

ON THE ROAD: EXPERIENCE WITH THE MEALS ON WHEELS MEAL  
DELIVERY PROGRAM IN CENTRAL TEXAS

by

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A thesis submitted to the Graduate Council of  
Texas State University in partial fulfillment  
of the requirements for the degree of  
Master of Arts  
with a Major in Anthropology  
May 2020

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## **DEDICATION**

I dedicate this thesis to my mother, Susan Spjut. Without her endless support and encouragement, I would not be where I am today.

## **ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS**

I would like to express my immense appreciation for my advisor, Dr. Emily K Brunson. Thank you so much for all the guidance and support I received from you in completing my master's degree. Thank you for your patience and all that you have taught me. Learning from you has given me the confidence I need to move forward into applied work. I would also like to thank my committee members, Dr. Nicole Taylor and Dr. R. Jon McGee, for taking the time to educate and support me through this process.

Thank you to all the Meals on Wheel Central Texas staff and volunteers for all the hard work they do every day. A special thanks to Laruen Sasser and Seanna Marceaux, I appreciate all the time and effort you put into this project, it was a pleasure to work with you both.

Finally, I would like to thank all my family and friends. Your faith in me and constant encouragement gave me the strength to never give up.

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## **LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS**

<b>Abbreviation</b>	<b>Description</b>
MOWCTX	Meals on Wheels Central Texas

## **ABSTRACT**

Meals on Wheels Central Texas (MOWCTX) strives to provide a system of support for its senior clients in order to extend their independence and health as they age. Currently, funding for MOWCTX is in jeopardy; for-profit companies seek to acquire federal funds MOWCTX relies on. To preserve their funding, I assisted MOWCTX in gaining an understanding of how their model offers more than nutritional support. Observations of deliveries and 20 semi-structured interviews with current clients were conducted. Research findings suggest that there are additional practical benefits, including the ready-to-eat meals and face-to-face interactions with volunteers, that are unique to MOWCTX.

## I. INTRODUCTION

This thesis was framed as an applied research project with Meals on Wheels Central Texas (MOWCTX). Federal funding MOWCTX depends on may be redirected to for-profit meal delivery companies. Because of this possibility, MOWCTX thought it would be beneficial to have qualitative data showing how their services impact the lives of their elderly homebound clients. MOWCTX believes these for-profit delivery companies would not offer the same level of support to homebound elderly clients as their services do. Therefore, the goal of this research was to explore the experiences of the elderly clients MOWCTX serves and examine the ways the meal delivery services impact their daily lives.

The majority of the existing research on the meal delivery services focus on the effects of the services nutritional and social support quantitatively. However, very few studies on this topic utilize qualitative methods such as the ones used in this research. Observations and interview data were collected with the purpose of understanding the home delivered meal services' effect holistically. Data were analyzed and the finding were written up as a report for members of MOWCTX board. Chapter two is the applied report in its entirety as MOWCTX has received it and chapter three is an explanation of the outcomes and future of this work.

## II. ON THE ROAD: EXPERIENCE WITH THE MEALS ON WHEELS MEAL DELIVERY PROGRAM IN CENTRAL TEXAS

### EXECUATIVE SUMMARY

The purpose of the research described in this report is to inform Meals on Wheels Central Texas (MOWCTX) about how the home delivered meal services impact the lives of their elderly homebound clients, and specifically how these clients experience the meal delivery services in ways that matter to them.

The results of this research indicate that the model MOWCTX utilizes to address nutritional and social issues faced by the elderly population they serve has both tangible and intangible benefits.

Specific social benefits of the home delivered meal services identified through this research are:

- *Deliveries relieve stress associated with mobility issues.* Elderly clients experiencing physical limitations described being uncomfortable preparing food due to concerns about falling. This situation prompted adjustments to their normal eating routines, including “snacking” throughout the day (often on prepackaged food items) and/or relying on frozen TV dinners. As recipients of MOWCTX home delivered meals, clients worried less knowing they will be receiving a healthy meal option each day.
- *Daily safety checks provided by deliveries foster a sense of security.* Many clients expressed concerns they would experience a fall or other sudden health issue and be unable to call for help. The dependable nature of the deliveries and attentive

volunteer drivers gave the clients confidence that help is ensured to arrive. This provided peace of mind to clients and their family and friends as well.

- *Deliveries provide a potential for social support.* In this research it was found that volunteer delivery drivers typically do not spend enough time with clients to develop meaningful relationships. Volunteers and clients both reported that interactions were typically brief. However, clients felt volunteers genuinely cared for them. Volunteers also expressed feeling a sense of responsibility for their clients, including the need to watch for changes in clients' living conditions and behavior. This suggests that even though strong social connections are uncommon, clients benefit from the frequent contact, enjoyable chats and attentiveness of the volunteers.
- *Deliveries help clients maintain independence.* Clients experiencing mobility issues described an increasing reliance on others that lead to a loss of independence. Signing up for MOWCTX services was viewed by clients as a way of taking care of themselves. Additionally, the meal delivery services addressed clients' concerns about becoming a burden on family members. The dependable deliveries were felt to relieve loved ones of some of the responsibility for their care, including daily safety checks as described above.

These findings reveal how the MOWCTX home delivered meal services act out in the lives of the lives of elderly clients as they experience advanced aging. The identification of additional benefits provide insight into what issues matter to the clients and the specific ways MOWCTX addresses them.

## METHODS

### Population and Sampling

Meals on Wheels Central Texas (MOWCTX) delivers meals to approximately 5,000 home bound clients living in the greater Austin area each business day. In 2019 this resulted in the delivery of over 500,000 meals (More Than A Meal Impact Report 2019). While clients of all ages can and do receive home delivered meal services, the majority of clients are older adults. In 2019, 73% of MOWCTX clients were 65 to 85+ years of age (More Than A Meal Impact Report 2019). The purpose of this research was to understand the experiences of the home bound elderly individuals receiving home delivered meals.

Participant observations were conducted in order to gain familiarity with the delivery process as well as directly observe interactions between volunteers and clients. Observations were carried out as the researcher accompanied volunteer delivery drivers on their delivery routes. Routes for participant observations were determined by MOWCTX staff based on a combination of which volunteers were willing to be accompanied and diversity on the routes in regard to clients' sex and race/ethnicity.

Interviews were subsequently conducted with elderly MOWCTX clients (within the 65 to 85+ age range) who were currently receiving home delivered meal services. Clients were recruited for interviews directly during participant observation of delivery routes, and indirectly, through fliers provided by volunteer delivery drivers on routes that participant observations were not conducted on.

Persons with cognitive impairments were excluded from participation in the interviews. The determination of cognitive impairment was made by MOWCTX staff

based on existing client data. MOWCTX staff provided the names of clients who were experiencing cognitive impairments before each observation and flyer campaign so these clients could be successfully avoided for interview recruitment.

Fliers provided the contact information of the researcher and a brief explanation of the project. Initially, flyers were given to clients directly by the researcher on routes chosen for participant observation. In order to facilitate additional recruitment, flyer campaigns were arranged for additional delivery routes. MOWCTX staff gave fliers to volunteers and instructed them to deliver them with meals for that day. The first round of fliers canvassed 12 different routes across 4 meal distribution sites within the Austin area. A second round of fliers were sent out on 7 additional routes from 6 different distribution sites.

### Data Collection

#### Observations

Participant observations were conducted by accompanying MOWCTX volunteers on their delivery routes. Deliveries from MOW take place Monday through Friday, 11am to 1pm. Each volunteer completes at least one 1-hour delivery per weekday to 6 to 10 homebound or disabled clients. Ultimately, 9 delivery routes from 4 different distribution centers were observed over the course of 5 weeks. In total, there were 14 separate days of observation. Five delivery routes were observed twice in the same week, staggered with another route (i.e. Monday and Wednesday on route 1 and Tuesday and Thursday on route 2) allowing the researcher to observe interactions clients had with different volunteers on the same route. Once again, the routes were chosen based on volunteers' willingness to be accompanied and diversity on the routes in regard to clients' sex and

race/ethnicity.

During observations field notes were taken detailing the deliveries, with particular attention to the interactions that occurred between the volunteers and clients and how the clients responded to the meal delivery. While traveling from client to client, informal interviews were also conducted with volunteers (16 in total) to gain insight about their experiences delivering meals and their own perceptions of client interaction. Field notes were subsequently typed and indexed. These notes later informed interview questions regarding the relationships between volunteers and clients.

#### Interviews

Interviews with clients were conducted in the clients' homes and lasted for 30 to 60 minutes. In the interviews, participants were asked questions that focused on their experiences with MOWCTX services and the role it plays in their daily lives. Topics covered included, but were not limited to, the services' impact on clients' feelings of isolation and loneliness, their eating habits, and their health.

Interviews were conducted in a semi-structured manner beginning with questions addressing MOWCTX services before moving on to clients' social lives and possible food insecurity (see Appendix for a copy of the interview guide). Notes were taken during the interviews. The interviews were also audio recorded for later transcription.

A total of twenty-two clients were interviewed, including 2 couples.

Demographically, the sample was predominantly female (16 females vs 6 males). Ages ranged from 65 to 99 with a median of 80. Twelve clients lived alone while 10 lived with a spouse or other family member. Racial/ethnic composition of the sample population

was 14 white, 6 Hispanic or Latin American, and 2 African Americans.

In comparison to all MOWCTX clients (as reported by MOWCTX client demographic 2018 to 2019), the sample for this study was slightly more female (73% vs. 63%) and more frequently lived alone (54% vs. 52%). Age-wise, demographics from MOWCTX indicated that the entire client population of those 65+, has more individuals in the age range 65-74 than the sample (27% vs. 14%), and less in the 85+ bracket (20% vs. 32%). Finally, the racial and ethnic composition of MOWCTX clients is slightly more diverse (51% white, 25% Hispanic or Latin American, 29% African American) than the interview sample that was 64% white and only 9% African American.

### Analysis

Once data collection was complete, audio recordings of the interviews were transcribed. Following transcription, the data were analyzed via thematic analysis. This is an iterative process that provides a mechanism to identify, analyze and report patterns within qualitative data. The specific process used in this study consisted of: 1) reading and rereading transcripts to ensure familiarity with the data, 2) breaking the text into meaningful units (codes), and then 3) coding and recoding the text to refine the codes and identify corresponding groups of codes (themes). After the interview data was coded, notes from the observations were cross referenced with the experiences detailed by clients in order to bring the identified patterns further into focus.

## RESULTS

Overall, clients reported positive experiences with the home-delivered meal services. Clients indicated that they received dependable, ready-to-eat and nutritious

meals. Samantha<sup>1</sup>, a 91-year-old client, living alone, felt that MOWCTX provided services that could be counted on: “I know I can depend on Meals on Wheels. If I can’t cook. I can call them and get the whole week. It feels good that I can depend on something like that.”

Additionally, some clients experienced interactions with volunteers that made them feel the volunteers were genuinely interested in their well-being. While first conducting observations on delivery routes, this was apparent in the interactions between volunteers and clients. Later, during interviews it was further supported by clients who described their experiences with the deliveries. Cindy, an 80-year-old female client living with her husband, for example, stated: “The lady that does bring it in, she says ‘How are ya’ll doing?’ ‘Are ya’ll doing okay?’ Like, when I was sick, she kept asking me ‘Have you seen a doctor? Are you doing anything?’ She was very nice about it.” Cindy, and many clients like her, felt the volunteers expressed genuine concern for her and her husband’s overall health. The knowledge that someone who cared would be at their door everyday also fostered a sense of security.

In addition to these expected outcomes, the inductive approach used in this research suggested four additional benefits clients received from participation in MOWCTX: 1) reduced physical risks when mobility issues are present, 2) peace of mind because meal deliveries act as a daily safety check, 3) opportunities for even limited social contact, and 4) through all of these an increased ability to maintain independence. Each of these are outlined in more detail in the sections below:

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<sup>1</sup> All client names appearing in this report are pseudonyms.

## Deliveries Relieve Stress Associated with Mobility Issues

### Safety and Mobility

Age-related mobility impairments and limitations were frequently cited by clients as an issue when asked about cooking and eating habits. Physical limitations in the kitchen created a level of anxiety around having to prepare meals for themselves. Jacob, now in his 80s, described having past issues with maintaining a healthy weight and cholesterol level. In recent years, he has struggled with cooking and worries about preparing healthy meals. Since receiving MOWCTX services Jacob worries less: “I don’t have to try to cook lunch. I know my lunch is coming.” The MOWCTX deliveries provided what clients referred to as a “balanced” or “well-rounded” meal that was consistent and came ready to eat. This alleviated the burden or stress of cooking and guaranteed that the clients received at least one hot, full meal a day.

Clients experiencing advanced aging found cooking increasingly difficult as stamina and range of motion decreased. Many times, standing was found to be a main hurdle in the kitchen. Clair, 84-years-old and living with her husband, specifically mentioned standing as her main reason for not cooking: “Since I can’t cook- I mean I can’t stand long enough to do it.” Clair’s husband, who at 93-years-old and relies on a walker, was similarly unable complete meal preparations. It was this circumstance that prompted their daughter to contact MOWCTX on their behalf.

An inability to move freely about the kitchen was also viewed as a safety concern. In relation to mobility difficulties, some clients mentioned an aversion to using hot surfaces like a stove or oven, further limiting their meal choices. In Jacob’s interview he went into further detail about hurdles he faces in the kitchen, specifically being weary of

the heat of the stove: “I’m 83 years old and I don’t feel like going over and hanging over no stove.” He went on to explain the heat “wipes [him] out.” This meant that he would become exhausted by the heat and would need to sit down, potentially leaving the stove unattended.

#### Adjusting to Non-Nutritional Alternatives

Without a program like MOWCTX, and in light of the cooking related difficulties described above, clients reported having to resort to unhealthy eating habits. Some clients reported that “snacking” throughout the day often replaced full meals the more difficult regular shopping and cooking became. Items, such as yogurt or toast, that they could grab and go with little effort were frequently mentioned by clients describing such situations. Long-time MOWCTX client Marie, who at 74-years-old was living alone in a mobile home, admitted having had developed a tendency to “nibble” instead of facing the task of cooking: “I’d eat, you know, like a piece of lunch meat and roll it up in the bread.” Marie recognized this habit as unhealthy behavior and she became worried about her nutrition after losing weight during a hospital stay. Once Marie began to receive regular, hot meals from MOWCTX her situation changed.

Beth, an 80-year-old woman living alone, similarly described a tendency toward simple and quick food items: “Sandwiches, uh, I eat a lot of yogurt. Because it’s easy. You just go in the ice box, get one, rip the top off, and eat it.”

Other clients described needing to rely heavily on store bought frozen dinners. Linda, 78 and living alone, suffered from chronic pain in her knees and despite having gone through two knee replacement surgeries, continued to struggle to move freely about

the kitchen. Before receiving MOWCTX services she would frequently order food, like pizza, or warm frozen dinners in the microwave. Linda viewed these adjustments as unhealthy but necessary. The MOWCTX services lessened her dependency on frozen dinners and provided a healthier meal option in her day: “I’m happy with what they give me because its vegetables that I wouldn’t eat normally [because] I don’t cook anymore. I mostly eat, um, well mostly I eat TV dinners if I have to. But normally I’ll just eat those MOW.... They keep me going.”

### Deliveries Provide a Daily Safety Check

#### Concern about Falls

In the interviews, many elderly clients told stories of falls and/or expressed worry about falling. Clients living alone in particular reported being especially careful in their movements around their homes. Previously mentioned client Samantha, 91, has lived alone since her husband passed away 6 years ago. She was very aware of the dangers of experiencing a fall. During her interview, she expressed concern for her health many times, particularly in the context of falling as it might lead to her becoming bedridden: “That’s why I’m very careful. Especially if I trip a little bit on something I say ‘Oh God!’ I talk to myself, I say ‘you better be careful....’ I don’t like to stay in bed. I don’t want to fall.”

#### Feelings of Security

Like Samantha mentioned above, many clients interviewed were comforted by the reliability of the deliveries and the knowledge that a person would be at their door to check on them every day. Especially those living alone and/or without family in the immediate area felt a sense of security from this daily contact.

One 82-year-old client, Daniel, has lived alone since his wife's passing. Having had experienced previous health issues, he expressed concern about future complications. The MOWCTX deliveries guaranteed a daily safety check, alleviating some of that concern: "Then also there was always someone at the door once a day that was looking for me. That I wasn't laying on the floor in the other room, you know, unconscious or something." In Daniel's case, his previous health issue had come on suddenly in the night. He was able to receive help from a neighbor in that instance. However, he—and many other clients in similar situations—feared they may find themselves in a similar situation in the future. For these individuals, daily meal deliveries meant help would be coming.

During participant observations, volunteers also reported feeling a level of responsibility for their clients, including the need to pay attention to their physical environment and health. Volunteers were able to illustrate a general knowledge of each client's living situation (e.g. whether they lived with someone and their relation to that person/people) and the client's health (e.g. if they were sick or had recently been to the doctor). MOWCTX volunteers are in an important position where they can recognize significant changes in their clients' lives and monitor any changes or call attention to them by reporting to MOWCTX staff when intervention is thought to be necessary. This sense of responsibility to their clients offers an additional level of insurance to the daily safety checks.

In all of these ways, the reliable nature of MOWCTX deliveries provides an important sense of security for clients in addition to a potentially life-saving safety check.

## Peace of mind for Friends and Family

Benefits of the meal delivery system also extended to the friends and families of clients, especially their children, who worried about their aging parents' health and welfare.

It was often mentioned that a daughter had started the meal delivery-application process for the client. Linda, previously mentioned, has 2 daughters, neither of whom live in the immediate area and find it difficult to frequently check on their mother in person. When asked how she became a recipient of MOWCTX services Linda explained: "Oh, my daughter. She called [MOWCTX] and set it up for me. She lives way south, and she was worried about me having food and everything. So, she set it up. That's how I got it." Worried about her mother living alone the eldest daughter had taken it upon herself to sign her mother up for the meal deliveries. Both daughters were then reassured by the meal delivery services that not only would their mother be receiving "at least one meal a day" she would also be checked on through the delivery process.

### Deliveries Provide Important Social Support

#### Potential for Strong Social Support

Due to time constraints and feelings of obligation to deliver meals to clients in a timely manner, volunteers were often unable to spend more than 4 to 5 minutes with each client. This meant that close relationships between volunteers and clients were not commonly observed in this research. When asked to describe the kind of things they talked about with the volunteers, clients reported that topics were generally limited to the clients' wellbeing and the weather.

Jacob, living alone and receiving meals daily, was asked to describe a typical interaction with the volunteers: “We just chat with them. I tell them, ‘it’s a good day’, uh, ‘get out of the sun’ or something like that. They give me my meal and they go. Yeah. They don’t spend long here.” As Jacob’s route had been chosen for observation, the researcher was able to observe one of his volunteer interactions in real time. Much like he described, Jacob and the volunteer stood in his doorway and chatted about the weather for a few minutes. The volunteer asked him how he was feeling and if he was doing okay, then moved on to the next delivery.

Despite the often short interactions, clients spoke highly of their volunteers, often expressing that the volunteers’ concerns for their wellbeing felt genuine. Again, 80-year-old client Cindy, living with her husband, felt all the volunteers were good people for taking time out their day to deliver meals. In her experience: “They ask how we’re doing. Like, they’re very concerned about us and I like that. I like that. They’re very nice and polite and concerned about us too.” To her this indicated the volunteers were invested and cared.

Volunteers similarly reported that it was common to only have brief interactions with their clients. However, they still felt an attachment to those they delivered to. During observations, it was noted that many volunteers were aware when a client was missing from their list of deliveries for that day and expressed concern for them, especially if it had been multiple deliveries since they had seen that client.

As previously mentioned, volunteers felt responsible for their clients watching out for changes in clients’ living conditions and behavior. Therefore, even in the absence of a

strong social connection the volunteers provide an important service, acting as the eyes and ears of MOWCTX.

#### Seeing Someone at Door is Nice

Clients, especially those who may be experiencing some level of isolation, (i.e. living alone with no family in the area and/or little to no connection with the community or neighbors) expressed that the interactions were enjoyable, even when they were simple and short. Samantha, at 91-years-old, described how she preferred to live alone, finding company to be exhausting. For her, a short visit from a volunteer was often all she needed socially for the day: “It’s gloomy sometimes, especially in winter, so just hearing their voices and seeing them [it] makes me feel good.” While the interactions are often brief, many clients appreciated the exchange of pleasantries, as well as the time and energy the volunteers put into their deliveries.

#### Deliveries Help Clients Maintain Independence

The dependability of the MOWCTX services, as well as the nutritional benefits, allow clients to maintain their independence. Those facing advanced age often experience a loss in mobility that requires increasing dependency on others for various tasks (e.g. shopping or driving) that once came easily (Åberg et al. 2005). Feeling a loss of independence, clients expressed that signing up for MOWCTX services is a way of taking care of themselves.

#### Taking Care of Themselves

Victoria, who at 86 lives alone, has a daughter living close enough to occasionally take her to church or the grocery store. However, the majority of Victoria’s time is spent

alone. She described that while recovering from back surgery she had needed extra help taking care of herself and the house. Concerned about losing her independence again, Victoria felt a need to do something: “Because I wanted to help myself, you know, and not having to depend on somebody else to be here... I had spinal surgery a few years back and then I had somebody helping here and all that. But, I decided to apply for Meals on Wheels so they [her family] wouldn’t, you know, watch me, take care of me and all of that.”

### Avoiding Becoming a Burden

Experiencing increased reliance on others, typically children, clients expressed not wanting to burden their families with caring for them. Previously mentioned, 91-year-old Samantha, described how she relied on her children and grandchildren for tasks like yard work, getting groceries, and rides to doctors’ appointments. Like Victoria mentioned above, Samantha also expressed a desire to maintain her independence. However, now in her 90s, she did not feel safe driving, nor could she comfortably bend at the knees and back to complete yard work. Aware of the time and effort her family takes to care for her needs, she worried about becoming a burden. Samantha believes the meal deliveries provide enough additional support to relieve her family members of some responsibility for her care. Elaborating on her feelings that MOWCTX services are dependable first mentioned at the beginning of this section, Samantha explained: “I know I can depend on Meals on Wheels. If I can’t cook. I can call them and get the whole week. It feels good that I can depend on something like that. That way my family doesn’t have to come from out of town to bring me this and that. Because they have their jobs too.”

### Meal Delivery Drivers Helping Clients

During volunteer training volunteers are encouraged to preform minor tasks (e.g. taking out the garbage or checking the mail) to facilitate the clients' ability to live at home and maintain their independence. However, it was found through observations and informal interviews with volunteer drivers that it was rare for a client to request additional help outside of the meal deliveries.

Clients similarly reported that they did not ask, or were unaware they could ask, volunteers for extra help. The few clients interviewed that did have experiences with volunteers performing a task for them were surprised at the trouble the volunteer was willing to go through. In one instance, Janelle, an 86-year-old client, asked her volunteer to take a table to her neighbor's house down the street: "I had an antique table that I wanted to give my neighbor because she liked it very much. And it was a little bit heavy for me. I asked [the volunteer] if he could do it for me and he said, 'yes I will do it'. He said he didn't mind. So, he did it." Until then Janelle had not asked a volunteer for extra help and expressed surprise that he had been willing to perform such a task. Janelle's volunteer had been observed during his deliveries and recounted the same story. He explained that it was uncommon to be asked for anything extra, especially a larger task such as this, but that he had been more than happy to help.

In this research, stories like Janelle's were rare. Even with smaller tasks, most clients were unaware they could ask volunteers for assistance. This might suggest a discrepancy in communication exists since the volunteers consistently expressed a willingness to provide additional assistance if asked.

## IMPLICATIONS

Interview findings and observational data suggests MOWCTX home delivered meal services provide vital resources to the population of elderly home bound individuals they serve. Findings revealed the specific ways in which the meal delivery services affect the lives of recipients as they experience the aging process. The existing literature on aging is reflective of these outcomes:

### Mobility

MOWCTX acknowledges that age related mobility impairments are a hurdle for the elderly population in that they hinder individuals' abilities to retrieve groceries and/or to seek social connections. However, interview data suggests the issue is more complex than initially believed. Clients reported that mobility issues directly impact nutrition and eating habits by making the kitchen an unsafe environment. Meal preparation becomes a more demanding task as functional capabilities change during the aging process (Ibrahim et al. 2012). For example, standing for 2 to 3 minutes at a time was directly cited by clients as a barrier in the kitchen.

This is in line with existing literature discussing behavioral changes made by aging adults facing mobility challenges. Studies report older adults developed strategies to overcome loss of physical functions, specifically, food preparation activities were found to have the most adjustments (Remillard et al. 2019). This adapting to the home environment as normal age-related functional limitations occur (e.g. decline in strength and balance), commonly led elderly individuals to make behavioral adjustments in eating habits in favor of less nutritional food options (Lien et al. 2015). In this way mobility was found to have an immediate and direct impact on nutrition as aging individuals

experienced decreased range of motion and mobility. Interviews with MOWCTX clients showed that they too adapted in similar ways. Many clients, especially those living alone, reported relying heavily on frozen, microwavable meals and/or other easy and quick food items without the support from MOWCTX (See results section: Deliveries Relieve Stress Associated with Mobility Issues).

### Safety and Security

During interviews, clients frequently told personal stories of falls and/or expressed being concerned about falling. Falls can severely impact an elderly individual's overall health, especially when there are preexisting health conditions (Siracuse et al. 2011). As Martin et al. (1999) found, falling and fear of falling may also lead to decreased mobility which may lead to further functional decline (Martin et al. 1999). Daily physical activity is vital to maintaining mobility and delaying functional dependency on others (Dipietro et al. 2019). For MOWCTX clients, the knowledge and assurance that a volunteer would be at their door to provide a safety check lessened their anxiety about being mobile. Fostering a sense of security, as described previously, may allow clients to feel comfortable engaging in more movement, at least around their homes.

### Potential Social Support

A hypothesis at the beginning of this project was that interactions with volunteers alleviated clients' loneliness and social isolation. However, during the interview clients consistently reported not feeling "close" with their volunteers, typically only experiencing brief casual interactions. As discussed in the results, clients still spoke very highly of their volunteers, appreciating the time and energy they put into the deliveries,

and enjoyed exchanging pleasantries with them.

It should be noted a lack of strong social connections was not a source of complaint among clients. While much of the literature on aging focuses on understanding the impact of loneliness and isolation on the health and quality of life of aging individuals (Canjuga et al. 2019). Other research suggests people tend to overestimate levels of loneliness in the elderly than the elderly experience themselves (Dykstra 2009). Data from this research also found that loneliness was not a primary concern among the MOWCTX clients interviewed. The majority of participants expressed having adjusted social expectations and routines to their circumstances.

This is not meant to suggest that some MOWCTX clients are not suffering from persistent feelings of loneliness. Loneliness is simply a difficult concept to address. Studies on the subject describe loneliness as a subjective experience, which occurs when an individual's network of relationships is felt to be lacking in quality (Peplau et al. 1982). Therefore, loneliness is more dependent on personal preference than frequency of contact. In contrast, social isolation is the objective condition of not having enough contact with others, i.e. living alone with few opportunities to interact with others (Routasalo et al. 2006). Using this definition, it is appropriate to suggest that MOWCTX services impact social isolation. This was seen in this research as clients like Samantha explained that they preferred to live alone and did not need intensive contact, but that seeing someone, even briefly, was enough.

### Maintaining Independence

For clients experiencing loss of mobility and function, various tasks that once

came easily (e.g. shopping or driving) become increasingly difficult and may require assistance. Individuals experiencing increased reliance on others often feel a loss of independence which can impact a person's sense of self-worth and integrity (Leidy et al. 2020). MOWCTX clients indicated the reliable nature of the home delivered meal services provided additional support which contributed to their ability to maintain independence and avoid becoming too dependent on family members.

Literature on aging and disability point to activities such as personal care and retaining independence as significant for overall life satisfaction (Åberg et al. 2005). As explained in the results section of this report, some clients viewed signing up for the meal deliveries as a way of taking care of themselves. Managing one's own personal care, is a mechanism through which independence can be maintained and delay dependency on others (Åberg et al. 2005). As other literature suggests, loss of independence can put a strain on an individual's sense of individuality and integrity (Leidy et al. 2020). Therefore, it is understandable why MOWCTX clients found the services capacity to aid in maintaining their independence important.

While a certain level of decline in mobility and function should be expected with the natural aging process, clients in this research worried about over-reliance on family. Remaining functionally independent is critical in avoiding feeling like a burden on one's family (Åberg et al. 2005). MOWCTX services widen the network of social connections for clients, alleviating pressures placed on family members taking on the role of caretakers. The nutritional support from the meals as well as the consistent presence of volunteers at the clients home offers the clients the ability to retain a level of independence both functionally and socially.

Overall, this research suggests that the client/volunteer interactions, in whatever form they come, are vital to a model like that of MOWCTX that seek to aid the elderly in remaining at home and maintaining healthy living.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

Results of this research validate the claim by MOWCTX that their services are more than just a meal, and that their volunteers provide both nutritional support to their clients as well as social support. Highlighting the additional benefits MOWCTX clients receive illustrates that home delivered meal services really do offer something unique other delivery services, and especially mail delivery services, are not set up to provide.

More minor points that MOWCTX may consider:

- On days when meals are not delivered make check-in calls to vulnerable clients.
- Strongly encourage volunteers to introduce themselves at each visit (names).
- Clarify with clients that volunteers are available to help with small tasks.

These minor points address some of the issues that arose from interview data that could help clients utilize MOWCTX services to their full extent. Clients with mobility issues who do not have extra help at home (e.g. no family in the area or at home health care assistance) may benefit from MOWCTX calling on days deliveries are not made. This will add to the feeling of security the services already provide. Additionally, it was found that clients did not feel particularly close to their volunteers (See results section: *Deliveries Provide Important Social Support*). Encouraging the volunteers to introduce themselves multiple times will increase the likelihood clients will remember their names. Establishing more familiarity with their volunteers, even in a small way, could help

clients develop a stronger sense of security. Increasing familiarity, along with clarifying that volunteers are willing to complete minor tasks, will provide clients with more opportunities to benefit from the MOWCTX home delivered meal services.

### **III. CONCLUSION**

The results of this research were written in report form and given to MOWCTX as it may benefit them in maintaining federal funding. This study provided insight into the relationships between volunteer drivers and clients and what those interactions mean to the clients. Findings can be used by MOWCTX to better understand their services in action. Moving forward, this information and subsequent report may be used to illustrate the unique benefits MOWCTX offers their clients. Along with the report, a presentation and explanation of research findings will be made for the MOWCTX board of directors.

These results have been used to supplement a phone survey already in use with MOWCTX that addressed the experience of their homebound clients with the deliveries. The findings were able to inform new survey questions that yielded additional data about how clients perceive MOWCTX services.

Additionally, these results will be published in article form in a professional journal. This information may aid other community-based Meals on Wheels programs in better understanding their impact on the clients they serve.

## **APPENDIX SECTION**

### **Interview Guide**

#### **Research Statement:**

Thank you for agreeing to speak with me today. The purpose of this interview is to understand your experience with the Meals on Wheels services you receive. I will ask you questions about things like your experience receiving home-delivered meals and how you feel that impacts your day-to-day life. The interview will last about 30 minutes to an hour and I will audiotape the discussion to make sure that it is recorded accurately.

#### **Confidentiality Statement:**

I would like to remind you that to protect your privacy, I will not include your name in the transcript of our conversation or in anything I write using this data. Do you have any questions for me before we begin?

#### **Interview Questions:**

##### **Experience with MOW:**

1. Tell me about your experience with Meal on Wheels. Could you walk me through the application/acceptance process? How did you feel about that process?
2. What is a typical delivery like? Could you explain to me how that system works?
3. What happens when the volunteers first arrive? Can you walk me through that step by step? Typically, how long would you say this process takes?
4. Could you describe your interactions with the volunteers who deliver? How do you feel about these interactions? While they are making the delivery, what kinds of things do

you talk about?

5. How do you feel about your relationships with the volunteers? Are there certain drivers you like more than others? Why?

6. Do the volunteers ever do anything extra for you while they are here?

7. Did you have any expectations about the meal deliveries before receiving them? If so, how have they met or not met those expectations?

8. How does your experience taking part in MOW services compare to your experience prior to receiving their services?

Social Interactions/Isolation:

Community:

1. Could you describe what a typical week is like for you? What kind of activities do you engage in? Could you describe those for me?

2. Could you tell me about your social interactions in a typical week? Would you consider yourself close with your neighbors, people from church or others around you? How often do you interact/chat with them?

3. How long have you lived in this house/apartment/ neighborhood? Could you describe the community you live in? Or your experience living in this community?

4. Are there community/social/church events you are aware of /attend regularly? If so, what kinds exactly?

Family/Friends:

5. Would you say you have many close relationships? What are the relationships that are most important to you and why? How important are these interactions?

6. How much time do you spend alone? How do you feel about that?

7. Do you have any family living in this area? If so, could you tell me a little about them?

How often do you spend time with family members? What about close friendships?

Food Insecurity:

1. How, if at all, have the meal deliveries impacted your eating habits? Could you describe to me your eating habits before receiving meal deliveries?

2. What kind of foods did you eat before receiving meal delivery services? How does that compare to the meals MOW provides you?

a. Do you feel like you had to adjust to the types of foods delivered? If so, can you tell me about that adjustment? Have they ever brought you foods you were not familiar with?

b. In what ways, if at all, do you feel the meal delivery program has affected your diet/nutrition?

3. How do you receive other food, food not delivered by MOW? Could you walk me through how you typically prepare meals for yourself?

4. Has the scheduled meal deliveries impacted the frequency or number of meals you eat in a day?

5. Did you ever miss or skip meals before becoming a part of the Meals on Wheel program?

#### Demographic Survey

1. What is your age? \_\_\_\_\_

2. What is your sex/gender? Male Female Prefer not to answer

3. What is your race/ethnicity? \_\_\_\_\_

4. Do you currently live with another person or people? Yes No

If yes, what is your relationship to this person/these people?

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5. How long have you been a client of Meals on Wheels?

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