

# MealsOnWheels

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## SUMMARY KEYWORDS

meals, clients, volunteer, services, wheels, maryland, food, program, margo, margot, talk, delivery, impact, deliver, seniors, food insecurity, group, give, health, baltimore city

## SPEAKERS

Bill Fitzgerald, Ashley Biggs, Announcer, Margo Cruzei

### Announcer

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### Ashley Biggs

Hey, everyone, its Ashlee back with another LBPD Guest our I'm so excited because we have one of my favorite organizations on the line today, Meals on Wheels of Central Maryland. And we have two guests, we have Bill Fitzgerald, who is the Senior Vice President of organization advancement. And we have Margot Cruzei, the Senior Director of more than a meal service Bill join Meals on Wheels of Central Maryland and 2018. His responsibilities include raising about one and a half million, that's million with an M annual in government foundation and corporate grants and personally delivering meals to clients when there's a need for volunteers. His experience in development in the nonprofit sector includes two years as the director of development for the campaign for our children, and more than a decade in higher education at Johns Hopkins and George Washington University. Margot has been with Meals on Wheels since 2015, she has over 10 years experience working in the nonprofit field in Maryland. Her work at Meals on Wheels looks at the entire client population based on social and health determinants, which support additional services to assist our most at risk clients and is safe and independent, to stay safe and independent in their homes. Did I get all that? Because that's a lot. Thank you got it all. Thank you did I mean, you guys could have gone anywhere with this experience? What brought you to Meals on Wheels?

### Bill Fitzgerald

That's a great question. I came to Meals on Wheels five years ago, and was really attracted by by the mission and the sort of close to the ground direct impact what you mentioned, when you introduced me about occasionally delivering meals, it's something I tried to do, it's not part of my job description. But everyone here does it every now and then. And if I can I get out at least once a month and deliver a bunch of meals to clients. It just connects you directly with the work you're doing. So if I'm writing a grant, and I'm talking about, you know how many people we feed and impacted we have on community and population health and these broader across multiple counties, outcomes, it's fully reinforced by the

act of knocking on someone's door and handing them the hill that's ready for them to eat. And they are getting that, that response of gratitude and seeing it happen. You know, it's an essential. And so to come from I come from a family where, you know, good food was appreciated, and understanding the importance of that, to come to an organization that can deliver that to so many people and have such an impact. Certainly, that is what attracted me five years ago,

### **Margo Cruze**

very well said. So my evolution was a little bit unique. I started as a part time employee while I was doing some other work. So I wasn't even necessarily looking for a full time job. Everything that that bill said is exactly what I saw right away when I started working there. And so I saw the impact. And I saw the impact of the food. And I saw that personal connection delivered many, many meals myself in the beginning, as Bill talked about, too. But the thing that really impacted me is how much more Meals on Wheels does. And so that's really what appealed to me. I knew I didn't know I wanted to work in the nonprofit world. But I really decided to apply for a full time position when I saw the breadth of what we do, and that I'm sure we'll touch on more later, and the wide impact that we had with nutrition and even beyond.

### **Ashley Biggs**

It's kind of how I feel about my job. And you know, so I can totally relate to that. And I think a lot of our patrons tend to they're all drawn to a lot of individuals are drawn to working within the community and going for something better. So that's pretty awesome. Well, it's time for nitty gritty. So tell me what exactly is Meals on Wheels with Central Maryland because I know meals of wheels like oh, that's the food service. But what is it really?

### **Bill Fitzgerald**

Sure I'll start I'm sure Margo will jump in. Meals on Wheels is a highly recognized brand. Before I came here. I probably had a simple understanding of what most people have their meals on wheels in some way or another provides food for people who can't access it for themselves. But To Meals on Wheels, Central Maryland does a lot more than that. And a lot of meals all organizations do a lot more than that. So it's a well known brand. But the activities and it's marvelous that the depth and breadth of the impact are not well understood. Meals on Wheels of Southern Maryland actually started in 1960. There were two women in the community, Ernestine McCollum and Beatrice Strauss, who thought that it would be helpful for their neighbors who could not access food who are homebound to be provided with food. And so it started October 3 1960 10 meals delivered to neighbors of Ernestine McCollum and Beatrice Stroud. And it's actually based on a program that started in the United Kingdom in London during the Blitz during World War Two came to America initially in Philadelphia, I'm not sure exactly what but started here, as I said, in 1960, since it 60, we've grown today, we are the largest Meals on Wheels organization in the state of Maryland. And we're one of the largest Meals on Wheels organizations in the country. There's a national organization called Meals on Wheels America are a member of that. But membership can vary from a church group that's packing sandwiches for delivery after services to something an organization like what we do, which is every day, we deliver meals to 2300 clients in their homes, it's a hot meal and a cold meal, so they can eat the hot meal right away, and they can have the cold meal later. And that's a daily service, so that over the course of the year, we deliver more than 1 million meals to the homes of clients. In addition to that we work with senior centers and other private

clients that do group meals for seniors, we call that our congregate meal program. And that comes in a close to another 500,000 meals. So the volume is much greater than sandwiches in the church basement. And the geographic coverage is extensive. Well, we're Baltimore City and all the surrounding counties, Anne Arundel, Baltimore, Carroll Harford power, and then we get down to Prince George's and Montgomery County for some coverage, as well. So in order to do that, we have to have a lot of volunteers, we have more than 2000, and nearly 3000 volunteers to help us with those deliveries. So every day those meals go out. And one of the great things that I love about coming to our Haven Street location in Baltimore City, is we have about 40 vans that have our logo, and that's where the meals start. They come from here, and to see that convoy go out every morning and understand what's in those vehicles. And who it's going to, is really when he talked earlier about, you know, why do you why do you work in a place like this, that's one of those moments for me that really, really Bigarade but the meals are what most people know. But they are only part of what we do. And we are known for our copyrighted phrase more than a meal, which, as you said, is part of Margo's title. So I'll let Margo jump in. If that's all right, to tell you a little bit about NAFTA, or what is what we do this more than

### **Margo Cruz**

I can definitely do that bill. So I would go back to our mission. So I think what Bill said is exactly right, so many people have heard of meals on wheels. But it can, it can look many different ways throughout the country. Our mission is to enable people to remain living independently. And that's through the provision of nutritious meals. So that's the part that we talked about that daily meal delivery, personal contact, so we can't talk enough about that. So that is the meals are handed to the client by a person that's oftentimes a volunteer. And that can be a staff person or a driver who's in one of those vans that Bill mentioned. But that personal contact is what leads to so much more of what we do. And it could be because of a friendly conversation. It could also be because we know that client needs additional services. And so that's part of our mission to related services. So what are the other things besides nutrition that that individual may need to remain living safely and independently, and that can be many things. You know, nutrition is tremendously helpful towards that. But the reason we have more than a meal services is to cover some of those other areas. So to go through some of them we have our grocery assistance program our GAP program, so that is matching a volunteer with a client to do their additional grocery shopping, so they may need groceries beyond the meals. It does really important things like offers opportunity for prescription pickup toilet trees. So there's other things that might not be covered by the meals, we have our kibble connection program. So that's a very popular one. That's our pet food delivery, everyone gets very excited talking about this, as do I. So that is, again, a volunteer matched with clients. It is a partnership with the Maryland SPCA, very grateful to them. And we're able to provide food for clients with cats and dogs. That evolved because for two reasons, really, we know that how we important pets are for individuals who might be homebound might have difficulty getting outside to shop or cook for themselves are so important for their companionship for so much more. And so we want to be able to take care of that pet as well. Also, if an individual is having difficulty feeding their pet, they might be sharing their food with that pet. So we know that the clients able to eat their meal themselves, when we they know that their pet is fed and taken care of. So that's a great one we're really proud of, we also have a program called call connections, that is a friendly calling program where a volunteer calls a client to check in. So that's all over the phone, a really great opportunity for volunteers, who like a little bit more flexibility and like working on on the phone instead of in person. And the idea is to reduce isolation. And so we had a smaller version of the program before the

pandemic started. And then when that happened, we really wanted to make sure that our clients were safe and that they were being checked in on. And so the program really, really grew tremendously. And so we have, you know, hundreds of clients now who've received that service. And it's really valuable just for building those deeper connections. And sometimes there's a lot more opportunity for a longer conversation on the phone than there would be when you're delivering the meal when maybe the client wants to eat that meal. So they might not want to stand there that long. But they can talk a lot longer over the phone. So there's some really valuable relationships built there. We also work with a few different home repair programs. So we're able to provide modifications and repairs to, for people to again keep them safe in their home. We work with in Baltimore City, the program housing upgrades, benefiting seniors. And we also work with the Home Depot foundation on helping homebound heroes, which helps provide home modifications for veterans throughout Maryland. That can be a range of things from a grab bar to keep them safe stepping into the shower all the way to larger repairs, even things like you know replacing their roof to keep them safe in their home. A couple other things, we do have a food delivery program called my groceries to go. And that is a once a month food box delivery. So again, that's it's a nutrition program, but it's a variation of it that might offer a little bit more flexibility. If they if they aren't home every day to receive those daily meals, something like that once a month box might work a little better for them. We also do snap applications food stamp applications directly for clients we are we are credentialed to do those screenings on their behalf, which is great not only in terms of client receiving their benefits, but clients who might not have been able to successfully submit that application themselves if it weren't for our assistance. And then finally, we do have case management. So clients who are at a little bit of a higher risk, at risk of potentially not being able to remain safe in the home. We connect them with other services, we connect them with our local Department of Aging, and we just work with them and monitor them much more carefully if they're part of our case management program. So that I think is all of our more than a meal services. And again, it just shows the breadth and then also how much it really can take to to keep an individual living safely in their home.

### **Ashley Biggs**

Well, you know, I immediately what comes to mind is this idea of I thought it literally was knock on the door. Here's your food gotta go. That really is what I thought Meals on Wheels was until I was introduced to you guys about five years ago. Yeah, that's how long I've I've known of your excellent work, especially the doggy program. Yay. But I guess my biggest question from all that is, maybe then this might be for Bill. But, you know, that sounds like a lot of time and money to put all this together. Have you found that people like to contribute when they can?

### **Bill Fitzgerald**

Oh, certainly, I think you know, I mentioned earlier, the volunteers and that's part of the contribution. So like I said, we have almost 3000 registered volunteers and they go through a training and certification process depending on what activity they bought. Hear For, obviously, we have financial contributors as well, but I'll give them a little more detail about about volunteers. First, the meal delivery volunteers, our largest group, and they typically might do weekly or twice a month, they will go to their particular distribution site. We have 20 distribution sites throughout. So the the trucks, the vans that I mentioned earlier, go from our headquarters to a distribution site. And we have a site coordinator, part time employee, which is I believe, Margo started with the organization. And so that might be a church, it

might be a senior center, and they decide coordinator works with the van driver to make sure that everybody gets the right meals and the client list that they're delivering to that day, we did go to electronic delivery route management. So your delivery route, your clients name, and address and information is on your cell phone. If you don't have a cell phone, we have tablets that we provide. And that way, we can confirm delivery when the delivery is made. And if there's an issue, there is an option, there's on the app in the phone, called Client change of condition where the volunteer can report a change of condition. Now if it's a if it's an emergency situation, the clients are trained to call 911. And that does happen often, thank goodness, but occasionally, and we have intervene at critical times for clients. But if it's something more like a condition of the home that might need to be addressed, or or some other issue that they think we might be able to assist with that's communicated through the mobile app, and actually goes to Margot's team where they triage it for response. So that's an aspect of that additional service and that connection, beyond, you know, the meal delivery. So that's what meal delivery volunteers will do. And that's our largest group of volunteers. We also have people who come in to help pack them you know, there's, there's 4300 clients being served here, he's getting two meals that's almost 5000 meals plus congregate, going out. And so there's need in our kitchen, which is an amazing facility, we have an outside vendor who specializes in senior nutrition meals that work the kitchen, but are supplemented by volunteers. So they'll come in and they'll pack fruit, or they'll pack bread or they'll help assemble trays or what have you. And we get corporate groups will come in as team building exercises, we get other groups that come in, we have disability groups who who help as well, which is a terrific service on both sides. Good for us and good for them. We have an excellent volunteer program called our teen Ambassador Program, which is a summer program where we have high school students come in. And they not only volunteer and perform service activities, they also learn but we have a curriculum of learning modules for them to learn about nonprofits, whether it's know what Margot's team does for fundraising, or just, you know, administrative leadership. So they really get to see a full picture. And that way, you know, we try to accommodate anybody who wants to give time in any way. It's especially wonderful if you can live with us in your neighborhood, because it really builds from the grassroots in the community. But we find that people are always interested in trying to fit that it, it can be challenging for people to deliver meals in the middle of the day, if you're working, you probably need about a two hour window. And we do need a regular commitment. We find it some corporate groups will do that they'll do what we call a lunch punch. And they'll get a group of you know, 10 or 12 employees, and they'll rotate. And it will be two people on this particular week and two people on another week. And that's a great way to engage as a volunteer. So yeah, we find because the nature of the service is so direct, it is just a wonderful feeling to be able to deliver a meal, or, you know, when you do a team building exercise, and you you know, you sit down at a table afterwards and say, Wow, we you know, put bread in, you know, meal trays of 2000 people today, you know, we count them up, we give them that that impact. So, so sometimes I think, you know, when you want to volunteer, you know, you want to know that your time is being well used and appreciated. So if you come to meals on Sunday, man, you're certainly going to have that experience.

### **Ashley Biggs**

Do you have to be a specific because you said teens do you have to be like 15 and older to volunteer? Do you have to be accompanied by an adult if you're still legally A minor? Like what's the deal with that?

**Bill Fitzgerald**

I know there are standards and high school for tap for the teen ambassador program. I'm fairly certain rising sophomore and above is generally what we're looking for. And there is an age standard. I believe teenagers have to be accompanied by adults on deliveries. I know we've had middle school groups are but I think eighth grade or so volunteering in the kitchen, because there are, you know, obviously some standards that have to be met to work in a kitchen. And then there's some standards that have to be met for meal delivery. because you're entering people's homes, so we perform a background check on all of our volunteers, that's part of the certification process, we have to have the interests of our clients put first, so that we're not just going to send someone into their home, if we haven't got a full background check, having said that, if there's a group that's too young, for some other reason, can't quite fit into the, you know, those different categories, we have service projects, people will do groups will do what we call modes of love, which is they take a you know, a base coffee mug, usually, it's a corporate branded logo, not always, and they'll put, you know, some nice treats in there and maybe do a card. So around Valentine's Day, we'll have loads of love that we can send out to clients with Valentine's Day wishes or holiday wishes, you know, during different seasonal holidays. And that's a nice add on. And it's a nice activity again, you know, for like a great school group, which is often what we get, you know, especially, especially around the hall. So there's almost always a way for us to accommodate a volunteer was to give some time, we have a great volunteer support services team that works across a lot of different populations. To do that.

**Ashley Biggs**

Have you ever had somebody who was on Meals on Wheels want to do like, say the phone check in like, hey, I really appreciated the service, I'm going to volunteer and do that. Can I do it from my home? You know? Yeah,

**Margo Cruze**

that's, that's, you're exactly right, your instincts are right. So we find that many, many clients also want to help themselves, they want to give back. But also, people you know, want to stay busy, they want to have something to be passionate about, they wouldn't have something that makes them feel like motivated and happy to wake up in the morning. So the your mention of phone calls is corrected. That's the program where we found that the most, and even the origins of what is now our call Connections program started a lot as clients being matched to call each other and have those friendly conversations. So you're exactly right. And also that the great thing about the flexibility of all the different options from delivery to phone calls, because you're able to accommodate many different kinds of volunteers.

**Ashley Biggs**

And when I picture Meals on Wheels, I picture just senior citizens. But is there like a? Because I know food insecurity is a huge thing? Is that food insecurity? Only hitting seniors? Is that Is that who you serve? Or do you serve? Like, you know, I know, I'm going to ask you pretty soon, like, what's the process to get started? But yeah, so tell me do you do you serve just seniors or?

**Bill Fitzgerald**

No? is the short answer. No. is the short answer. Mostly is the short, slightly longer answer. Most of our clients are seniors. And that's that's primarily because of our primary funding source, which is from the



federal government. And this will get to another question that are an assumption that people make the Meals on Wheels is free. It's not free. We are subsidized by money from the federal government through the various counties that I mentioned earlier. But that subsidy that Older Americans Act, which started in the 1960s, Title Three seat bonding is what we get for home delivered meals does not cover the costs. So that's where the grants that I work on for the public individual contributions come in. That funding is largely restricted. As we said, Older Americans Act to people over 60. However, it's not entirely so we will serve anyone that demonstrates food insecurity, defined as an inability, Margo is going to correct me on this because I don't always get it right, defined as an inability to access food for any number of reasons. They couldn't be mobility, and that mobility could be the result of age, it could be economic, it could be accessed, they might live in a food desert, it could be temporary as it's someone who is recovering from hospitalization or medical treatment, it could be a more permanent condition. So it's a pretty open door that we offer, the challenge for us then becomes okay, this is a person who is eligible by our very broad definition. And then how do we fund their participation so that we can get them on service. So we will go through a pretty rigorous, well rigorous for us, but I think very accessible with a client enrollment process to determine eligibility, you know, what, what services they need, and then what their financial status is whether we determined that they might be able to make a contribution or not how we can determine which funding sources they're eligible for to get them on service. Mark, if you want to go through the enrollment process might be helpful.

### **Margo Cruze**

So we do have a few different ways to To apply for service, whichever method you use is going to get you in touch with our client engagement team. And so they are very experienced into talking to people there, they're ready at the phones and computers waiting to do intake and to get people service started, usually pretty promptly, once you call. Um, if we get through the process, we're able to get food at your door within about 48 hours. We do have an application that you can fill out online on our website and Meals on Wheels md.org. But I will say that ease of access is something that is tremendously important to us, we know that throughout the communities we serve, people might not have computers, smartphones, or internet access, and so many, many, many, it most really, of our applications just come through our phone line. And so our main phone line of 41055808 to seven, again, puts you in touch with that client engagement team, how long it takes and how much information you need goes back to mostly what Bill was saying about different funding sources and where they come from and what's available and what you qualify for based on your age. But it's usually pretty basic your address going over the process of when the meals might arrive? And are you home? And how many days a week, do you want meals? Do you want any of our special diets, we do have a few of those like a no fish diet and no pork diet, on texture modified for blended food. Some clients receive frozen frozen meals a box of food once a week instead of that daily hot and cold. So your client engagement specialists will talk you through some of that as well. But again, either by applying online or on the phone, and we're able to get meals to people pretty quickly once we get through that part of it.

### **Ashley Biggs**

48 hour turnaround is not bad. Yeah, yeah, yeah. Yeah. That's pretty fast. I mean, like, is there smoke coming out of those keyboards? Like?

### **Margo Cruze**

You? Yes. And the phone lines? Yeah.

### **Bill Fitzgerald**

You have to, you have to appreciate the urgency of the need. When someone comes to us, it's not because they think in a couple of days, they might be out of food, they are out of food now. So we need to get to them as soon as possible. And just to give you some idea, you know, statistically, most of our clients are over the age of 60, I would say more than 90%, somewhere in the 8% range are under age 60. So in terms of how many that is, of course, a year, it's probably about 400. So it's a significant number, individually, percentage wise, again, because of the funding sources, most of our clients are over 60. And actually, most of them are over 70. And that's one of the concerns, I think, that people certainly need to be aware of, actually, last year, we had 31 clients 100 years old, which is amazing. And we do we have done 100 year, birthday parties, at times for clients, which is really worrying. But one of the things that we really need to be focused on, as we look out further, is the demographic trends and the ageing of the population. And we know that as the baby, baby boomer generation ages, that group of people over 60 over 70 is going to grow significantly. And so we need to be prepared for a greater need for these, you know, services and understanding also that somebody 60 is different from somebody at 100. And so we have to appreciate the range of the within that that spectrum. And you know, there are a fair number of our volunteers who, you know, are older because as I said the time needed during the day might be retired, who can see themselves moving into the age of where more of our clients are that might be might be in need of services. So it's an important consideration. Demographically, I think there's some awareness on the certainly Meals on Wheels America does a lot of work to make sure that there's an awareness nationally and in the government of this is coming this way. There's nothing that's going to stop it. And so we need to start thinking ahead about how to solve these future challenges.

### **Ashley Biggs**

So that Well that brings me back to food insecurity as people age and they are trying to stay home are you finding that you're getting more and more demand for for the food because there is more food insecurity? I know Baltimore has a Baltimore is considered a food desert in some by some standards. For those who don't know food desert means that there's a limited or no access to fresh food.

### **Bill Fitzgerald**

And we find that that's something that is extremely local. So, you know, if you go to the location of there's a Harris Teeter, just a few blocks from our office, there's also a Whole Foods and a Safeway. And they're all almost within walking distance of one another. However, you go to another neighborhood, and you won't find any grocery stores at the corner store for a couple, you know, for blocks and blocks. So they're, they're hyperlocal. The Food deserts are some areas in Baltimore that have plenty of grocery store, but there are many that have not. So yeah, the food desert food access is definitely an issue. The larger question of food insecurity, I think, like, you know, a lot of questions these days have to be considered in terms of the COVID 19 pandemic, what we found was that, for our people, the seniors was mostly who we serve, it was extraordinarily disruptive, because when we closed the senior centers in order to protect people in order to keep people safe and isolated from one another, because of the spread of COVID, 19, you know, before for vaccines, and for treatments, the basic prevention was stay away from everyone. So senior centers were closed, and people would go to



Senior Centers every day to eat their meals. And suddenly, they couldn't go there. And so we took on more than 2000 additional clients in the first year of COVID. We had served just over 3000 clients in our fiscal year 2019. So the year ending July 29, June, June 2019, March 2020, rolls around, suddenly, senior centers close and we need to feed people. Now we ramped up, we were doing about 25,000 meals a week before that ended up about 1.21 point 3 million meals on the year. In March of 2020. We were notified if I were obviously aware something we had to do something. So we ramped up, we changed our model to our frozen delivery. And we went from 25,000 meals to 75,000 meals, most of those per week. Most of those people we added were in Baltimore City of those 2000 clients that we added, of course. And so what we found, obviously, was that there was a tremendous team that was really laid their greatest challenge is that as the pandemic has, quote, unquote, ended, you know, today, I think is the CDC has declared the global crisis over. And so as people emerge, right, I see your air quotes, right. As people emerge from the pandemic, the people who we serve are more challenged to emerge, the pandemic was more disruptive for them. And it's harder for them to get back because the health impact on that isolation is extremely challenging. And because of the resilience is not as available for someone who's older, it's a little harder to bounce back a lot more. So. So it's been a real challenge there. So food insecurity that was increased during the pandemic has been slower. It's been slower to recover. So yeah, it is it is a tremendous challenge. So one of the things that we did was prior to pandemic, we were serving about 1800 clients. And as we came into our fiscal year 22, we committed to maintain this increase that we had achieved at 2300. So that's, you know, that's almost a 30% increase. And if you talk to any business about growing their primary, you know, product by 30%. And maintaining that, and oh, by the way, the more people we add, the more money it costs us. So it's not like we're growing the business or to increase, you know, the bottom line. So it's been a real challenge. But we know that food insecurity is a critical problem. We know the health impact and the importance of trying to address it. So we just, we intend to read to direct as many resources and raises many resources to combat that. Because we know what the health impacts are. Margot's team was part of a study with Johns Hopkins, Bayview hospital, that over a carer with the course Well, I think it was over an 18 month period, people who were on a daily meal delivery, we monitored them daily by survey, their claims for intensive care were reduced by water. So we know the impact that it can happen, that's, that's if we can help you stay out of the hospital, stay out of the emergency, stay out of intensive care, then we can save a tremendous amount of resources for preventive treatment. And that's that's one of the things that as we look at this demographic trend, we're trying to raise awareness. So if we can find more funding, as I say upstream, if we can do more preventive care, and keep that initial, you know, traumatic event, whether it's a fall or some other You know, health crisis, we can keep that at bay, we can be a much healthier and much more prosperous, you know, community where I don't know if you want to talk more about the together and care program or actually, I feel like I rambled a little bit there. Sorry about that.

### **Ashley Biggs**

It's good. It's good. Because, you know, when I think of the impact of food insecurity, I'm thinking of the immediate impact. My last job, I was in Mississippi. So when we talked about food insecurity, we talked about the immediate impact. And it's, it's really refreshing to hear this long term impact where it, you know, keep people out of the hospital, you know, so that's, that's a really interesting perspective. Thank you for sharing it.

### **Bill Fitzgerald**

Well, I think you mentioned when you introduce Margo, you mentioned social determinants of health. And that's understanding factors beyond medicine, medical treatment, going to see the doctor, health impact and food security, a major social, and social isolation is another one, you know, and Marga was talking about the call Connections program, and the impact of isolation, we have studies that were more and more of them, that have shown that social isolation, loneliness can be as harmful to your health as obesity or smoking. Like the impact of loneliness is the same, or worse than smoking a pack of cigarettes a day. So and that's a that is a demonstrated studied fact. And so that is impacting these decisions about how you provide these services as well. And there's going to be more studies on that because of the pandemic, you think about all the isolation time people had, we're just, we're just learning what the mental health impacts. So it's not just the male, it's more than a mail, it's that it's that personal conversation, and that that connection, the more we can connect people, the more impact?

### **Ashley Biggs**

Well, and I think that's why it's so important. Some of the other services, the call connection, the the keeping your animal companion in the home, are so important and need to be highlighted. Because, you know, I have I have four amazing stepchildren, and the isolation was horrible for them. But what's more is, you know, we had we had animals, so they have, you know, we have two dogs and two cats, they were like, oh, okay, well, we've got somebody to play with, that that connection was there. So I want to I want to hop back to something you said a little earlier, that kind of dovetails into what you were saying that your volunteers can report changing condition. So I'm assuming that there are other issues in aging, there are other issues that you and you said even earlier in the podcast, that if you don't have the resources, you direct them to people who do. So can you kind of explain how that process would work?

### **Margo Cruze**

It is the app that we use when meals are delivered, allows you to report your concerns, most importantly, in real time. So we are literally sitting there watching them come in as they're submitted. And you are exactly right, you hit the nail on the head, we even categorize them in terms of those same social issues, right? Is there something going on in the safety of the home? Do they need a railing at the front steps, which might even potentially be a risk for the volunteer delivering the meal? Did the client want to talk for a really long time, so they might seem isolated? They would report that does the client express a concern, you know a client as they get to know a volunteer or they see them regularly, they might share something about their financial situation, maybe their electricity is at risk of being caught off, or other things that they're willing to share. So the person who delivers the meal is able to categorize and then also typing comments of exactly what they're seeing or what they heard. And then we respond to it in real time we're watching them come in a bill use the word triage That's exactly right. Because some things are naturally going to be more more urgent for health and safety than others. And then we have a pretty efficient system of how to process them based on what the need is. And so there are many things that can link directly to our more than a meal services. So there are many clients who if they're experiencing isolation, they might be a perfect fit for our call Connections program. If it's something that is not one of our more than a meal services, it's not a service that we have in house of all use the example that comes up often they need some personal help in the home for some help with personal care, cleaning, whatever it might be. That's not something that we as Meals on Wheels have

available. But we know who does. And often that's the Department of Aging. And so we're able to make that link. And that's really important. It's wonderful that those services are out there. But we are often reminded that if we did not show up at that door, that perhaps that concern would have never been expressed, it would have never been communicated, it certainly would never have gone to anyone who would have known where to send that client. And so even though we're just making that link, I never wanted to diminish that, because that may not have happened, if it weren't for the trust between the client and the person delivering the meal, the relationship they might have built, or their trust in Meals on Wheels, that they're, they're willing to share what's going on. And that we're then able to help the client through the process of making that connection, whether it's submitting an online application on their behalf, if they're willing, maybe getting on a three way call with them to make sure they really get through that phone call and get someone on the phone and get the process started. But yeah, we're really, really excited that that technology is available to us now, because it wasn't always in my time at meals on wheels, and we operated with with pieces of paper. So this is much more efficient and in real time, and we're able to respond to things very quickly.

### **Ashley Biggs**

That almost sounds like a backdoor into advocacy. Because if you are helping a client make the connection you are advocating on their behalf. So does Meals on Wheels. I know that I know that Meals on Wheels advocates for itself. What is the importance to Meals on Wheels of Central Maryland, of advocacy for the for the for the client, the patron?

### **Bill Fitzgerald**

Well, I would say that it's very much part of what we do. It's it's phrasing that I use in in some of our grant applications, especially because if the client is living alone, if a client is without family, we will be an advocate for them. And also if clients family out of town, we're often able to advocate for them well, and that is a tremendous comfort to the family. We one of the great things that happens here is we will get a call or a letter, or we'll get a voicemail. And, you know, we will circulate that internally, just to make sure that everybody understands the gratitude that's expressed. And you know, personally, as someone whose mother lives, 90 minutes away from me, now my siblings live nearby, so I know she's well taken care of. But that comfort of knowing that your parent who is a senior is being watched out for is you know, that is priceless. So we certainly do advocate. One of the things we haven't talked very much about is care coordination, which is something that we do with local healthcare providers. We've had pilot projects, the one I mentioned with Johns Hopkins Bayview, we have referral relationships with Sinai Hospital with Good Samaritan Hospital, University of Maryland medical center, multiple University of Maryland, health care facilities, St. Joseph's as well. And so part of that, depending on the nature of the referral relationship, we will have members of our team who coordinate with the client and their health care provider, Margot was talking about three way phone calls, sometimes getting on the phone with a provider just to make sure they understand that treatment plan or prescription. So we certainly, you know, advocate for them in that way. In terms of larger advocacy, Margo mentioned relationships with departments of agent, and that, you know, that trickles up into county executive level support that we get from different counties. And certainly in the state funding and state legislature. There's a lot of support, in addition to the work that we deal with Meals on Wheels America on a national level, but that comes back down to cost. Well, yes, we are. Certainly, as you said, advocating for ourselves, because the need is there. I mentioned that the funding that we get from the federal government partially covers.

We talked to numbers a little bit earlier, we our annual expenses are nearly \$13 million. And more than 3 million of that has to come from public support, whether it's individual donors, people, you know, giving on a monthly or annual basis, or grants from corporations or foundations. We just we build it and put it together. Looking at every door we can to open access to funding and advocacy certainly is part of that.

### **Ashley Biggs**

Since this is a podcast nobody can see what I just did. So it's really funny. I just gave two thumbs up because that was like the perfect answer. You know, I again, I'm a huge lover of the Meals on Wheels program and I think it's great that so much more is happening behind the scenes to kind of close out and kind of wrap things up. Can you tell me how? I, you touched on this earlier? But could you go a little bit more in depth? Let's say that I have someone who might be interested in services. So first they can call you. And if you could give us that number again, that we'd appreciate it. And then can you kind of walk us through the process? Yeah, happy

### **Margo Cruzi**

to. So the number again, is 410-558-0827. And so we do have a team ready at the phones. If for some reason you get the voicemail, please leave a message you, you will get a call back from a real person, I promise. It's not at all automated system, it is all real people. But they might just simply already be on another call. So please leave a message. They're going to just go through the basics that confirm address phone. And I think the key is really going to be the delivery process. So understanding when the meals might show up that that works for you what specific days you want meals we deliver Monday through Friday. But if you're not home every day, that's an option. We can talk about that and different models. And then again, if there is funding available, that will depend on what the financial conversation is. But it is always a good idea to be ready with your basic income and expense information. So if we need that, potentially have it handy. So we can go through that part. And we will

### **Bill Fitzgerald**

follow up within 30 days with a more fully developed assessment just to confirm everything, the key is getting the initial enrollment done getting the deal started. And then we'll follow up within 30 days to do that more comprehensive assessment to see if there might be additional needs. And that's something that we we try to do on an annual basis with existing clients. And just to give you some idea that probably about 200 or so new clients every month, so the people are talking about mind are really getting the work done. When when we're contracted because we know, we know how badly this this is needed when people come to us.

### **Ashley Biggs**

Well, the platform is yours for any closing comments.

### **Bill Fitzgerald**

Margo gave the phone number I'll give you the website, Meals on Wheels, md.org Meals on Wheels, MBA from Maryland, board, because we are nonprofit, and certainly financial support is needed and welcome. And we have a variety of social media platforms, as well. So if you can give time, that's

wonderful. If you can get financial support. That's wonderful. If you can just spread the good word. We appreciate that as well.

**Ashley Biggs**

That was going to be my very last question. If people want to volunteer, you know, do they call that same number?

**Margo Cruz**

Yes, you can call that same number and it will take you to a phone tree. So it tells you which number to press to talk about volunteering. And again, you will you you will have a real person. Even if you have to leave a message at first a real person will call you back. That's always

**Ashley Biggs**

the important thing. We say that too. All right. Well, thank you everyone for listening once again this month. So excited to have Meals on Wheels on here. Just truly enjoying enjoying the conversation. So we will see you again next month with another podcast. So talk to you soon.

**Announcer**

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