

## **FY2026 Title III-C1 Congregate Meal Service Description**

### **Overview**

AgeGuide Northeastern Illinois is seeking applications from organizations interested in providing Older Americans Act Title III-C1 Congregate Meal services in DuPage, Grundy, Kane, Kankakee, Kendall, Lake, McHenry, and Will Counties. Nutrition services are provided to assist older adults to live independently by promoting better health through improved nutrition and reduced isolation. As outlined in the Older Americans Act, the purposes of this program are:

- To reduce food insecurity, hunger, and malnutrition,
- To promote socialization of older individuals; and
- To promote the health and well-being of older individuals by assisting such individuals to gain access to nutrition and other social connection activities to reduce loneliness and social isolation.

Meals are to be provided throughout the 8-County region to provide maximum coverage of the service area. Nutrition providers are expected to have an active role in the network of organizations providing services to older adults and work collaboratively with Care Coordination Unit and Older American Act service providers.

### ***Statement on Serving Populations in Greatest Economic and Social Need***

As outlined in the *AgeGuide General Service Requirements*, providers must assign priority, in the provision of services, to older adults in greatest economic and social need (“target populations”), at a rate at least in proportion to the incidence level of each group within the county. To achieve this outcome, providers must develop strategic plans to reach and provide services to these target populations which are defined in the federal Older American’s Act and the Illinois Act on the Aging as the following:

- Older adults with income at or below federal poverty guidelines,
- Minority older adults,
- Older adults age 75+,
- Older adults living alone,
- Older adults with Limited English Proficiency,
- Older adults who are frail,
- Older adults with severe disabilities,
- Older adults with dementia and related disorders (and their caregivers), and

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- Older adults at risk for institutional placement.
- The Illinois Act on the Aging [20 ILCS 105/3.11] expanded the definition of “greatest social need” to the need caused by noneconomic factors that restrict an individual's ability to perform normal daily tasks or that threaten one’s capacity to live independently.
  - These factors include:
    - Physical or mental disability,
    - Language barriers and,
    - Cultural or social isolation caused by, among other things, racial and ethnic status, sexual orientation, gender identity, gender expression, or HIV status.

### **Service Design**

Congregate dining has shown to be extremely impactful in combating isolation and improving overall health and wellbeing of older adults. The Congregate dining program provides a nutritious daily hot meal to those individuals deemed eligible for the program including individuals aged 60 or older and their spouses, regardless of age, if the eligible spouse is or has been an active participant in the program. A meal may be available to disabled individuals as defined in OAA Section 102(13) who have not attained 60 years of age but who reside in housing facilities occupied primarily by the elderly at which congregate services are provided; and individuals with disabilities who reside at home with older individuals who are eligible under the Older Americans Act. ACL has provided guidance that nutrition programs should recognize individuals of the same sex who are lawfully married under the law of a state, territory, or foreign jurisdiction as spouses.

Congregate meal sites should be located in easily accessible areas with a high concentration of older adults in greatest social or economic need. Examples of meal sites include senior centers, township buildings, park district buildings, senior housing developments, places of worship, banquet halls, and other civic organization buildings. All nutrition sites must be open to all eligible clients regardless of an individual’s membership or affiliation with the host site organization. Congregate meal sites in restaurants are allowable with approved menus and approval of AgeGuide.

All nutrition sites must pass a local health department inspection at least annually. A site manager with a valid Certified Food Protection Manager certification must be present

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when the site is operating. All other staff and volunteers handling food must be trained in safe food handling practices.

Meal quality, food presentation, customer choice and site atmosphere have been found to be important to the success of congregate meal programs. Although disposable paper and plastic service ware is allowable, more appealing non-disposable service ware is preferred. Food catered in bulk is required for congregate sites with greater than 15 people or based on caterers' discretion.

Congregate meal sites should be a place of warm and authentic social interaction around a quality meal. The dining space should have an inviting and attractive atmosphere and be conducive to socialization and a pleasant meal experience. Providers should be culturally competent and responsive to diverse populations, including providing barrier-free access to inquirers who speak languages other than English and inquirers with hearing or speech impairments. Procedures to welcome and assist newcomers with making friends and socializing should be in place.

Meals provided must meet nutritional analysis requirements, or menu plan requirements, as detailed in the Nutrition Standards. Menus must be planned in advance of service and approved by a Registered Dietitian. Menus should be appetizing, offering a variety of flavors, colors, and textures. A cycle menu should be at least three cycles per year. If the cycle is at least 6 weeks or greater in length, there should be at least 2 cycles per year. A hot meal should be served; however, cold meals may be provided occasionally as appropriate.

Each project is to provide special menus, where feasible and appropriate, to meet the dietary needs that arise from health conditions, religious requirements, or ethnic backgrounds of eligible individuals.

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III-C1 service providers will be required to perform the following activities:

1. Congregate Meal service providers should supply at least one meal a day, five or more days a week. However, AgeGuide may grant exceptions if the nutrition provider submits documentation of the need for an exception and serves meals at least 5 days per week throughout the service area. Grab and Go meals are an optional service that may be provided for older adults who attend social activities at the site and may not be able to stay for the meal. Grab and Go meal sites need prior approval from AgeGuide by completing AgeGuide's Site Modification Form.
2. Nutrition Providers must utilize "AgeGuide's Eligible Caterer List" to contract with approved caterers based on county availability. (Refer to Eligible Caterer List) Nutrition Providers will enter into individual contracts with AgeGuide's approved caterers established in the Eligible Caterer list. Copies of catering contracts must be submitted by no later than October 1, 2025.
3. AgeGuide's nutrition providers' average food cost per meal for congregate dining is \$8.50. Grant applicants should provide a written explanation of how their projected cost per unit compares or exceeds the regional average cost per unit.
4. AgeGuide expects a minimum of 50% of the funding provided to be spent directly on food costs. No more than 10% of the meals served should be shelf stable. If additional funds are needed to support administrative costs, additional match will be required.
5. AgeGuide supports the provision of special occasion meals including holidays, birthday celebrations, etc. at traditional congregate dining sites. However, any nutrition provider who has a conditional status or is out of compliance with their quarterly unit provision, will need prior approval from AgeGuide to host special events.
6. Nutrition Providers are responsible for screening, training, supervising and retaining staff and volunteers providing congregate meal services. Staff and volunteers must receive food sanitation training, either food handler training or Certified Food Protection Manager Certification. **"Food Safety on the Go"** is a required training for staff and volunteers. Background checks are strongly encouraged to be completed for all staff and volunteers.

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7. Nutrition providers are responsible for collecting and updating all necessary client registration information annually using the Illinois Department on Aging Registration for Congregate Meals form, ensuring the form is completed in its entirety and ensure confidentiality of information.
8. Nutrition providers are responsible for entering data into AgingIS (electronic data reporting software) by the 15<sup>th</sup> of each month. Data entry must be logged promptly and accurately. The purpose of this information is to meet all state and federal reporting requirements.
9. Clients are to be given the opportunity to voluntarily contribute to the meal's cost. A confidential system of collecting voluntary donations from clients is to be established and implemented. Clients may not be denied a meal because they cannot or will not contribute to the meal's cost. Written notices to clients soliciting donations should be carefully and tactfully worded as a request for donation.
10. Nutrition education is to be provided at least two times per year, and it is strongly recommended that nutrition education be provided quarterly and more frequently if possible. The purpose of nutrition education is to inform individuals about available facts and information that will promote improved food selection, eating habits, nutrition, and health-related practices. Materials presented should be from credible sources with valid credentials in nutritional science. AgeGuide staff are available to assist nutrition providers with suggestions of topics and sources of information.
11. Nutrition programs must have written plans to address adjustments to program design and delivery in a natural disaster, pandemic, and other emergencies or disasters. Congregate dining participants must be offered at least 3 shelf-stable meals, twice per year, to support participants due to inclement weather or other emergencies. Nutrition agencies must have a designated Emergency Coordinating Officer. Refer to Nutrition Standards for more specifics on shelf stable meals.

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12. According to IDOA nutrition standards, nutrition providers must gather input and feedback from program participants by having them complete evaluation surveys twice a year. AgeGuide requires that all nutrition providers use AgeGuide's standardized survey for Congregate dining clients once per year, as part of the two required surveys.
  
13. Adhere to the AgeGuide General Service Requirements and the program specific requirements as well as reporting requirements for these services, including the timely and accurate submission of monthly Nutrition Services Incentive Program (NSIP) reports, semi-annual, annual, and other Illinois Department on Aging's mandated reports. Visit AgeGuide's website at [www.ageguide.org](http://www.ageguide.org) for additional information on general and Nutrition standard and reporting requirements.