



Advancing Collaboration with Meals on Wheels America

Approach to Collaboration

Collaboration is part and parcel of everything that we do. To ensure our collaborations and partnerships reach their full potential we believe they require work, time, energy, compromise, conversation, and molding.

Though we have many partnerships we're very proud of, we're currently excited about our collaboration with Humana, the health insurance company. We've been working together to address food insecurity and loneliness among their members in targeted communities. These partnerships help us to drive resources to local programs so they're able to extend their reach and impact. Another of our long-term partnerships has been a cooperative agreement with the federal government as the host organization for the National Resource Center on Nutrition and Aging that provides support and resources to the nation's senior nutrition network.

Our vision is to ensure no senior in this country goes hungry or is isolated, and we always adjust our goals and priorities accordingly to best support that vision.

Application of the 9 Considerations for Collaboration

Build Trust

We believe trust is a factor in what sets Meals on Wheels apart. In our work, when we begin each partnership we take steps to build trust, starting with agreeing up front and documenting our commitment to confidentiality — leveraging tools like NDAs and memorandums of understanding, so all parties are protected.

Also, our network of community partnerships was built with trust and transparency in mind. Now, after over 40 years of service, we're a highly recognized and trusted brand. The community trusts us to be working alongside other community organizations, and we carry this trust with us every time we engage with a partner at the state or national level.

Have a Vision

Our vision is to ensure no senior in this country goes hungry or is isolated, and we always adjust our goals and priorities accordingly to best support that vision. In our work, we consider how our vision can play out in the long term and in the more immediate future with three-year plans. While we have reaffirmed our vision and mission over time, we have adjusted our goals and priorities to make sure we are always meeting the needs of our community.

As a national membership organization, we achieve our mission and vision through our efforts to enable and support the network of thousands of local Meals on Wheels providers. We have determined that securing partnerships with the healthcare sector was going to be the best way for us to be able to address the needs of a highly vulnerable senior population. We have evaluated all of our projects and partnerships and, as a result, have walked away from grant opportunities and corporate partnerships because our vision didn't align with what they were trying to do, which was difficult as a national nonprofit that always needs funding.

Seek to Assure the Success of Your Collaborators

When we begin new partnerships, we start by facilitating conversations that inquire what success looks like from their vantage point to see if we can find alignment between us. We assess potential conflicts or obstacles, and through our organizational ethos, we are able to step back and make an informed decision about if the timing is right to step in. While we're clear on our goals, we're flexible in terms of how we move forward.

Take Stock

We recognize we have some assets relating to thought leadership and innovation that we have not mined and leveraged to the greatest extent that we could but are always looking to understand how we can make a positive difference.

Due to COVID-19, we have a unique opportunity to think about what the world will look like post-COVID. Where are seniors going to be? What will the state of this social service infrastructure look like? There will be an increased demand and we have an opportunity to help lead the way as to how we prepare for that future. We hope to leverage our on-the-ground expertise, as well as our national lens, to help craft a path moving forward.

Start Small

Our approach with most partnerships begins with small pilots. First, we come up with our vision, a theory of change, design the intervention, and work around the processes. Then we test them out on a smaller scale so we can fix our errors.

At one point, we decided to leverage technology to solve for social isolation. We used technology to train and equip seniors in their homes with simple devices and gave them ways to access online activities. This turned out to be much more challenging than we anticipated in several ways.

In this effort, our volunteers were called tech mates and they would work with seniors in their homes. It was difficult to recruit and maintain those volunteers. The seniors were giving mixed receptivity; many didn't have devices, so we needed a grant to get the devices. Then they didn't have internet access, so we needed a grant for the internet. During our efforts to help the community, several issues arose. And while we had many ideas and solutions, this is a good example of how we design, test, refine, scale, and fail fast when we need to.

Fail Fast, and Build Rigorous Feedback Loops

Though we believe in failing fast, many funders do not have a lot of patience - they want to see an impact, results, and big numbers fast. It's a challenge to find supporters and funders who are willing to work with us and understand that crafting change takes time, and sometimes involves failing first.

We focus heavily on metrics so we can ensure we're improving health outcomes for seniors and reducing their need for healthcare utilization, but these results are hard to measure. We've invested heavily in building that evidence base for the impact of Meals on Wheels.

Take a Portfolio Approach

We refer to Meals on Wheels as more than a meal model. There are several pieces: nutrition, safety, and socialization, and connections to other community services when needed. The pieces are connected and create an integrated whole. We have a portfolio of work around each of these pieces.

Consider Non-traditional Partners

We seek to forge partnerships with new and different players. We have collaborations with the Home Depot Foundation for home modifications and repairs that enable seniors to stay in their homes safely.

Also, we just received a three-year grant from PetSmart Charities, which may surprise many people. However, pets are very important to seniors and a

source of companionship to them. We came across seniors who wouldn't schedule medical procedures in the hospital because they didn't have anybody to take care of their pets. We've also had people living in unsanitary conditions because they couldn't get out to walk their dogs anymore, but we didn't want to take away their pets because companionship is a vital component of socialization, one of our integral pieces. PetSmart Charities is committed to the human-pet connection, and we're now working with them to help local programs build their pet services for home-bound seniors.

Keep Your Donors Apprised of Your Collaborations

We just completed a grant from the Aetna Foundation in December. We partnered with the American Hospital Association to address malnutrition in seniors in hospitals and at home. We believe the Aetna Foundation funded us to carry out the project because they appreciated the collaboration, which created a greater likelihood for scale, replication, and dissemination through two extensive networks. Though the collaboration itself presented some challenges that caused delays, we were always honest about our progress and reported back about every aspect of the process.

Future Collaborations

We're looking forward to expanding our breadth of healthcare partnerships. We believe collaborations with different kinds of healthcare organizations are essential to the success of our strategy of keeping people safe, healthy, and independent in their homes.



Lucy Theilheimer,
Chief Strategy and Impact Officer

About the Organization

Meals on Wheels America is the leadership organization supporting the more than 5,000 community-based programs across the country that are dedicated to addressing senior isolation and hunger. Our network serves virtually every community in America and, along with more than two million staff and volunteers, delivers the nutritious meals, friendly visits, and safety checks that enable America's seniors to live nourished lives with independence and dignity.

By providing funding, leadership, education, research, and advocacy support, we empower our local member programs to strengthen their communities, one senior at a time.

Disclaimer: All participants were interviewed about past collaborations through the framework of the 9 Considerations for Collaboration. Naturally in some organizations, not every one of the considerations are applicable to their circumstances.

Credit: This article was composed by Rachel Romana Liu.