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ND provides guidance on reopening senior meal sites for dining

BISMARCK, N.D. – Visiting with family and friends over a meal in the community is something no one takes for granted anymore during this pandemic. Soon some older North Dakotans may have the option to dine in at senior centers and other senior nutrition program sites that decide to reopen and comply with North Dakota Smart Restart guidelines and recommendations from the North Dakota Department of Health’s Food and Lodging Division.

The North Dakota Department of Human Services shared reopening guidance late yesterday with senior nutrition providers who receive Older Americans Act (OAA) nutrition program funding through the department for on-site group dining, home-delivered meals and other meal options. There are 170 senior meal sites across North Dakota.

Senior nutrition programs can decide when they will reopen congregate meal sites for on-site dining. Before reopening, providers must submit a reopening plan outlining how they will modify their operations to meet guidelines. The department’s Aging Services Division will review plans.

“Decisions to reopen will vary based on local needs and capacity. We are available to work with any providers interested in reopening on-site dining in accordance with the current guidance,” said the department’s Aging Services Division Director Nancy Nikolas Maier.

“We recommended that nutrition service providers continue to provide other meal options for individuals, including home-delivered meals, pre-packed grab-and-go or curbside pick-up or frozen meal options until this state of emergency ends,” she said. “Our goal is to prevent hunger and to support good nutrition and the health and well-being of older adults. Individuals should continue to have alternatives to on-site dining.”

Under the guidelines, meal sites can only have 50 percent capacity in the dining area and must be able to maintain the proper social distancing requirement of six feet. Food must be served by employees; self-serve is not allowed.

Individuals who choose to dine at a meal site during the pandemic have a responsibility to maintain the proper distance from others and to follow other guidelines.

During the pandemic, participation in the senior nutrition program in North Dakota has grown with many new first-time users. Drive-up, pre-packaged meals have been popular.

“After on-site dining closed in April and providers began offering more choices in how qualifying individuals could receive a nutritious meal, we saw significant growth in participation,” Maier said.

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The number of meals provided has grown from 99,211 meals in March to 114,445 meals in April statewide, and about 900 new customers have used the service since April.

The federal government provided North Dakota with an additional \$4.47 million to sustain this important nutrition program and to adjust for increased participation and added costs associated with the prep and delivery of pre-packaged meals during the pandemic.

Aging Services continues to consult with health department officials on any changes to the state's risk level assessment and any needed adjustments to guidelines.

OAA-funded nutritional meals are available to individuals age 60 and older. Individuals have an opportunity to contribute to the cost of the meal; however, that is not required.

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