



Senior Nutrition in a Pandemic:

The California Great Plates Delivered Program



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Overview

Great Plates Delivered (GPD) is a home-delivered restaurant meals program that was piloted by Governor Gavin Newsom on April 24, 2020, amidst a global pandemic caused by COVID-19. Modeled after World Central Kitchen’s *Restaurants For the People* initiative, Great Plates Delivered has the dual purpose of getting prepared meals to isolated seniors and supporting restaurants across California. The program played a unique role in Governor Newsom’s broader economic and social response to the pandemic. The program is being managed at the state level through the California Governor’s Office of Emergency Services (CalOES), the California Department of Aging, California Health and Human Services Agency, and California ALL, with additional funding from the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA). At its peak, the program was operational in 40 out of 58 counties in California and still remains in effect in many.

Participating Cities:

City of Citrus Heights, City of El Monte, City of Elk Grove, City of Lodi, City of Los Angeles, City of Moreno Valley, City of Oakland, City of Parlier, City of Pasadena, City of Perris, City of Rancho Cordova, City of Rancho Mirage, City of Rosemead, City of Sacramento, City of Sanger, City of Seaside, City of Firebaugh, City of Montebello, City of Stockton, City of Long Beach, and City of Bell Garden

Participating Counties:

San Bernardino County, San Diego County, Ventura County, San Francisco County, Santa Cruz County, Contra Costa County, San Benito County, Alameda County, Yolo County, Monterey County, San Mateo County, Butte County, Los Angeles County, Marin County, Mendocino County, Nevada County, Orange County, Riverside County, Santa Clara County



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Executive Summary

Through qualitative interviews and surveys with administrators, and public information requests of CalOES, we have learned that the Great Plates Delivered was ultimately successful at reaching its two primary goals: supporting isolated older adults with prepared meals and providing economic support to restaurants and meal providers across the state. Cities and counties that operated the program encountered different opportunities and challenges that were largely determined by the size of the primary agency that ran the program, their capacity to staff the program, the availability of meal providers, and their ability to work collaboratively with governmental, private, and community partners.

The challenges were both anticipated and unforeseen and should be addressed if this program is to continue while California is under a state of emergency, and potentially beyond. Through March 2021, estimated spending on Great Plates Delivered across the state totaled **\$557,030,450** with the highest spending in the following jurisdictions:

County of Los Angeles (\$91.6 million)
County of Orange (\$66.8 million)
County of San Diego (\$53.9 million)
County of Riverside (\$44.7 million)
County of San Mateo (\$42.8 million)
County of San Francisco (\$40.8 million)
City of Los Angeles (\$39.6 million)
County of Ventura (\$37.8 Million)
County of San Bernardino (\$33.7 million)
City of Sacramento (\$15.9 million)

STRENGTHS OF THE PROGRAM

- **More than 8,000 workers were employed by meal providers participating in the Great Plates Delivered program**
- **Minority-owned meal providers were supported and over-represented in some localities**
- **Direct financial support to restaurants and nutritious, consistent meals to participants**
- **Data were relatively easy to collect and report to CalOES**
- **Most Great Plates jurisdictions did not have to limit the number of people who could participate. Those that did only did so initially and then were able to accept more participants later**
- **The majority of GPD sites have more than enough meal providers**
- **Easy sign up and meal delivery process for participants**
- **Some localities could offer culturally relevant foods to participants**

CHALLENGES OF THE PROGRAM

- **Communication from FEMA on whether Great Plates would continue to be funded was a challenge for the majority of administrators. It was difficult to coordinate meal deliveries with providers with only a few days notice in some cases.**
- **Reimbursement processing has been slow. As of March 2021, 25 out of 40 localities have received reimbursements from FEMA and CDAA for administrative and operational expenses. This has been cited as a reason by some Great Plates administrators as to why their jurisdiction ended the program.**
- **It takes a significant amount of human capacity and coordination to operate this program and some site could not provide that support without detracting from other essential operations in their city or county**



Photo courtesy of Flapjacks Breakfast & Grill, used with permission of BenitoLink

How This Report Was Constructed

This report primarily uses publicly available data, a survey of city and county Great Plates Delivered Program administrators, and four in-depth virtual interviews with administrators from the following jurisdictions: Alameda County, San Benito County, San Diego County, and Los Angeles County. The publicly available data were accessed through two Public Records Act requests to the Governor's Office of Emergency Service (CalOES), submitted on December 9, 2020 and March 21, 2021. The requests for information were fulfilled on December 21, 2020 and April 9, 2021.

CalFresh data were gathered from the California Department Social Services (CDSS) Data Portal and data on the Senior Farmers Market Nutrition Program (SFMNP) were gathered via a Public Records Act request to the California Department of Food and Agriculture (CDFA) on March 29, 2021. The request for information was fulfilled on April 22, 2021. The Home-Delivered Meal Program (OAA ENP) data were gathered from the California Department of Aging (CDA) COVID-19 Response Data Dashboard.

City and County administrators for the Great Plates Delivered Program were contacted via email to complete a survey that captured their agency's experience implementing and administering the program. Their responses were recorded through Google Forms. A full list of the survey questions and survey results is listed in the appendix. For the in-depth interviews, we sought to identify cities and counties that varied by region, population size, and jurisdictions where the program was still operating and where the program had ended. In-depth interview questions were tailored to each administrator, based on their responses to the Google Survey.

Senior Food Insecurity

Ensuring that seniors have access to nutritious meals at all times, but particularly during the pandemic is important. According to the California Department of Aging, there were 8.2 million older adults aged 60 and older in the state, 18 percent of whom live alone. In a 2020 California factsheet from Meals on Wheels, 8 percent of seniors in California experienced some degree of food insecurity. A lack of access to nutritionally adequate meals is associated with difficulty complying with medication routines, hospital readmissions, decreased mental health, and other physical ailments. The Great Plates Delivered Program ensured that participating seniors had their nutritional needs met by ensuring that meal providers supplied consistent, nutritious, and timely meals while the program was in operation.

¹ California Department of Aging. CDA COVID-19 Dashboard - CDA's Home Delivered Meals for Older Adults. https://aging.ca.gov/Data_and_Reports/COVID-19_Data_Dashboard/#cda-meals

² California Department of Aging. CDA COVID-19 Dashboard - Statewide Demographic Data on Older Adults, Fiscal Year 2018-2019. <https://aging.ca.gov/download.ashx?lEorcNUVozYeAlJo7uplNg%3d%3d>

³ Meals on Wheels of America. Delivering So Much More Than a Meal in California. California 2020 Factsheet. September 2020. https://www.mealsonwheelsamerica.org/docs/default-source/fact-sheets/2020/2020-state/california-2020.pdf?sfvrsn=c8a9b53b_2

⁴ Aging in Place. The Facts Behind Senior Hunger - Illnesses Causes by Malnourishment. Updated April 2021. <https://aginginplace.org/the-facts-behind-senior-hunger/>

Restaurant Worker and Small Food Business Challenges in the Pandemic

As scientific awareness grew of the airborne nature of COVID-19 transmission, restaurants were increasingly identified as sites of heightened risk for both workers and customers. On March 16, 2020, Governor Newsom ordered all indoor dining establishments to close out of escalating concerns about the novel coronavirus. Many small businesses, like catering companies, also temporarily ceased operations due to safety precautions and struggled financially during the pandemic.⁵ As the pandemic worsened in April and May of 2020, there were few state or federal programs in place to support these businesses or their workers.

⁵ Bikales, James. Not Just Restaurants: Caterers are Suffering Even More. CalMatters. December 22, 2020. <https://calmatters.org/projects/not-just-restaurants-caterers-suffering-even-more/>



Photo courtesy of Robert Eliason, BenitoLink

The first round of financial relief for California restaurants was the Paycheck Protection Program (PPP), made available through CARES Act, which was signed into law on March 27, 2020.⁶ Many business owners struggled to access these funds, especially small and locally-owned restaurants. In April 2020, 91 percent of PPP loans in California for large restaurants (300 or more employees) were approved, versus only 51 percent of loans for smaller restaurants (100 or fewer employees).⁷ There were also issues of transparency and racial disparities in who ultimately was approved for a PPP loan.⁸

The second round of federal dollars to help restaurants was made available through the American Rescue Plan Act, signed into law on March 11, 2021. This time, \$28.6 billion were earmarked for restaurants through the Restaurant Revitalization Fund.⁹ The Biden administration also outlined a plan to more equitably disburse PPP loans to women and minority-owned businesses, small businesses, and businesses in rural areas.¹⁰ Participation data for the Restaurant Revitalization Fund is not available yet but it has the potential to make a significant impact on local restaurants across California. On February 17, 2021, Governor Gavin Newsom also reached an Immediate Action Agreement with leaders in the legislature to get more COVID-19 relief to Californians, including more funding and tax relief to small businesses, which could be beneficial to restaurants once made available.¹¹

Restaurant workers, especially line cooks, struggled to remain healthy and economically secure during the pandemic. According to a study recently published by the University of California, San Francisco, line cooks in restaurants are at the highest risk of dying from COVID-19.¹² As of May 2021, restaurant workers that filed their taxes in 2019 should have received two stimulus checks from the federal government. Only those who lost their jobs, and had a W-2 from work, could qualify for unemployment insurance. Many restaurant workers were ineligible or found these financial supplements insufficient.

⁶ Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security Act of 2020. United States Congress. <https://www.congress.gov/116/bills/hr748/BILLS-116hr748enr.pdf>

⁷ Sierra, Stephanie and Lindsey Feingold. The French Laundry got more than \$2.4M in PPP funding; 17x more than average Bay Area restaurant. ABC7 News. December 15, 2020. <https://abc7news.com/coronavirus-french-laundry-ppp-loan/8806467/>

⁸ Morel, Laura et al. Businesses in majority-white communities received PPP loans at higher rates, analysis shows. The Los Angeles Times. May 1, 2021. <https://www.latimes.com/california/story/2021-05-01/ppp-loans-coronavirus-pandemic-businesses-trump>

⁹ U.S. Small Business Association. Restaurant Revitalization Funding Program. April 28, 2021. https://www.sba.gov/sites/default/files/2021-04/Restaurant%20Revitalization%20Fund%20Program%20Guide%20as%20of%204.28.21-508_o.pdf

¹⁰ U.S. Small Business Association. Fact Sheet: Changes to Paycheck Protection Program by Biden-Harris Administration Increase Equitable Access to Relief. March 9, 2021. <https://www.sba.gov/article/2021/mar/09/fact-sheet-changes-paycheck-protection-program-biden-harris-administration-increase-equitable-access>

¹¹ Office of Governor Gavin Newsom. Governor Newsom, Legislative Leaders Announce Immediate Action Agreement for Relief to Californians Experiencing Pandemic Hardship. February 17, 2021. <https://www.gov.ca.gov/2021/02/17/governor-newsom-legislative-leaders-announce-immediate-action-agreement-for-relief-to-californians-experiencing-pandemic-hardship/>

¹² Chen, Yea-Hung et al. Excess Mortality associated with the COVID-19 pandemic among Californians 18-65 years of age, by occupational sector and occupation: March through October 2020. University of California San Francisco - Institute for Global Health Studies, Department of Epidemiology and Biostatistics, and the Department of Medicine. January 22, 2021.



Photo courtesy of BenitoLink



For restaurants that remained open, workers faced the risk of COVID-19 infection while preparing and delivering food to Californians who could afford to shelter at home. To support restaurant workers, groups like the Restaurant Opportunities Center provided direct cash assistance to workers.¹³ The James Beard Foundation started the Food and Beverage Industry Relief Fund in April 2020 to support small, independent restaurants that employ fewer than 100 people and promote a fair, safe, and respectful workplace.¹⁴

In this distressed environment, the Great Plates Delivered Program served as a financial lifeline for both restaurant owners and workers. According to data from CalOES, the Great Plates Delivered Program helped to keep more 8,000 restaurant and food business workers employed during the pandemic.¹⁵ Additionally, almost a third of all localities reported that the majority of their meal providers were minority-owned businesses.¹⁶ Meal providers can be reimbursed up to \$66 per day for three meals a day, based on the per-diem rate set forth by FEMA. This rate doesn't cover all costs associated with running a business, but some found it enough to stay open during the pandemic while serving seniors in their respective communities.

¹³ Restaurant Opportunities Center. National Direct Financial Assistance. <https://rocunited.org/stop-the-spread/coronavirus-support/>

¹⁴ James Beard Foundation. Relief Fund Application. <https://www.jamesbeard.org/relief-fund-application#:~:text=The%20purpose%20of%20the%20James,keep%20from%20going%20out%20of>

¹⁵ The data for the number of workers that remained employed by meal providers were requested via Public Records Request to CalOES. The number was self-reported by the meal provider to the agency in the section titled, "Total number of staff members employed by your jurisdiction's currently participating meal providers (self-reported by local jurisdiction)". As of April 9th, 2021, the total number was 7,946 but this was undercounted because not all localities reported this metric.

¹⁶ The data for the number of minority-owned businesses serving as meal providers were requested via Public Records Request to CalOES. Identity was self-reported to the agency in the section titled, "Average percentage of currently participating meal providers identifying as "minority owned" (self-reported by local jurisdiction). As of April 9, 2021, 27 out of 40 GPD sites reported these data to CalOES.

ELIGIBILITY

The Great Plates Delivered Program has strict participation guidelines based on age, income, housing arrangement, and other criteria. The applicant must meet the following guidelines:

Be 65 years of age or older OR be aged 60-64 and have had a positive Covid-19 diagnosis, possible exposure, or be considered high-risk according to CDC guidelines.

Live alone or with a program eligible adult.

Not be receiving assistance from a state or federally funded nutrition assistance program, like CalFresh or Home Delivered Meals.

Have difficulty accessing and preparing one's own meals.

Earn less than 600% of the federal poverty limit (have an income between \$25,000 and \$76,560). Applicants used self-attestation to verify income.

Live within a city or county participating in the program.



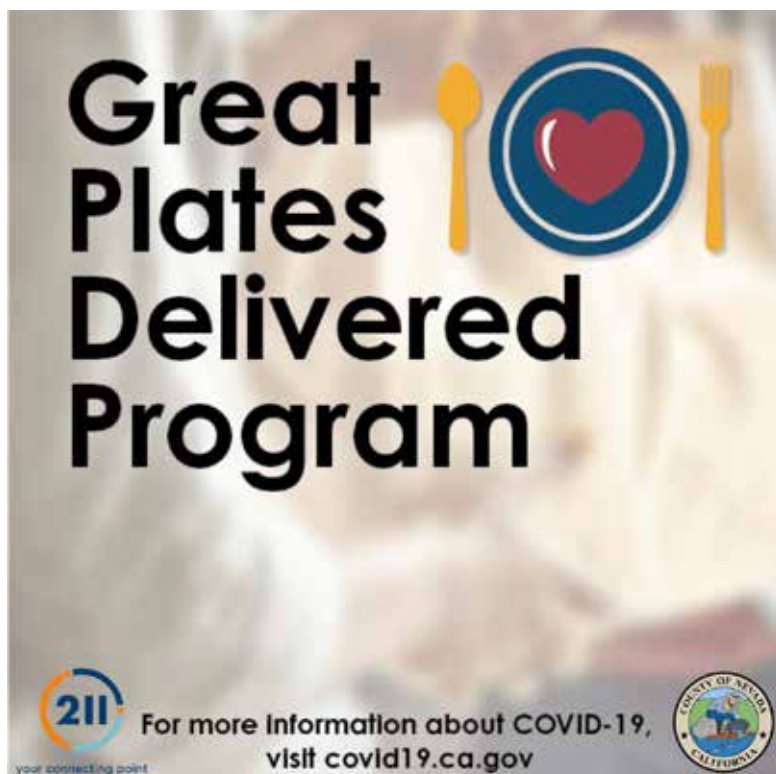
Characteristics of Program Administration

To serve as a Great Plates Delivered site, the city or county must identify a local administrator and handle the individual enrollment of clients. Each jurisdiction is also responsible for initially funding the program, with the possibility of reimbursement from the state and/or federal government. Costs per participant are capped at \$66 per day, for three meals provided. Local administrators are also responsible for reporting data on a twice weekly basis to CalOES on metrics including number of requests to enroll, number of meals provided and dates delivered, average length of participation, and more.

When the program first started, the FEMA Public Assistance Program reimbursed 75 percent of eligible expenses associated with implementing and running the program. To participate, a jurisdiction must contribute a 6.25 percent cost share, while the State of California covers the remaining 18.75 percent, administered through the California Disaster Assistance Act (CCDA). CCDA funds are used to reimburse local governments that have spent money on certain emergency activities in response to a state of emergency, like setting up an emergency meal program during a pandemic.¹⁷ As of January 21, 2021, FEMA may now reimburse up to 100 percent of eligible costs related to operating the program, through September 30, 2021.¹⁸

¹⁷ California ALL. Great Plates Delivered Program Guidance. Administration - Funding. Page 5. Revised March 1, 2021. <https://files.covid19.ca.gov/pdf/wp/great-plates-delivered-program-guidance.pdf>

¹⁸ The White House. Memorandum to Extend Federal Support to Governors' Use of the National Guard to Respond to COVID-19 and to Increase Reimbursement and Other Assistance Provided to States. Briefing Room - Presidential Actions. January 21, 2021. <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/presidential-actions/2021/01/21/extend-federal-support-to-governors-use-of-national-guard-to-respond-to-covid-19-and-to-increase-reimbursement-and-other-assistance-provided-to-states/>



Restaurants that wish to participate in the Great Plates Delivered program can apply through CalOES and or directly through the locality. Approved restaurants must follow strict nutritional guidelines for breakfast, lunch, and dinner meals, along with food safety procedures for preparation and delivery. Meal providers that work out of commercial kitchens or create pre-packaged meals are also eligible to participate in the Great Plates Delivered Program.

Local agencies work with meal providers to arrange meal deliveries to GPD participants. Typically, a list of participants will be given to the restaurant's point of contact on a Thursday or Friday to let them know how many meals should be prepared for the following week. Over the weekend, restaurants and meal providers are able to procure the food items necessary to prepare the meals. Reimbursements to restaurants can be processed on a weekly, biweekly or monthly basis, depending on their agreement with the coordinating agency.

To deliver meals to participants, some jurisdictions, like San Diego County and Los Angeles County, required all meal providers to also deliver meals to participants. Other places, like San Benito County and the City of Sacramento, utilized paratransit services, along with some restaurants making meal deliveries themselves. Gig-based platforms and private companies, like Doordash and GoGo Grandparents, were used in the City of Citrus Heights and in Alameda County to deliver meals to participants. The latter example, GoGo Grandparents, a ride-hail intermediary, was procured by Alameda County to also manage a call center for scheduling meal deliveries and handling quality assurance issues.

Operating the Great Plates Delivered Program requires a great deal of coordination across multiple local agencies. The most common agencies that were central to coordination of the program were Area Offices on Aging, Offices of Emergency Services and Departments of Social/Human Services. Some locations also worked with Chief Executive Office's and their local Chambers of Commerce. Partnerships with private agencies also proved useful in coordination efforts, such as GoGo Grandparents in Alameda County.



**Feeding Oakland's Seniors.
Helping Local Business.**



Great Plates Delivered At a Glance (May 2020 - March 2021)	
Number of GPD Sites	40
Total Meals Provided	29,309,828
Total Meal Providers	878
Total Participants	55,454
Estimated Total Spending	\$557, 030, 450

Statewide Great Plates Delivered participation and spending through March 2021.

California Demographics & Food Insecurity Rates	
Total Population	39,512, 223
Senior Population (age 60 and older)	8,237,000
Marginally Food Insecure	1,411,796
Food Insecure	594,858
Experiencing Very Low Food Security	206,217

American Community Survey (ACS) Population Estimates (July 1, 2019) and California Health Interview Survey 2018. Food Insecurity Rates from Meals on Wheels 2020 California Fact Sheet.

Senior Participation in State, Federal, and Privately Funded Nutrition Programs	
Senior CalFresh (SNAP) Participants	756,739
Senior Farmers Market Nutrition Program (SFMNP) Participants	19,813
Older Americans Act (OAA) Elderly Nutrition Program (Home Delivered Meals) Participants	113, 732

CalFresh data reflect a Point-In-Time count conducted in July 2020 by the California Department of Social Services. SFMNP data reflect participation for all of 2020 from the California Department of Agriculture. OAA Home Delivered Meal data reflect participation between July 6, 2020 thru July 12, 2020 to be consistent with Calfresh Point-In-Time count. As of April 12, 2021 - April 18, 2021, OAA Home Delivered Meal Participation is nearly half of the number reported above, at 70,376 people served.

Reimbursement Rates for Home-Delivered Meal Programs				
Program	Average Cost per Meal	Reimbursement Rate per Meal	Reimbursement Gap	Funding Source
Great Plates Delivered Program	\$20	\$20	\$0	FEMA
Meals on Wheels (San Francisco)	\$13.06	\$3.82	-\$9.24	OAA + Fundraising
Meals on Wheels (Sonoma County)	\$13.06	\$3.72	-\$9.34	OAA + Fundraising
Home Delivered Meals (San Diego County)	\$13.06	\$4.89	-\$8.17	OAA + Fundraising
Home Delivered Meals (San Diego County - Rural)	\$13.06	\$5.32	-\$7.74	OAA + Fundraising

Average Home-Delivered Meal Cost was \$13.06 based on 2020 California Meals on Wheels Fact Sheet. Great Plates Delivered Average Meal Cost of \$20 was calculated based on Per Diem Rate set forth by FEMA and adopted from the General Services Administration (GSA) Meals and Incidental Expenses (M&IE) chart: \$16 for breakfast, \$17 for lunch, and \$28 for dinner with \$5 in incidental expenses, totaling \$66 per day (16 + 17 + 28 divided by 3 = \$20). This does not reflect average restaurant meal costs in California. Reimbursement gap is average meal costs minus reimbursement rate. OAA-funded Home-Delivered Meal reimbursement rates vary by individual contract and region.



Survey Analysis and Lessons Learned

Impact of The Great Plates Program

This assessment of the Great Plates Delivered Program will provide a broad overview of participation (cities, counties, seniors, and meal providers), characteristics of program participation in four jurisdictions, and successes and opportunities, as captured through narrative interviews with city and county Great Plates Delivered administrators. This information can hopefully be used to make an informed decision on whether this program should be part of a broader permanent network of nutrition assistance programs tailored toward seniors, during and beyond the pandemic caused by COVID-19. It also provides economic impact data, where available, to assess whether this program provided economic stability and living wage employment to workers and small business owners in the food preparation and delivery sectors. Those impacts have the potential to affect entire communities through local spending, which is beyond the scope of this report.



**GREAT PLATES DELIVERED:
HOME MEALS FOR SENIORS**

**3 HOME-DELIVERED MEALS A DAY
DELIVERED FOR ELIGIBLE O.C. SENIORS**

A Deep Dive Into 4 GPD Jurisdictions

County Level Snapshots				
	Alameda County	San Benito County	Los Angeles County	San Diego County
Population	1,671,329	62,808	10,039,107	3,338,330
Senior Population (age 60 and older)	274,000	14,000	2,008,000	655,000
Total Great Plates Meals Provided	242,116	80,724	4,777,549	2,808,737
Total Great Plates Providers	65	12	80	41
Total Great Plates Participants	639	517	8,919	4,779
Total Great Plates Spending	\$4,868,146	\$1,949,628	\$91,613,828	53,960,351
Senior CalFresh Participants (age 60 and older)	363,389	12,943	2,085,070	668,905
Senior Farmers	N/A	N/A	2315	4534
Market Nutrition Program (SFMNP) Participants				
Older Americans Act (OAA) Home Delivered Meals	21,359	7,601	96,232	98,664

County-level senior food insecurity rates were not available or consistent enough to report. Population data from American Community Survey (ACS) July 1, 2019 Estimates. County-level Senior CalFresh participation data reflect Fiscal Year 2019. The SFMNP numbers for San Diego County and Los Angeles County were for all of 2020. The SFMNP was not operational in Alameda County or San Benito County in 2020 according to the California Department of Food and Agriculture. County-level Home Delivered Meal data is from the CDA COVID-19 Response Data Dashboard and reported by Area Agencies on Aging. Home-Delivered Meal data reflect participation between July 6, 2020 thru July 12, 2020 to be consistent with CalFresh Point-In-Time count. Home Delivered Meal Data for San Benito County is also combined with Santa Cruz County.

Alameda County

The Great Plates Delivered Program ended in December 2020 in Alameda County. During its operation, it was one of the jurisdictions that opted to collect additional data on GPD participants and meal providers. The Alameda County Social Services Agency, which also serves as one of thirty-three Area Agencies on Aging, collected data on age, gender, ethnicity, and created a detailed breakdown of GPD participants by Board of Supervisors District and region within the county. They also surveyed participants on their overall satisfaction with the quality of meals they received and timeliness and variety of food options. When the program sunset at the end of 2020, they transitioned their participants out of the program by providing them with one-time \$250 stipends that could be used for food or other household necessities. They also provided information and enrollment support for the OAA Home Delivered Meals Program and CalFresh if they were eligible. A chart with the aforementioned data is at the end of this report. (Item 1).

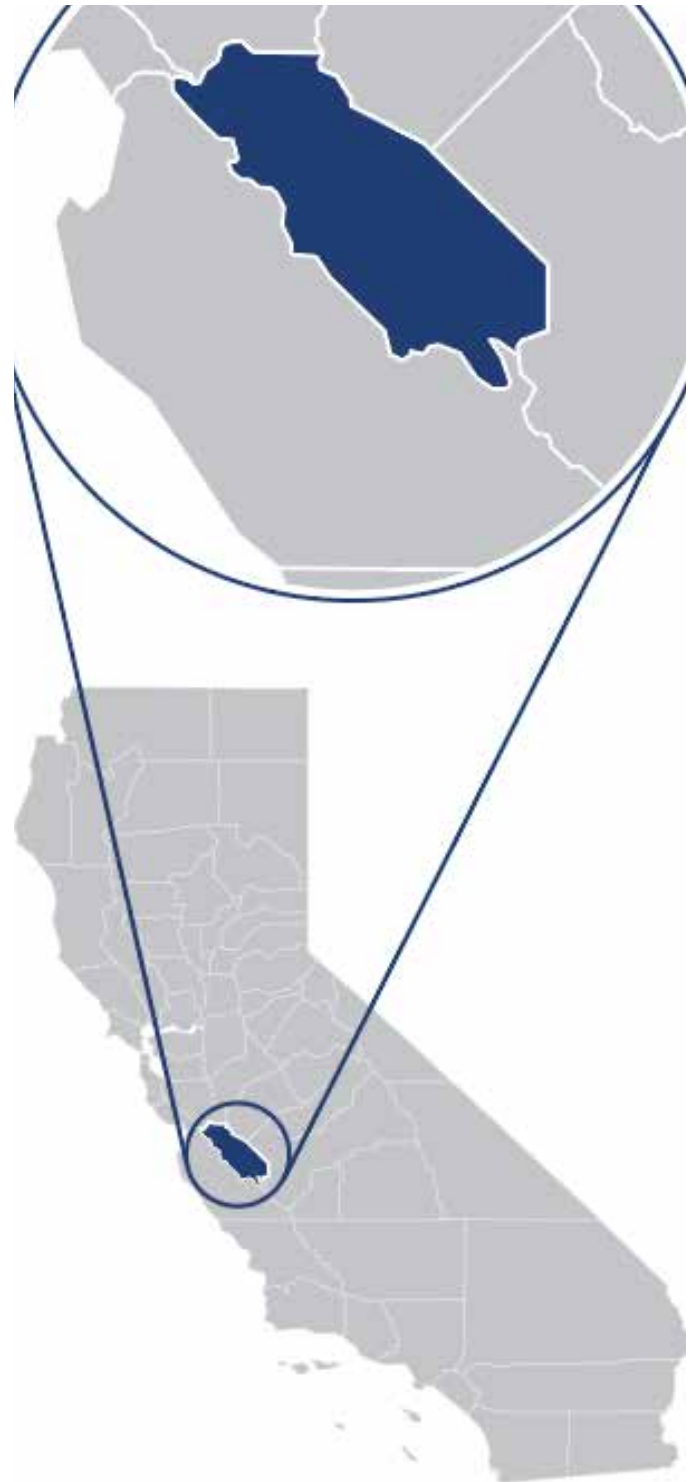
“The [Great Plates Delivered] program was innovative and creative. It really stimulated the economy. Finding a way to open up the eligibility criteria would be great. Fund the Senior Nutrition Programs at a higher rate so they can produce better quality meals... Overall, it was a bonus for our county.”

- Alameda County’s Assistant Agency Director for Adult and Aging Services



San Benito County

The Great Plates Delivered Program in San Benito County was originally operated by the County Office of Emergency Services and then transitioned to being operated by the San Benito County Chamber of Commerce (and is still operational). The chamber had longer standing relationships with local meal providers and also worked with the United Way of San Benito County to identify more restaurants. Early on in the pandemic when the program was getting set up, volunteers were used to facilitate meal deliveries but this grew to be a challenge as the pandemic worsened. In response, additional staff from the Office of Emergency Services stepped in to add capacity and were surprised by how many seniors in their community were dealing with isolation and just wanted to talk on the phone after coordinating a meal delivery or resolving an issue.



“Some [of the meal providers] were going beyond their own standards, (like) Mangia Italian Kitchen. The owner is Raul and he is an awesome guy. He has some deliveries that he makes and delivers himself. The recipients love him.”

- San Benito County’s Emergency Services Manager

Los Angeles County

The largest Great Plates Delivered operation was in Los Angeles County through the Workforce Development, Aging, and Community Services agency. It is worth noting that multiple cities within the Los Angeles County, like Pasadena and Long Beach, also operated the Great Plates Program but on a smaller scale and for some, a shorter timeline. The county's data collection and program integrity efforts were cross-cutting between multiple agencies and the program was fully operational within two weeks. An example of the Great Plates Program supporting local businesses and restoring jobs can be highlighted through their procurement of a restaurant in a major Los Angeles hotel that was secured to provide meals to GPD Participants. That hotel had a union agreement with the Hospitality Training Academy in Los Angeles (Local 11) and their Great Plates Delivered partnership enabled the hotel to rehire all of their staff that were laid off at the start of the pandemic.

“Every division in our department has taken a piece of this puzzle. Program staff, contracts staff, IT staff - they quickly developed a database for restaurants - our data team, compliance staff, our budgeting staff. Every division has really come together to implement this program and has devoted so much time and effort.”

- a Human Services Administrator with the Los Angeles County Department of Workforce Development, Aging, and Community Services



San Diego County

The San Diego County Health and Human Services Agency is one of thirty-three Area Agencies on Aging. As of May 2020, the program is still operational and administrators plan to continue running the program, so long as funds are still being provided to run it. The county already had a robust Home Delivered Meal Program in place with 18 subcontractors, which the Great Plates Delivered Program complemented, once operational. They also worked with their local Department of Purchasing and Contracting to create a formalized Request for Proposals (RFP) process for meal providers to ensure consistency with pricing, meal deliveries to participants, and continuity of services, which gives security to the meal provider as they continue to operate their business during the pandemic.

“We did a lot of outreach, and part of outreach is listening. Listening to the community and what they needed. At the start of the pandemic, people needed food. Caregivers weren’t showing up anymore so no one was cooking for them. They’re staying home to take care of their own kids. We knew [access to] food was [going to be] a huge problem.”

- San Diego County’s Chief of Agency Operations for Health & Community Aging and Independent Services



MISSED OPPORTUNITIES

- Agencies that operated Great Plates were not required to collect data on the race or gender of participants
- Many Great Plates administrators that completed the Google survey and in-depth interview stated that program eligibility was restrictive, especially for seniors that receive CalFresh. It excluded many of the poorest seniors, many of whom were seniors of color. CalFresh participants that would have otherwise been eligible for the Great Plates are eligible for the *Restaurant Meals Program (RMP)*, where CalFresh benefits can be used to purchase prepared foods from a pre-approved list of restaurants.¹⁹ But this became dangerous at the height of the pandemic and even impossible during shelter-in-place orders.

UNINTENDED CONSEQUENCES OF THE PROGRAM

- Many seniors struggled with isolation during the pandemic and participating in the Great Plates Delivered Program created an unexpected opportunity for them to speak and connect with people on a regular basis, especially delivery drivers.
- Some seniors unenrolled themselves from CalFresh and other home delivered meal programs to participate in the Great Plates Delivered Program, against the advice of the person screening them for eligibility. It can be challenging to re-enroll into these programs, especially due to existing waitlists.

Senior nutrition services before, during, and after the pandemic, in California and nationwide

Some localities, like the City of Rosemead and San Diego County, transitioned their Congregate Dining Program into a drive-through service where prepared lunches could be picked up. Participation in this program significantly increased during the pandemic. Other innovative, non-governmental interventions to support seniors and restaurants have also emerged during the pandemic. The Eat.Learn.Play Foundation, in partnership with World Central Kitchen, provided more than 2.4 million free restaurant meals to residents of Oakland, CA. Their reporting estimates this put \$20 million back into local businesses and led to more than 900 workers either keeping their jobs or being rehired after their restaurant partnered with the foundation to provide meals.²⁰

²⁰ Eat.Learn.Play Foundation. Updates from Stephen and Ayesha Curry - Fourth Quarter Foundation Updates. <https://eatlearnplay.org/updates-from-the-currys>



Medically tailored meals are also a crucial staple of nutrition programs in California that kept some of the most vulnerable seniors nourished during the pandemic.²¹ Managed by the California Department of Health Care Services (DHCS), the Medically Tailored Meals (MTM) Program was first piloted in 2018 to serve three meals a day to 1,000 participants who were all diagnosed with congestive heart failure.²² The program is operational in San Francisco County, Alameda County, San Mateo County, Los Angeles County, Marin County, Sonoma County, San Diego County, San Mateo County, and Santa Clara County. The pilot was designed to sunset after three years but additional changes were proposed in February 2020 in the California Assembly to extend the deadline, expand services to Kern County and Fresno County, and expand the service window from 12 weeks to 24 weeks.²³

Meals on Wheels, a national organization that fights hunger and social isolation in older adults by serving home-delivered meals, has operated in California since 1970. There are 49 affiliate sites across California that comprise the Meals on Wheels California state association. In 2020, 11.1 million meals were delivered to 60,615 seniors across the state.²⁴ In some localities, Meals on Wheels serves as a home-delivered meal provider through the Area Agency on Aging and in others, they're operated through local non-profit community organization or independently. Depending on the needs of the client, Meals on Wheels can deliver hot meals, refrigerated meals, frozen meals, and in some localities, groceries can be delivered in place of pre-made meals. Equally important are the wellness checks and social services provided by Meals on Wheels staffers that help to curb isolation, increase medication compliance, and reduce the risk of hospitalization.

Programs and partnerships emerged to support restaurants and feed communities. Rethink Food, a New York City anti-hunger nonprofit organization, pivoted in April 2020 to include emergency food response as part of their work. Their Rethink Certified program provides grants to restaurants to support their operating costs, in exchange for preparing free community meals. To date, they've disbursed more than \$10 million dollars to 40 restaurants, which provided 2.5 million meals to New Yorkers facing food insecurity.²⁵ The High Road Kitchens Program in California received state, local, and philanthropic funds to subsidize meals produced by restaurants that agreed to "serve meals in a model that allows some community members to subsidize others' meals; feed thousands of low-wage workers as well as health care workers and others in need; employ service workers."²⁶

²¹ Medically tailored meals are also available to people younger than 60 years of age. The primary eligibility criteria is a positive diagnosis of Congestive Heart Failure.

²² California Department of Health Care Services. Medically Tailored Meals Pilot Program. <https://www.dhcs.ca.gov/services/lrc/Pages/Medically-Tailored-Meals-Pilot-Program.aspx#:~:text=%E2%80%8BMedically%20Tailored%20Meals%20Pilot%20Program&text=The%20program%20will%20serve%20three,during%20the%20three%2Dyear%20period>.

²³ Assembly Bill - 2807. Medically Tailored Meals Pilot Program. 2019-202 Regular Session. February 20, 2020. https://leginfo.ca.gov/faces/billTextClient.xhtml?bill_id=201920200AB2807

²⁴ Meals on Wheels of America. Delivering So Much More Than a Meal in California. California 2020 Factsheet. September 2020. https://www.mealsonwheelsamerica.org/docs/default-source/fact-sheets/2020/2020-state/california-2020.pdf?sfvrsn=c8a9b53b_2

²⁵ ReThink. ReThink Food's COVID-19 Response. <https://www.rethinkfood.org/covid19-response>

²⁶ CALIFORNIA LABOR SECRETARY ANNOUNCES GROUNDBREAKING PUBLIC-PRIVATE PARTNERSHIPS TO SUPPORT EMPLOYERS & WORKERS IN RESTAURANT & HOTEL INDUSTRIES IMPACTED BY COVID-19. <https://www.labor.ca.gov/2020/05/01/california-labor-secretary-announces-groundbreaking-public-private-partnerships-to-support-employers-workers-in-restaurant-hotel-industries-impacted-by-covid-19/>

(The World Central Kitchen) meals generally follow the strict “EAT-Lancet” guidelines for planetary health, which emphasize whole grains, fruits, vegetables and nuts, and limit meat and dairy. A typical lunch may be caramelized onion dal with rice and curried cauliflower, or Cajun salmon and grits with tomato-coconut gravy and roasted broccoli. The higher reimbursement rate also allows Alkimiah to pay its cooks \$16 an hour, plus benefits.

²⁷ Black, Jane. Restaurants Find a New Revenue Source: Feeding the Hungry. The New York Times. February 9, 2021. <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/02/09/dining/restaurants-food-insecurity.html>

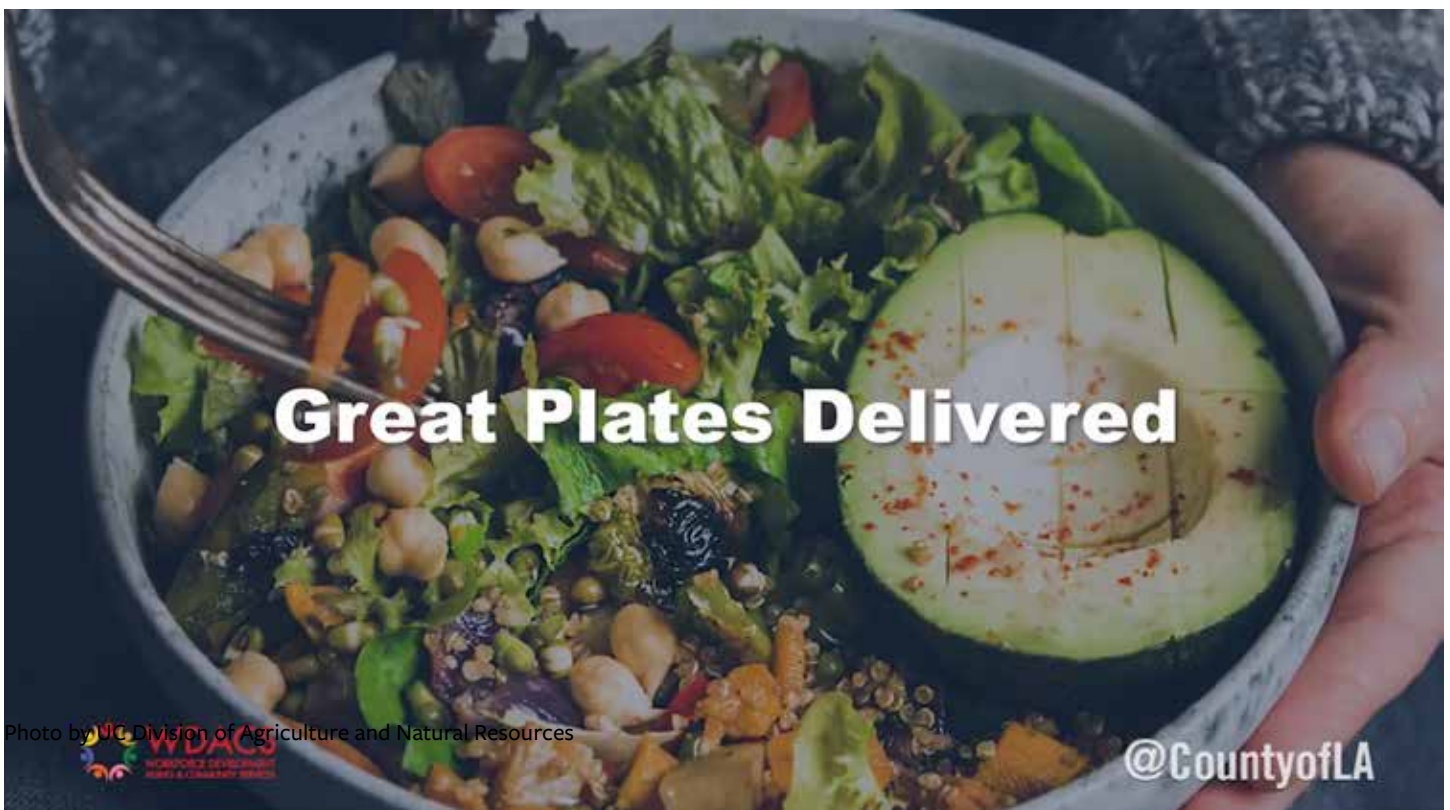


Photo by UC Division of Agriculture and Natural Resources



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Recommendations / Considerations

FOR JURISDICTIONS STILL OPERATING GREAT PLATES DELIVERED:

Expand the eligibility criteria for Great Plates Delivered to include seniors who receive CalFresh

Collect participation data and disaggregate it by gender, age, and race and/or ethnicity.

Expand eligibility to allow seniors who live with more than 1 eligible adult to qualify for the program. Many participants, especially seniors of color who live in intergenerational housing with family members who still had to work outside the home during the pandemic, would have benefited from home delivered meals.

Push for earlier notifications from FEMA on whether the program will continue into the next month. Having 3-4 days notice was a challenging turnaround time for administrators.

POST-PANDEMIC, INCREASE STATE FUNDING TO THE OAA-FUNDED HOME DELIVERED MEAL PROGRAM SO THAT MORE AND BETTER QUALITY MEALS CAN BE SERVED TO SENIORS THROUGHOUT CALIFORNIA, ESPECIALLY IN COUNTIES WHERE THE GREAT PLATES DELIVERED PROGRAM DID NOT OPERATE.

CONDUCT FURTHER RESEARCH COMPARING GPD RETURN ON INVESTMENT WITH OTHER ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT AND/OR EMERGENCY SERVICES PROGRAMS (OPERATED BY GO-BIZ, CAL-OES, OR THE PRIVATE SECTOR).

Looking to the Future

Moving forward, investment in existing senior nutrition programs will be crucial, especially those that serve home-delivered, prepared meals. California's thirty-three Area Agencies on Aging, which are run by both governmental and nonprofit agencies, represent different service areas and play a crucial role in ensuring that seniors can age in place, have their nutritional and other needs met, and receive in-home care.

Through March 2021, the Great Plates Delivered Program served 23 million meals to 55,545 participants in California. The cost of one OAA home-delivered meal is \$13.06, compared to the reimbursable \$22 for a Great Plates delivered meal. If considering CalFresh, the average senior CalFresh benefit is \$158 per month.²⁸ The maximum monthly benefit to a senior participating in Great Plates is \$1,584.²⁹ That is nearly 10x more spending for Great Plates participants, versus CalFresh participants.

²⁸ California Department of Social Services. Senior Healthy Food Access and Nutrition Education Information and Innovative Practices Webinar. Slide 6. December 12, 2016. https://www.cdss.ca.gov/calfreshoutreach/res/pdf/FANOut_12_2016.pdf

²⁹ \$66 dollars/day * 6 days of meal deliveries * 4 weeks/month = \$1584. FEMA will reimburse up to \$66 per day, per participant and on average, meals are delivered 6 days a week.



Photo by USDA

It is important to remember that Great Plates has the dual purpose of supporting local businesses and the pricing reflects the per-diem reimbursement rate set forth by FEMA. CalFresh monthly limits are set from the U.S. Department of Agriculture and take into account many factors, like earned income, housing and utility payments, assets, and more. Home-delivered meal costs, which recipients don't pay for, are funded through federal, state, and sometimes private resources.

The emergence of the Great Plates Delivered program during the pandemic, and the level of funding and human capacity it needs to operate, have generated questions about equity and whether the program is sustainable into the future. It is also worthwhile to consider seniors in California who have not been reached by the Great Plates Delivered Program, either due to the program not being operational in their city or county, or residing in more rural and less densely populated areas of the state. One administrator, during an in-depth interview, also noted that LGBTQ-identifying seniors were harder to reach and less likely to seek out services from their agency. Looking forward, ensuring that seniors of all backgrounds have their nutritional needs met, especially those who are low-income, marginalized, and/or harder to reach, should be prioritized during and beyond the pandemic.

³⁰ Alameda County



Closing

In summary, the Great Plates Delivered Program achieved its dual objectives of supporting local meal providers and helping many seniors stay well-nourished during the pandemic. The current costs of the program, most of which were covered by local jurisdictions at the onset of a program, are expensive and a source of strain, especially in less populated cities and counties that participated in the program. With California's Disaster Declaration still in place, this indicates that the state has not returned to normal and that seniors, especially those who are home-bound, will likely continue to face challenges with securing nourishing meals for themselves. Further, restaurants and meal providers will also likely continue to face hardship until the virus abates.

Where the pandemic continues to threaten senior nutrition, the Great Plates Delivered Program should continue to be funded using local cost shares, CDAA funds, and federal dollars. In the City of Moreno Valley and the City of Monte, their Great Plates Delivered programs are managed by their local economic development agencies. San Benito County transitioned management of their Great Plates Delivered site from the Office of Emergency Services to their local Chamber of Commerce as they had more capacity and stronger relationships with meal providers. Looking forward, there should be stronger collaboration between agencies that serve elders and agencies that serve local businesses, including restaurants. This is an opportunity for shared administrative responsibility that can lead to easier identification of meal providers and less administrative burden on the agencies that serve seniors.

When California is no longer in a state of emergency, the Great Plates Delivered Program should not continue. Instead, there should be more robust investment in senior nutrition programs,

especially the Home Delivered Meal Program, while also continuing to support local restaurants and food businesses as they recover from significant financial losses. The administrative burden that agencies experience while operating Great Plates is challenging and not sustainable without significant shifts in their staffing model, which many cities and counties cannot afford without disrupting other essential services.

Acknowledgements

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