



# Breaking Barriers

Culturally-Responsive  
Congregate Meals





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With current headlines that feature viruses, variants, and vaccines, it seems we're all looking for additional reads, particularly ones that showcase innovative ways in which we address food security. This need is particularly significant for one of our more vulnerable and under-represented segments of the population: the diverse, older adult.

In almost any type of foodservice setting—from acute to long-term care—you have likely encountered an individual who is food insecure, or may be at-risk of being food insecure, simply because the food provided to them is not familiar and, therefore, will not be consumed, only increasing their risk for malnutrition. This article reflects a collaborative, integrated program designed to tackle food security through the promotion of more culturally-responsive meals in a congregate setting, prior to and during the COVID-19 pandemic.

## BACKGROUND

The Worcester Senior Center (WSC), the featured congregate meal site, is known as a place where older adults, their families, and caregivers can take advantage of a wide swath of programs designed to encourage overall health, independence, and well-being. Activities and services run the gamut—advocacy, fitness, travel, nutrition, and education. It promotes acceptance, appreciation, and inclusion of all, reflecting the diversity of Worcester, a city with 21.3 percent of its population listed as having been born outside of the United States.

One of the key services at the WSC, is Bobby M's Diner (the Diner), a collaborative program between the Executive Office of Elder Affairs (EOEA) and Quinsigamond Community College's Hospitality & Recreation Management Program (QCC HRM). Housed in the WSC and operated by QCC HRM, the Diner is open during the morning and

early afternoon hours and provides WSC program participants breakfast, lunch, and light fare options for purchase. As well, the Diner provides an experiential learning site for the QCC HRM students who with the QCC HRM faculty and staff design and prepare various menu items for other catered events, such as luncheons, Memory Café, dinner theaters, and auctions.

During some of these regularly-scheduled senior programs, it was observed that an estimated 20-40 individuals attended activities, sometimes over a period of several hours—including meal times—but chose not to partake in any of the meal services offered. To determine the reasons associated with limited dining participation, EOEA and QCC held a series of listening sessions with relevant community stakeholders. A lack of familiar foods within the congregate meal selection was listed as a key barrier for certain groups among the larger senior community.

These under-represented groups included Vietnamese, Chinese, and Middle Eastern Iraqi or Levant. As such, the design of culturally-responsive meal programming was initiated, with early financial support from the Commonwealth of Massachusetts through its Executive Office for Administration and Finance (EOAF).

## A RECIPE FOR SUCCESS! KEY INGREDIENTS

### Faculty, Staff, and Student Involvement

QCC began this integrated programming with a Special Topics course, Nutritional Anthropology: A Biocultural Perspective on Menu Design. Developed and facilitated by the QCC HRM Program Chair, Patricia Hutchison, this course provided students with

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an exploration of food culture through a multidisciplinary lens—from advocacy to immigration to urbanization to community building. They directly participated in the listening sessions with community elders representing different ethnic groups; researched and prepared authentic, indigenous recipes; and facilitated a multi-cultural tasting event for relevant stakeholders.

Once approved, these recipes could be incorporated into the regularly-scheduled congregate meals program, with different facets of their production integrated into the QCC HRM academic curriculum, including the culinary, food service, hospitality, and nutrition courses. Examples of these combined contributions included menu creation, cost control calculations, nutritional analyses, and meal service.

### Interagency Collaboration

The synchronized efforts by QCC, EOEA, EOEF, Worcester Area Senior Companions, and Chartwells are seen as key drivers of this program's success, particularly in 2020 with the COVID-19 pandemic affecting so many older adults. Rebecca King, QCC HRM Dietary Management Lab

Site Supervisor, facilitates recipe review and menu planning with the EOEA Multi-Cultural Coordinator, Yung Phan, and EOEA Senior Services Program Assistant, Lindita Taka. QCC's Brandi Manca, Cultural Meals Coordinator, painstakingly orchestrates countless aspects of the program, including, but not limited to: participant registration, allergen alerts, meal preparation and distribution, donations management, as well as inter-agency communication with EOEA and Chartwells.

Additionally, various EOEA staff assist with interpretive services, meal reservations, and distribution. For those individuals unable to pick-up their meals curbside, Senior Companions facilitate meal delivery.

### Community Engagement

From the onset it was essential to directly involve and engage the community. The early focus group discussions illuminated the issue of unfamiliar foods, but also highlighted participants' desire to share their respective cultures within the wider senior community, offering an opportunity to bridge divides while assisting with assimilation through the commonality of food.



### ONE OF OUR POPULAR OPTIONS

Vegan Vietnamese Noodle Bowl:  
Lemongrass Soy "Chicken," with  
Cucumbers, Carrots, and Bean Sprouts

The continued community check-ins allowed for recipe solicitation, development, samplings/tastings, cooking techniques, ingredient sourcing, and overall meal tweaks.

### CULTURALLY-RESPONSIVE MEAL SERVICE BEGINS

On March 1, 2020, the Culturally Responsive Meals program introduced its full

service, with Chinese, Levant, and Vietnamese/vegan dishes represented at least one time during the weekly schedule. Some example menu items include Asian Garlic Noodles with Meatballs, Red Lentil Soup, Soba Noodle Bowls, Vegan Ragout, and Cardamom Cookies. Participation was enthusiastic with approximately 40-50 of the meals served in the first several weeks in March. Unfortunately, meal service



## CULINARY TREND

Create dishes that explore ethnic flavor profiles to surprise and delight diverse clients.

(and all WSC in-person programming) had to be suspended on March 16, 2020 related to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Finally, on October 1, 2020, after strategic planning and coordination, curbside pick-up and delivery options permitted the piloting of one weekly culturally-responsive meal from the vegan Vietnamese recipes. Orders for these meals averaged 30-40 per week, with the demand increasing as winter transitioned to spring, and the weather posed fewer logistical challenges. With its successful launch and subsequent adjustments, the program introduced a second weekly offering (the Middle Eastern Iraqi recipes) in March 2021, and has plans for

a return to the full three meal distribution later this year.

Overall, individual feedback has been extremely positive. Community members are appreciative of the familiar, nourishing food *and* the opportunity to interact with others during pick-up or delivery.

Brandi Manca's comments encapsulate sentiments expressed by many: "The seniors really enjoy (even) the short interaction they have with us on meal days and meal participation keeps increasing, an indication they like the food too."

Additionally, Yung Phan praises the inclusivity of the program and cites its appeal to the targeted ethnic groups *and* the general public.

"This program brings people together to celebrate one of the most common (and basic) things in life—food!"

With integration, collaboration, and

engagement, any program can break barriers, increase participation, and contribute to a more food secure and nourished community. **E**

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