



VCAAA COVID-19 Food Pantry

Pictured here are County of Ventura Disaster Services Workers (from left to right) Jorge Vallardes-Fernandez, Antonio Barajas-Trujillo, and Sabino Benitez.

Ventura County Area Agency on Aging

COVID-19 RESPONSE

2020 CSAC Challenge Awards

Category: Disaster/Emergency Response & Management

Population: Urban



OVERVIEW

When the health emergency was announced in March 2020, the Ventura County Area Agency on Aging (VCAAA) immediately recognized the needs of the nearly 200,000 older adults in Ventura County, as well as those living with disabilities. Among the most vital needs was securing meal services for those at highest risk of contracting and succumbing to COVID-19. Within a matter of hours, the VCAAA responded by opening a full-service food pantry, an extension of the Agency's Senior Nutrition Program, designed to serve thousands of Ventura County residents.

CHALLENGE

Prior to the COVID-19 crisis, the VCAAA's Senior Nutrition Program served more than 250,000 meals annually to approximately 4,000 Ventura County residents 60 and older. This was accomplished through congregate and home-delivered meal services, and partnerships with 11 community meal sites as well as other locally-based collaborations. The program had always served as a way to reach those who did not have the physical or financial means to access regular, healthy meal options. It was also a way for people to gather in congregate settings to offset social isolation.

When the health crisis reached Ventura County in March, traditional means of reaching clients were no more. VCAAA offices and all 11 meal sites were closed to the public. Older adults and people with disabilities were encouraged to remain in their homes. Access to regular meals and risks associated with social isolation and depression were among the greatest threats facing older adults.

Those who had not accessed Senior Nutrition Program services prior to COVID-19 found themselves counting on the VCAAA to keep them fed and safe at home. It was no longer an equation that focused primarily on those with limited financial means – it was a call to action to keep as many older adults and people with disabilities as possible safe and healthy at home. It became clear early on that the meal services offered by the VCAAA would see exponential growth. What wasn't clear was that the more than 250,000 meals that had been served annually prior to COVID-19 would need to be matched in the first two months of the health crisis.

SOLUTION

In less than a week from the time the health emergency was announced in Ventura County, the VCAAA opened a full-service food pantry based out of its administrative offices. As an extension of the Senior Nutrition Program, the Agency's primary conference room was transformed into the focal point of the VCAAA COVID-19 response, housing an assembly line of staff and Ventura County Disaster Service Workers who pack hundreds of boxes per day. Each box is filled with fresh produce from local vendors, donors, and the VCAAA's Senior Nutrition Garden. In addition, there are loaves of bread, milk, canned goods, and other non-perishable items. In total, each box contains two to three weeks-worth of healthy meal options.

A partnership with World Central Kitchen was established to add high quality restaurant meals to the food boxes each day – a program that has the added benefit of supporting local restaurants who have struggled to keep their doors open. As administrator of Ventura County's *Great Plates Delivered* program, the VCAAA was able to expand its reach to even more area residents.

Collaborations with organizations like Gold Coast Transit enabled the VCAAA to establish a recurring delivery system to reach thousands of people each week. Marketing efforts geared toward community awareness harnessed the attention of not only those in need of services, but also local donors who have provided monetary donations and food donations by the pallet. Sustainability of the program has been made possible with donations and Federal, State, and County funding.

INNOVATION

At its highest level, the County of Ventura was tasked with slowing the spread of COVID-19 by implementing a variety of guidelines. Responding to how those guidelines would affect individual residents was the responsibility of each County agency. As the agency serving those at highest risk, the VCAAA response has been particularly crucial. Having the ability to sustain the efforts as the crisis continues is equally vital.

The expansion of the Senior Nutrition Program in response to the COVID-19 crisis has been unlike any other VCAAA program expansion to date. It required immediate action with little room for error and massive multi-agency coordination. Partnerships with County and community organizations have proven to be a critical component to the success of the program. Because of this, the VCAAA's Senior Nutrition Program will be in a position to respond to increased needs when the pandemic ends with leadership and staff preparing to maintain increased accessibility to fresh produce and other healthy meal resources.

RESULTS

In the first six months of the COVID-19 crisis, the VCAAA served more than 1.7 million meals to more than 20,000 people, surpassing the previous year's meal services by more than 1.4 million meals and more than 15,000 people. In addition, public awareness of VCAAA services as a whole has increased dramatically, including social media follows that have more than doubled since the crisis began. In addition, community partnerships have grown, and those that existed prior to the pandemic have strengthened.

REPLICABILITY

County agencies throughout California can replicate the COVID-19 meal service efforts put forth by the VCAAA by (a) identifying community needs and funding sources; (b) identifying a location for a food pantry; (c) establishing means to staff the food pantry and delivery needs; (d) building, and nurturing existing, community partnerships, and (e) creating a plan of action to build public awareness.

PROJECT/PROGRAM VIDEO LINK

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nZSIF4Woyn4&feature=youtu.be>

PROJECT/PROGRAM CONTACT

Jannette Jauregui, VCAAA Public Information Officer - (805) 477-7306 or jannette.jauregui@ventura.org