteers?

- Attend volunteer fairs and community events.
- Post virtual flyers on volunteer clearinghouse sites.
- Word of mouth!
- Engage on a personal level to show you care.
- When faced with a challenge, solicit input from volunteers.



What else do you attribute your success to?

We are the only Meals on Wheels in our county that serves Medically Tailored Meals, which makes us unique.

We also have great technology, which helps us run a more efficient operation. We use a database, [ZippyMeals](#), which Rider University can access to download a report each morning to get a list of everyone who is scheduled to receive a meal that day, their dietary restrictions, and any changes or customizations that need to be made. We also use [Meals on Wheels Scheduler](#), which enables volunteers to schedule their own routes.

What are your biggest challenges?

There is so much need. We know there's much more we can do, but in terms of adding more routes, we're limited by the number of volunteers we have. The rising cost of food is also an issue. In 2023 alone, our food costs rose by an estimated 22%, so we must fundraise constantly. We receive grant money from the county and others, but that's not enough. We subsidize our meals to the tune of almost \$28,000 a month, and that's all due to fundraised dollars. To continue to serve our current participants and to expand to those who still need our help, we have to diversify our funding stream.

How do you ensure you are meeting participants' needs?

We do extensive surveys twice a year. They are all done on paper, and we have a great return rate — around 60%. We ask participants about the food, whether they are getting enough, and what they like and don't like. For example, one woman said how wonderful it was to get fresh blueberries because it had been years since she had tasted a fresh blueberry! But we also get feedback on what people don't like. For example, participants told us we were serving bean salad too often, so we cut back. We also got enough complaints about the Caribbean stew that we took it off the menu.

How has being involved in your community enabled you to better meet the needs of seniors?

Earlier this year, we learned there were seniors who were becoming homeless and now living in hotels. In the past, we would have said we don't deliver meals to hotels; we only deliver to permanent residences. But we made an adjustment based on a need. We couldn't have done that unless we were participating in the community at large and gaining a better understanding of all the barriers people who need our help face.

As you look ahead, what are you focused on?

As we continue to grow, we're always looking for ways we can better address the needs of a diverse population and offer culturally appropriate meals. When people sign up, we want them to feel comfortable that they are going to get a meal they enjoy eating.

Additional Advice from Flynn and Englezos

- » Recognize you are part of a larger ecosystem, not a silo.
- » Learn from others in your community.
- » Share your knowledge and best practices with others.
- » Be flexible and adapt to changing needs.
- » Attend professional conferences.



Find resources and more from the [Nutrition and Aging Resource Center](#), which is funded by the [Administration for Community Living](#) to build the capacity of senior nutrition programs funded by the Older Americans Act to provide high-quality, person-centered services and enhance program sustainability and resiliency.