



**MEALS on WHEELS**

MERCER COUNTY

**Friends Foundation for the Aging 2022 Report**  
**Farm Fresh Produce Bags Program**

**1. What problem were you addressing? What solution did you propose to address it?**

Meals on Wheels of Mercer County's Farm Fresh Produce Program addresses the request from our seniors to provide more fresh produce that they can prepare themselves and enhance their nutrition. Over 80% of our participants who fall below the federal poverty level receive a subsidy for their daily meals. They not only have low quantities of food available to them and live in a food desert, but also low quality, since they are limited to what they can cook, and most cannot adequately shop for themselves. Many of these individuals often are forced to eat nutritionally poor snack foods, high in sodium and sugar that negatively affect their ability to maintain or improve their health.

Their limited income increases their risk for poverty, malnutrition, hunger, illness and even death. Receiving regular, nutritious home-delivered meals tailored to their dietary needs, as well as the farm fresh produce, proper nutrition education and counseling, alleviates their need to choose among food or medications, paying the rent or mortgage or utilities. This helps prevent malnutrition, hunger, and illness and allows the homebound elderly to remain at home, living independently and with dignity. This also relieves their families, communities and other tax-payers of the burden of long-term care in a facility.

**2. What actions did you take? What worked and didn't work toward your objectives? Please share any unanticipated benefits or barriers encountered.**

For the Farm Fresh Produce Program, Meals on Wheels of Mercer County partnered with Snipes Farm and Educational Center who provided the sorted and prepared bags of vegetable produce and delivered them to Rider University where our daily meals are prepared and disbursed to our volunteers to deliver to our seniors. With this gift, Meals on Wheels of Mercer County and Snipes Farm were able to provide 250 seniors a bag of produce twice a month for 5 months.

There were many positive comments from our seniors about the benefits of this program. When asked if she had a reliable way of getting groceries, Evelyn B. let us know that the only way she can get to the store is with use of TRADE, a local senior/disabled transportation service where arrangements must be weeks in advance with long wait times for pick up. She said that she used to be able to manage getting on/off the van and use a walker in the store. Now, she can longer do this. She called regularly to thank us for the fresh produce. Other comments were; "I appreciate when the "extras" come- a real bonus." "I would never be able to keep fresh produce like this on hand." - Joanne O. "I have been trying to eat whole foods for a long time. Now, I can." - Martha M. "I always have to ask someone to get fruits & vegetables for me. They can't always do it. Now, I don't have to ask." - Lawrence participant. "Have no way to get to stores. Wheelchair." - Patricia C. "My daughter used to cook for me. Soups, salads, lots of things." James F. "I have weakness in my hands." "I ate fresh. No cooking" - Carolyn F. "I put the carrots that I

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BY PROVIDING COMPREHENSIVE NUTRITION SERVICES AND HELPING EASE SOCIAL ISOLATION.

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got and cut them up in small pieces into my salad. And the cucumbers, I also sliced up and ate it too. I loved them all." - Delores S. "My friend cooked them for me." - E. Windsor participant

A challenge that Meals on Wheels of Mercer County found was that Snipes Farm could not provide the variety of produce that our seniors were seeking. They were also unable to provide fresh fruits, as they are a working farm and only grow limited items. This made participants unable to prepare simple dishes with the fresh produce provided, only salads. Participants often requested more fruit that was not readily available - mangoes, berries, bananas, avocados, grapes. Snipes was unable to provide such things. In addition, we would like to work with a Jersey farmer this time around.

### **3. How did you measure success--both quantitative and qualitative? Please include numbers and demographics of people touched by the work.**

In order to determine program effectiveness Meals on Wheels of Mercer County include both qualitative and quantitative data overall. Qualitative data is obtained from consistent unsolicited participant and caregiver comments and concerns, as well as a semi-annual participant survey. This semi-annual survey asks for detailed information regarding meal temperatures at delivery, appearance and palatability of the meals, likes and dislikes regarding specific foods provided, and suggestions for program improvement. We also ask questions regarding the overall impact of MOW on participants' quality of life. The survey also asks for feedback regarding delivery, the volunteers, and office staff.

Quantitative methods include analysis of program service data, such as the number of meals provided monthly and quarterly, trends in reasons participants begin services or leave the program, demographic information of participants (to ascertain any under- or over-served populations). Trends over the past few years indicate a continued increase in the number of participants aged 80 and above, and a slight increase in the number of Asian participants served. Data collected shapes program activities in terms of outreach to the community, planning menu changes, and policy and procedural changes when necessary.

For the Farm Fresh Produce Program, we included these following questions in the regular fall survey:

How would you rate the quality of produce?

[ 27 ] Excellent [ 19 ] Very Good [ 15 ] Good [ ] Needs Improvement

How would you rate the variety of produce?

[ 20 ] Excellent [ 21 ] Very Good [19] Good [ 1 ] Needs Improvement

*(The needs improvement rating came with a comment stating that she cannot eat tomatoes, onions or peppers)*

On the program we were able to serve 300 seniors (including attrition). 57% live alone, 60% female, and 4% Asian, 39% African American, 10% Hispanic, 45% White.

### **4. How did partnerships/collaborations enhance or challenge the project?**

While we were grateful that SNIPES stepped up on short notice to partner with us on this pilot project, as stated above, they were unable to provide the variety we were looking for. Obviously, this has to be a collaboration as we are not farmers. We will be working with a NJ farmer this year who we already have a working relationship with for over 5 years.

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**5. Include a budget and actual for the project during the reporting period.**

**ORIGINAL BUDGET:**

500 bags per month x 6 months x \$15 per bag = \$45,000  
\$45,000 + \$4,000 Snipes prep/delivery + \$2,000 MOWMC admin = \$51,000 total grant

**FINAL EXPENDITURES**

2,585 bags x \$15 per bag = \$38,775  
\$38,775 + \$4,000 Snipes prep/delivery + \$2,000 MOWMC admin = \$44,775 total grant

\$6,225 left over

**6. What conversations have you had on how to sustain the project after the grant, and do you have plans to share your results with other organizations?**

Meals on Wheels of Mercer County is planning on continuing this program by seeking out new grant funding to supplement hopeful future funding by the Friends Foundation for Aging. We have had conversations with Asparocolas Acres who we have partnered with for many years to providing produce for the Senior Summer Farmer's Market voucher program. This will be the second year of the Farm Fresh Produce Program and from experience Meals on Wheels of Mercer County learned what works and doesn't. The farm will provide the sorted and prepared bags of produce and deliver them to Rider University where our daily meals are prepared and disbursed to our volunteers to deliver to our seniors. We already have the infrastructure in place with our daily meal distribution to continue making this program work seamlessly.

Meals on Wheels of Mercer County has been able to share with other Meals on Wheels organizations throughout the state the success of this program. It has inspired other programs who are in more rural areas with greater farm access to begin a gleaning program where volunteers glean the produce that the farmers deem not good for sale and are used in their daily meal preparation.

**7. Feedback on your interaction with FFA would be helpful. How have we helped? Made it harder? What else can we do to facilitate your work?**

Meals on Wheels of Mercer County is grateful for Friends Foundation for Aging for their guidance and oversight of the Farm Fresh Produce Program. 2022 was the first year of this program and Susan was helpful in being able to discuss all of our ideas and hopes for this program. She was the one who gave us the idea of supplying simple recipes with the produce that our seniors could execute on their own. Meals on Wheels of Mercer County hopes to continue this partnership so that we can continue providing our seniors with the farm fresh produce that they want and need.

**8. Additional comments:**

We are very grateful for your initial funding as well as the ongoing support requested. We learned many things from our pilot. We have received funding for a mobile grocery van, so having funding to have fresh fruits and veggies to supplement planned staples such as eggs, dairy, and chicken, that can also be distributed through this van is very exciting.

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