

Meals on Wheels: History and general information

ORIGINS

Meals on Wheels originated in Britain during the Second World War assisting old people who wanted to stay in their own homes, but who needed help to do so.

In AUSTRALIA, Meals on Wheels started in 1952 in South Melbourne. The meals were delivered by a lady on a tricycle. When it became too much for her to cope with, the Red Cross took over.

In NEW SOUTH WALES, Meals on Wheels was started in March 1957 by Sydney City Council. In the first week 150 meals were served for inner city dwellers, these were cooked in the Town Hall kitchen. The cost of the meal then was two shillings (which is approximately 20 cents in today's coinage).

The service quickly spread to other areas and today there are approximately 315 groups which are known as Meals on Wheels or Food Services in NSW.

STRUCTURE

Meals on Wheels is an essential community service with very strong local origins. Individual services are independent organisations. It is not a single National or State charity, nor is it a Government Department.

Many Meals on Wheels/Food Services organisations are voluntary groups run by committees of unpaid local people – most of whom now employ a coordinator to manage the service on a daily basis and to be responsible for service development.

SCOPE

Over the course of a year, 14 million meals are delivered by more than 100,000 volunteers to about 60,000 recipients Australia wide.

About 4.5 million of these are in NSW, where 35,000 volunteers are active.

AIMS

The main aim of Meals on Wheels is to allow frail aged or disabled people who might otherwise be forced into institutions for their daily care to stay in their own homes.

MODELS OF SERVICE DELIVERY

Most Meals on Wheels organisations offer a range of meal delivery options, including hot meals to be consumed immediately and frozen meals to tide their clients over weekends/public holidays – always providing they are able to manage heating the meal for themselves. The emphasis is on providing a service planned to suit the needs of the individual client.

Many elderly or housebound people who are able to participate are encouraged one day a week (or more) to have their meal in a nearby Meals on Wheels centre. They are taken to the centres by volunteers. This allows them to socialise and meet with other people in the same age group – maybe with the same problems and interests, and it releases them from the confines of the home for a few hours.

FUNDING

In addition to local fundraising and community support, funding is made available through the Home and Community Care (HACC) programme which is jointly funded by the NSW and Commonwealth Governments.

In NSW, HACC-funded organisations are required to work within guidelines set down by the Department of Aged, Disability and Homecare.

VOLUNTEERING

Many Meals on Wheels organisations in NSW are voluntary in nature and always have been. As well as the volunteer management committees, those who drive – usually their own vehicles – and those who go into the home and deliver the meals (runners) are all volunteers.

In some rural districts, volunteers have to travel vast distances to deliver meals to people in outlying areas. Volunteers are often given a petrol subsidy to help towards the cost of petrol as the majority of the volunteers who drive or deliver the meals are themselves retired and on a pension.

Volunteers may have a regular day per week in which they deliver meals, although on day per month is more usual. In small country towns it may be more frequently as local churches and clubs etc., often take responsibility for set weeks on a 4-6 week roster, depending on the number of community groups involved.

SOURCES OF THE MEALS

The three principal sources of Meals on Wheels meals are local hospitals, commercial catering suppliers, and Meals on Wheels production kitchens.

Services with their own kitchens employ paid or volunteer cooks. These days with the increasing cost of running and maintaining a kitchen and the difficulty of finding enough volunteers, the trend is towards purchasing “cook-chill” or frozen meals from commercial catering suppliers, which are stored in fridges or freezers at Meals on Wheels centres.

These can then be heated just prior to delivery, or may be delivered cold to be heated when the client wishes to eat. This is much safer than the practice of leaving hot midday meals until the evening and reheating because you prefer to eat at night.

Other sources of meals include nursing homes, service clubs, and ethnic restaurants.

COST

There is a charge for the meal which varies according to the circumstances of the group providing it and from which source they obtain their meals.

Naturally the prime objective of any Meals on Wheels organisation is to keep the cost to the client as low as possible while still providing a nutritious and appetising meal.

REFERRALS AND ELIGIBILITY

People can refer themselves, or be referred by a friend, doctor, relative or hospital.

Clients must be part of the Home and Community Care program group: frail aged people, young disabled people and their carers. Eligibility assessment of potential clients is carried out by the local service.



THE CHANGING FACE OF MEALS ON WHEELS

As informal care networks have declined over the years, demand for formal care such as Meals on Wheels has grown. Clients are also increasingly diverse in their needs.

Changing client needs

In particular, we are seeing an increasing number of younger disabled persons or arthritis sufferers who also need assistance with meals. They may want to have the hot midday meal but in many cases they are able to heat a frozen meal, or even cook for themselves if they are given assistance with shopping and/or preparation on food.

Meals on Wheels organisations help here by doing their shopping for them and in a few areas, supplying ingredients already prepared, for example fresh vegetables daily, peeled and chopped and meat suitably cut up. This gives the client the independence of choosing what will be eaten and at what time of the day.

Not everyone who is disabled is housebound and indeed it is very necessary for some to attend rehabilitation sessions, social groups etc., during the day. So Meals on Wheels or as some prefer to call themselves today, Food Services, have an expanding challenge to meet changing delivery requirements.

Changing volunteers

Hot midday meals also require that volunteers be available at that time. This is not always convenient for those in the workforce during the day, so Meals on Wheels has predominantly been delivered by an ageing group of retiree volunteers.

Frozen and chilled meals can be delivered at any time – weekends, for instance. This increases the number of volunteers available. Many Meals on Wheels services are working hard to promote volunteering opportunities for families and younger people

One of the most appreciated aspects of meal delivery is the social contact for a housebound person. This is a function which is increasingly important in our atomised communities, and many volunteers .

Changing meals

Another expanding area is clients from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds who may need culturally appropriate meals. It is very hard to change eating habits of a lifetime when you are old and maybe sick as well.

Meals on Wheels organisations themselves, or in partnership with local cultural community groups, are increasingly working to cater for particular cultural groups in their areas.

Clients with dementia, whose numbers are increasingly dramatically as people live longer, also have special meal requirements. Meals on Wheels organisations often provide nutritious snack foods and “breakfast packs” to help remind these people to eat and drink during the day.

If you have any questions or require further information, please contact the NSW Meals on Wheels Association on 8219 4200.