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## POLITICS

# More Minnesota seniors may go hungry after tightening state dollars mean fewer meals

Nonprofits say state and federal funding has dried up and philanthropy is down, leaving senior nutrition programs faced with cutting back the number of meals they serve.

**By James Walsh**

The Minnesota Star Tribune

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If there was good news during the COVID-19 pandemic, it's that millions of new dollars helped provide meals to thousands more Minnesota seniors.

Those days appear over.

Just two years after an infusion of state and federal dollars boosted the number of older Minnesotans getting meals delivered to their homes or served in congregate dining rooms, food programs are girding for tighter times.

Officials who work at senior programs expect their nutrition services to dish up more than half a million fewer meals in 2025 than they served in 2024, despite the fact that there's an ever-increasing number of Minnesotans ages 65 and older in need. The math isn't good, said Dawn Simonson, president and CEO of Trellis, which provides services to older residents in the Twin Cities.

"Local service providers have already made reductions in the number of meals they provide each week, as well as cut routes for Meals on Wheels programs," Simonson said. "And they won't be able to accept new people. There will be waiting lists."

Every year for at least the past decade, officials said Minnesota has had about \$2.6 million in state and federal dollars to spend on senior nutrition programs. But, over the past biennium, officials boosted that number with \$11 million in additional COVID-related spending.

Officials sought the same amount of funding for the next biennium, Simonson said. Enough for 1.13 million meals.

That hasn't happened. Instead, a bill now being considered by the Minnesota House would provide an extra \$1.74 million – above the \$2.6 million base – in 2026 and \$1.8 million in 2027. That would buy approximately 380,460 meals – about a third of what was served previously.

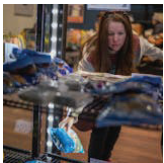
A bill in the Senate totals just \$250,000 for the biennium. In an email from the Senior Meals and Services Coalition, advocates said they estimate they need \$20 million in the biennial budget to fully meet the growing need.

Simonson said she fears fewer meals will threaten seniors' health.

"Meals are a very critical upstream service for older adults," she said. "It's pretty generally well-accepted that a meals program is critical to allowing people to stay at home, prevent hospitalizations and slow the number of people moving into a nursing facility. These programs are just critical."

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Patrick Rowan, executive director of Metro Meals on Wheels, said the money crunch is coming not just from state and federal sources, but private giving has dampened as well.

"We're feeling it from all sides now," he said. "For the first time ever, we're starting to put people on waitlists."

While funding for 2025 is down, Rowan said the organization can get by this year without cutting back on the 1.6 million meals served by 30 different nonprofits in the Twin Cities area. “But,” he added, “we’re beginning to turn people away.”

## A rural lifeline

Jason Swanson said the infusion of federal American Rescue Plan dollars in 2022 “was phenomenal” in expanding the reach of senior nutrition programs.

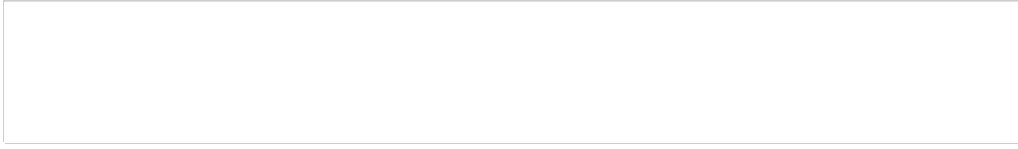
The executive director of the Minnesota River Area Agency on Aging said they were able to ramp up home-delivered meals at the same time grocery stores and restaurants were closing after the pandemic.

“We saw a lot of people we never saw before,” Swanson said. “A nutritious meal a day really serves an older person well.”

While officials knew it wouldn’t last, he said they didn’t expect the funding would fall so far.

In the area they serve – covering 17,000 square miles of 27 mostly rural counties in southwest Minnesota – Swanson said they’re projecting a decrease in the number of meals they’ll be able to provide at church meetings, quilt gatherings and nursing homes.

He hopes to boost private contributions, he said, but worries it won’t be enough to meet a growing number of seniors.



“We continue to be a constant beacon,” Swanson said. “Anything that we can get right now we appreciate it and will do what we can.”

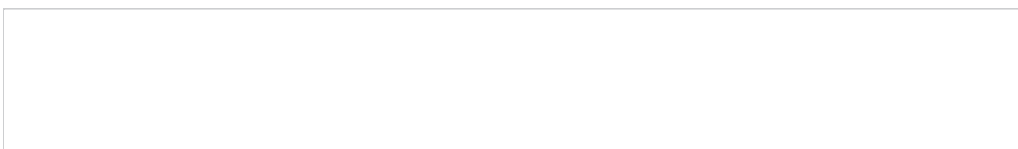
In 1977, the Southeastern Minnesota Citizens Action Council shortened its name to Semcac, even as the range of its services was expanding.

Jeff Wyant, director of senior services for the past six years, oversees congregate dining in 11 counties and home-delivered meals in eight counties.

What the pandemic showed, he said, was there were a lot more people who needed food than previously believed. Now, there will be people whose needs won’t be met.

“The demand for our services is only going to increase. We all know there are going to be a lot of older folks looking to age in place,” he said. “Our plea is that we need to make the investments in these programs now.”

He added that they are delivering meals now where all other options, such as diners and grocery stores, have gone away.



“Having access to the meals [we provide] might be the only source of food that they have,” he said of seniors, some of whom live 20 miles from the nearest town.

## Cutting hours, not meals

Earlier this week, at the Tenborg Building in Rushford, site manager Sharon Boyum was helping ready the meals for both congregate dining and home deliveries. Taco casserole was for lunch.

They serve folks in Rushford, Preston, Lanesboro, Houston, La Crescent, Mabel and Spring Grove, she said, “so it’s a busy place down here in the morning.”

A retired teacher, Boyum works with her brother, a retired state trooper. With money tighter this year than last, she said, “they’re trying to cut hours rather than meals.”

Cooks’ hours have been shaved, and she now works three hours a day instead of four. They’re also looking at ways to cut prep time, such as sending out bread and milk in bulk, rather than individual packing per meal.

They would never cut meals, she said.

Boyum’s father-in-law passed away in December at 106, she said. He had meals delivered right up to his death.

“He waited for those meals, and he waited for those volunteers who brought them, for a little conversation,” she said.

It’s about more than nutrition, Boyum said.

“This is about their independence,” she said. “And treating our seniors with respect and dignity.”

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## ✦ ABOUT THE WRITER

**James Walsh**

REPORTER

James Walsh is a reporter covering social services, focusing on issues involving disability, accessibility and aging. He has had myriad assignments over nearly 35 years at the Star Tribune, including federal courts, St. Paul neighborhoods and St. Paul schools.

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